



Holiday Husband

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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HOLIDAY HUSBAND

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MAEVE

Monday mornings should be illegal. Especially the Monday after Thanksgiving, when my stretched stomach still feels like it's holding enough turkey and stuffing to feed a small army. I barely managed to squeeze into my work clothes this morning. The pants I've been wearing comfortably for years now cut into my bloated middle like sausage casing. Even my favorite cashmere sweater feels snug across my boobs. Yep, I've turned into a walking, talking, overstuffed Thanksgiving turkey, all plump and waddy.

I guess I could finally start that diet I've been meaning to for the last... decade or so. But it doesn't help that I've got the annual family reunion at Christmas to stress eat about. An entire week trapped in a drafty estate on the outskirts of a small town called Oakwood Falls with my parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins...you get the idea. Don't get me wrong, I love them all. But ever since the cousin closest in age to me got married last summer, it's all I'll hear about. I know that for a fact because Vanessa's wedding was all I heard about at Thanksgiving—hence the overeating. It was either stuff food into my face or scream whenever she reminded us how rich and successful her doctor husband was, which always prompted another well-meaning relative to ask me when it was going to be *my* turn down the aisle.

Ah, sorry to burst your bubble, Aunt Daphne, but this girl is thirty-one and hasn't been on a date since college. There's no ring on this finger and no man in sight. Back off!

And honestly, I'm OK with that. I've got a good job, great friends, and a cozy apartment all to myself. Who needs a man when you've got a bathtub and a bottle of wine to keep you company?

But as I trudge through the office building, I can't help but wish there was *someone*, even if it was just to get my relatives off my back for five seconds.

After all, Vanessa and I are two totally different people. Growing up, she was the polished, popular overachiever, and I was the bookish, awkward tagalong. We're total opposites, but because we share the same last name and age, people love to compare us—our parents included. And it's created a rather uncomfortable rivalry between us that I hate.

Now, I don't hate Vanessa. In fact, I think that if I didn't have to share family members with her, I'd be incredibly proud of her accomplishments, and we could maybe even find a way to be friends. But it's hard to be much of anything at all when every family get-together is just another reminder that she's the standard, and I'm not measuring up. Something she *loves*, by the way. *Maybe I do hate her...*

Just a little.

And I don't want to be like this. But it's gotten so much worse ever since she met Dr. Blake Westington III and turned into one of those women who bases her entire personality around her husband's career and social status. Now, I think Dr. Westington is a great guy if not a little boastful, and this is no offense to Vanessa since she's obviously thrilled with her choices, but I'd rather guzzle expired eggnog than spend my life defining myself by someone else's success. If I ever manage to find someone I want to share my life with, it'll be because I'm head over heels with their humanity. Not their bank balance or their last name.

As I enter my office, I toss my coat on the back of my chair and slump into the seat, the wheels creaking under my weight. Maybe I'll conveniently come down with a terrible case of viral stomach flu before Christmas. Or at the very least I might 'accidentally' unfollow my cousin on social media, so

my timeline isn't constantly filled with photos of Vanessa's amazing life with her massive engagement ring conveniently cropped into every one of them. Ugh, pass the Pepto.

Shit. Maybe I'm jealous, too.

Scowling at myself, I turn on my computer and stare at the screen. Time to earn this month's paycheck. I work as an executive assistant at Silver Fox Financial, meaning I get the privilege of catering to every whim of Gabe Lansing, CEO, and my ultimate work crush.

Yes, crush. I know it's cliché to have a thing for your boss, especially when he's eighteen years older than me. But I can't help it. Gabe is handsome in that distinguished silver fox kind of way, with salt-and-pepper hair and lively green eyes. He's also brilliant and charming when he wants to be. Which is often, since dazzling clients is part of his job.

And just so we're clear, the company is *not* called 'Silver Fox Financial'. I just call it that because my boss is hot AF, and it's more fun than calling it by its real name, Lansing Financial.

I shake my head, trying to clear away the Gabe-induced daydreams as I open my email and scan through my messages. As I sift through the requests and updates from Gabe's calendar, an email notification catches my attention. It's from Gabe himself, and my heart races as I click open the message. I'll forever live for the hope that one day he'll profess his undying love via office email and we'll run off into the sunset together. Oh, I should probably mention I'm prone to delusional daydreams too. They're where I go to escape the mundane reality of my life. And where I'm the star of the show.

But the email isn't a love confession. It's a request for me to join him in his office ASAP. But it's the second sentence that has me frothing:

Maeve,

Can you come to my office as soon as you're free. I have a rather personal request I'd like your help with.

Gabe.

Personal? Excitement skitters about in my belly. In the five years I've worked as his assistant, I've learned exactly three personal details about the man:

1. He takes his coffee black with two sugars.
2. He has a sweet tooth and loves red velvet cupcakes.
3. He's never been married, but he has a teenage daughter, Gigi, who lives with her mother in another state. I looked after her once when Gabe had a work emergency. Otherwise, I'm not sure I'd know about her, either.

I know they're not exactly riveting details. But in my head, I like to imagine Gabe has a secret life full of intrigue and adventure. Like maybe he's a former international jewel thief who retired to run a financial empire as a cover to explain away his wealth. Or maybe he's a race car driver on the weekend. Or he's the secret leader of an all-silver-fox biker gang who rides around town, rescuing children from the streets and setting them on the straight and narrow. Maybe he's batman?

Come to think of it, I've never seen Gabe and Batman in the same room.

Giggling to myself, I grab my notepad and pen, trying to look professional as I make my way to Gabe's office. Silly as it is, my harmless crush gets me through the day because, let's face it, Gabe Lansing will never see me as anything more than a hella good executive assistant. And that's *if* he notices me at all.

I knock tentatively on Gabe's door, trying to calm my racing heart. "Come in." I hear his deep voice from inside.

As I step into the room—or the 'fox's den' as I like to call it—I'm hit with the scent of his cologne. Something spicy and masculine that sends shivers down my spine. Gabe is sitting behind his desk, his eyes locked on his computer screen. He looks up as I enter, and I swear I see a flicker of something before his face goes back to its usual stoic expression. But

then again, I *do* have an amazing imagination, so that ‘flicker’ could just be in my head.

“Maeve, thank you for coming so quickly.” He stands up and walks around the desk, coming to stand in front of me. I can feel his gaze on me, and I’m suddenly very aware of how close we are. *Sweep me off my feet, big boy.*

“Of course, Mr. Lansing. What can I help you with?” *Removing your shirt?* I try to keep my voice steady, but it comes out a bit breathless. The man seems ripped for his age, and I’m desperate to see what’s going on under that suit.

“As I stated in the email, it’s a rather personal request. But something I don’t think I’ll have the time to get to myself. Is that OK?”

I nod, feeling a bit disappointed that a) this isn’t some romantic mission for us to go on together, and b) seems he’s definitely keeping that shirt on. I’ll just have to keep living in hope.

When I look out the window wistfully, to my surprise, Gabe clears his throat and takes a step back, as if he’s aware of the effect his proximity has on me. *Whoops. Maybe too wistful there...*

“I know it’s out of the ordinary for me to send you on personal errands,” he says, his voice low and serious.

“You know I don’t mind. Anything you need,” I say, wincing a little when my voice comes out breathy again.

A slight furrow creases his brow as he walks back around his desk and opens the drawer. “I need you to go to this jewelry store and pick up a ring for me,” he says, handing me an envelope. Inside is a card with the store name and address on it.

“A ring?” I ask, my curiosity piqued while my chest tightens. What if he’s found another woman that isn’t me? Will I be OK with that? I mean, this imaginary love connection we have going is pretty serious for me. I hold my breath as I await his words.

Gabe sighs heavily. “It’s an heirloom I had restored as a Christmas gift for my mother. It’s of great sentimental value, so I don’t trust anyone else besides you with it.” He looks at me then, his gaze softening slightly. “Will you do it?”

I take the envelope, feeling both touched and honored that he trusts me enough to do something this important. I’m also super relieved it’s a ring for his mother and not some Victoria’s Secret model-type. *The daydream is safe!*

“Yes, of course,” I reply, meeting his gaze with a small smile.

Gabe nods, seemingly relieved, then hands me a credit card. “This will cover the expenses,” he says. “I also need you to arrange for it to be delivered to my mother’s address, which I’ve included in the envelope. Make sure she needs to sign for the delivery.”

“Will do,” I say, setting everything on top of my notebook.

Gabe looks at me for a long moment before finally saying, “I realize this is outside your job description. It’s OK if you want to say no.”

I give him a small smile. “It’s no problem, really. I’ll leave as soon as possible.”

He nods, and I turn to walk out of his office. As I reach the door, I hear Gabe’s voice behind me.

“Maeve?” He pauses for a moment, seeming to war with himself over whatever it is he wants to say. “I just... I really appreciate this.”

“I know,” I say, giving him my brightest smile before heading back to my desk, feeling on cloud nine while my overactive imagination conjures up all sorts of romantic scenarios involving Gabe, that ring, and of course...me.

GABE

As I watch Maeve leave my office, I feel a pang of concern. While she seems cheerful now, over the weeks leading up to Thanksgiving, I couldn't help but notice she seemed down—like she always does around the holidays. Normally, she perks up again once Thanksgiving is over with. But this year, I noticed that when she entered the office this morning, her usual exuberant energy just wasn't there. Her demeanor was more muted and melancholy, which is so unlike her. Did something happen over the holiday? Is she having some kind of family trouble?

I know it's not my place to pry into an employee's personal life. But I care about Maeve as more than just a top-notch assistant. I hate seeing her bright spirit dimmed, and I wish I could think of the perfect way to cheer her up. She always gets me a red velvet cupcake when she notices I'm having a less than perfect day, but I just don't feel that a cupcake is enough in return. I want to do more, to give more. I want her to feel valued.

In fact, when I'd called her back just now, I was ready to tell her to pick out something nice for herself from the jeweler. A gift for being such an exemplary assistant. But at the last second, I choked. And now I'm kicking myself for 1) thinking of taking such a foolhardy risk in the first place, and 2) chickening out. Maeve, she deserves the world. But I can't go around buying lavish gifts for just one employee. Even if she is amazing at her job—even if she's amazing, full stop.

In the five years Maeve has worked for me, she's become indispensable. She knows this company inside and out, manages my impossible schedule flawlessly, and has saved my ass more times than I can count. Not to mention, she's brilliant, funny, and captivatingly beautiful. Not that I pay too much attention to the last part. I'm pushing fifty and she's still young and fresh-faced, and I have no business looking at her or thinking about her the way I do. It's inappropriate. I simply care about her as an employee because she makes my day-to-day easier. That's it.

God, who am I kidding? This isn't about rewarding an outstanding employee. I'm completely smitten with her. Those big blue eyes and radiant smile ignite something in me I thought was long dead. But I can't act on it. It wouldn't just be inappropriate, it would be unethical. I'm her boss, for God's sake. And even if I weren't, the age difference alone would raise eyebrows. I can't risk my reputation, or hers, or this company's. But damn, it's hard to deny these feelings. Every time I see her, I feel drawn to her, like a moth to a flame. I want to wrap her in my arms and never let her go. I want to kiss her until we're both breathless, and then kiss her some more.

But I can't. I won't. It's not right.

With a grunt of frustration, I turn back to my computer, unable to focus. I shouldn't torture myself by imagining a reality where Maeve could return my feelings. A world where I could kiss those soft, full lips and run my hands through her honey-colored hair. Where I could press her into my mattress and finally learn if her skin is as velvety as it looks...

Fuck. I adjust myself discreetly under the desk, willing my inappropriate arousal to subside. I let out a deep sigh and run my fingers through my graying hair. How did I let it come to this? I knew from the moment she walked into my office five years ago that she was trouble. Trouble for my heart, trouble for my mind, and trouble for my management. Yet, I couldn't resist the way she looked at me with those innocent eyes, eager to prove herself. She was just out of college and ready to take on the world, and I was the one who offered her a chance

to do just that. But now, I can't help but think that I've made a mistake. With my contacts, I could have recommended her for a job anywhere. But I wanted her here. And now I've become too attached to her, too wrapped up in her warmth and charm. Every time she leaves my office, it's like a piece of my heart goes with her. And every time she returns, it's as if she makes me whole.

I lean back in my chair, letting out my breath as I attempt to clear my thoughts. I can't keep lusting after Maeve like this. The last thing I want to do is make her feel uncomfortable or objectified. But how can I help it when she walked in today wearing that cashmere sweater I love? The one that fits her so well I can see her nipples through the plush fabric...

Groaning out loud, I force myself to stand up from my desk and march over to the window, hoping the endless view will somehow clear my head. Coveting one's own employee is the first commandment of being a CEO. And even if it wasn't, acting on my feelings could destroy our friendly rapport if my advances were unwelcome. My worst fear is that she'd be horrified and view me as a dirty old lech.

No, I can't risk any of that. I just need to be grateful she's in my life at all. Keep things professional between us. Ignore these nagging feelings and focus on being the best damn boss she's ever had. I just... I want to make her life better the same way she does mine. The problem is, I don't know how to do it without crossing the uncrossable line.

Maybe a hefty Christmas bonus to show my appreciation would take the edge off? Probably less overt than over-priced jewelry...

"Good call," I say to myself, feeling a little calmer and more resolute as I return to my desk and shift my attention back to the quarterly budget reports on my screen, hunting for the perfect way to convince my accountant that it would be a sound investment in our company's future to give my wonderful, maddeningly tempting assistant—who I absolutely cannot make a move on—a chunk of extra money.

I sigh heavily, knowing deep down that it's never going to happen. I close my laptop and lean back in my chair, letting out a long, drawn-out breath as I glance back out the window, wondering at what point in my life I became such a—what is it my daughter calls me? A 'simp'?

When a cheerful whistle cuts through the air, I'm pulled from my thoughts, turning to see one of my employees walking by humming Mariah Carey's *All I Want for Christmas Is You*. As the melody makes its way into my office, it dawns on me that all *I want for Christmas* is a solid reason to spend some personal time with my assistant. I'd do anything to have her want me the same way I want her.

Yep, I'm a simp all right.

Whatever that means...

MAEVE

I can't stop admiring the massive diamond ring I just picked up for Mr. Lansing. Even nestled in its velvet box, it glitters brightly under the jewelry store lights. I know it's a family heirloom and a gift for his mother, but I can't resist taking it out of the box and admiring the beauty and craftsmanship.

When I tilt it side to side, the diamond glitters even more brightly than I imagine Gabe's green eyes would if he were down on one knee, gazing up at me adoringly as he asks for my hand in marriage. I picture his strong, rugged hands gently sliding the ring onto my finger, the cool metal warming against my skin as a symbol of our love and commitment.

Before I can stop myself, my daydream gets the better of me and I slide the ring onto my left hand. Just to see how it looks, of course. The band is a little snug, but I wiggle it on and hold my hand up to admire just how perfect it is.

I can't even begin to guess how many carats this thing is. It's like this ginormous Celtic knot pattern that wraps around a big, round, clear diamond in the middle. It's gorgeous and I can't take my eyes off it, can't stop myself from falling even deeper into my little fantasy.

I imagine Gabe still holding my hand once the ring is on my finger, telling me it belonged to his grandmother originally, but he had it reset just for me. In my dreamworld, he says I'm the only woman he's ever wanted to give it to, the one who finally captured his heart after so many years alone. I blush, thinking of the passionate kiss we'd share when I said yes,

promising to spend the rest of our lives cherishing each other. *Oh, if only...* This ring represents everything I wish I could have with Gabe. It makes me feel giddy and gushy inside, but at the same time, it's like I'm wearing someone else's happiness on my finger. Because at the end of the day, all of this is in my mind, and a man as handsome and distinguished as Gabe Lansing will never profess his love for a dowdy, mousy nobody like me. I let out a sigh filled with longing and lower my hand back to the counter.

"A perfect fit!" the jeweler beams, jolting me back to reality.

I flush, caught ogling my boss's expensive gift. But damn, when I glance at it again, my hand looks good with some serious bling on it.

"You think so?" I say, forcing my smile as I move to take off the ring and return it to the box.

"Your husband has wonderful taste, ma'am," the jeweler continues, still smiling but now looking at me expectantly. I giggle. He said 'husband'. *Oh gosh, just imagine!* Then he keeps looking at me, and I start to sweat. Does he know I'm trying on a ring that isn't mine? Did he say 'husband' ironically? Or does he think I'm trying to steal? Oh no. *What if he calls Gabe?!*

"I should probably put this back in the box," I say, hooking my fingers over the edges of the ring and pulling, only to find it now stuck tight around my finger. Crap.

"You're welcome to wear it home once we settle the bill, ma'am. A ring like this is best on one's finger, after all."

"Oh!" *That's* why he was looking at me! "Of course, the bill. I'm so sorry," I mutter, digging through my purse to find Mr. Lansing's credit card. "Here you go."

He eyes it with suspicion at first, but the moment he clocks it as a black AMEX card, he immediately returns to the overly polite, smiling man he was a moment before. "One moment, please, Mrs. Lansing."

The jeweler disappears to run the card, leaving me standing there, feeling like the biggest idiot on the planet. Why did I even put on the ring in the first place? And why did it have to get stuck on my finger? I attempt to shake it loose, but with no success. Fear quickly fills my mind as I struggle to think of a way out of this mess. I am so fired!

“Maeve? Is that you?” a familiar voice sounds behind me and I freeze. Vanessa? I turn slowly, a deer caught in headlights as I come face to face with my nemesis. AKA, my cousin. *Son of nutcracker!*

“It is you!” Vanessa beams, and I force a smile. *Of all the bad timing...*

“Wh-what are you doing in the city?”

“Oh, just picking up a few trinkets as stocking stuffers. You know how it is... Actually, you probably don’t.” Her words cause my hackles to instantly rise, and I have to fight the urge to hiss at her. It’s during that wrestle with my self control that her eyes zero in on the giant rock on my left hand.

“Oh. My. God, Maeve. What am I *looking* at?” She’s smiling, but in her eyes, is a hint of genuine curiosity mixed with a healthy dose of jealousy and disbelief. “Is that a *ring*?”

Oh no, no, no, no. I tuck my hand behind my back so she can’t look at it, then open my mouth to explain. But she doesn’t even wait for a response before clapping her hands together and squealing. “Don’t tell me mousy little Maeve is getting married!” *Bitch!*

“I—”

“Oh, my god. You are! And I can’t believe the timing of it all—so close to *my* wedding. It’s like you went and grabbed the first guy who’d say yes just so you wouldn’t be left behind.” She pauses to laugh at her ‘wit.’

“Getting married isn’t a competition, Vanessa,” I say defensively.

“Of course not, silly. You know I’m just playing. So, who’s the unlucky guy?” She pauses to laugh again. I’m yet to crack a smile. “He must be rolling in it if he gave *you* a rock that

size.” She gasps with wide eyes and lowers her voice to a stage whisper. “Oh wait. Is that why you’re here? You’re checking if that thing is real?”

“You think this is fake?” I pull my hand out and look at the ring on my finger. Where’s a time machine when you need one? I need to go back five minutes and leave this thing firmly in its box.

“I didn’t say that. I’m asking if that’s why you’re here. Like, maybe you don’t trust him not to give you the fake stuff.”

“It’s real, Vanessa. But you’ve got this all wrong. I just—”

Before I can get through my explanation, the cashier returns and cuts me off. “Here’s your card back, Mrs. Lansing. Since you’ll be wearing your ring home from the store today, I’ve gone ahead and put the box and receipt inside this bag. If there’s anything else you or your husband need, I’ve popped my personal card in there too. I can help with any and all of your jewelry needs. No request too great or small.” He beams with the gleam of a man who works on commission in his eyes.

“Oh...y-yes. Thank you so much,” I say, taking everything from him and wondering how fast I’d have to run before the friction from my thighs rubbing together would spark a fire and burn this place to the ground so I can convince Vanessa that I was never here and the trauma of the fire is why she thought she saw me.

Probably way faster than I’m capable...

“Great seeing you, Ness. I should get back to work,” I say, desperately wanting to leave while I still have plausible deniability.

Unfortunately, my cousin has other plans and grips my arm with her boney fingers. “Oh no, you don’t—Mrs. Lansing? As in, you’re married already?”

“What? No, I...” I stammer, but Vanessa steamrolls right over me.

“I can’t believe you got hitched and didn’t even tell anyone!” she exclaims. “You were a *bridesmaid* in my wedding, Mae. How could you do this to me?” Her voice rises in pitch with each syllable.

I take a deep breath and try to ignore Vanessa’s theatrics. “Vanessa, I’m...” *Not married. Just tell her you’re not married, and that this is all a big mistake.*

That’s what I *should* say. But then my dear cousin gives me yet another push into Bitch-ville by leaning in conspiratorially and saying, “Are you ashamed because he’s ugly? It’s OK, Mae-bie. None of us expected you to bag a prince charming like I did with my doctor husband, Blake Westington the third. We’re just proud that you managed to convince *anyone* to be with you.”

Mae-bie? I fucking hate that name. I’m not a ‘maybe’, I’m a someone, dammit! I’m so instantly incensed, enraged, livid that I just can’t help but sprint down the main road of Bitch-ville and make myself a home there. How dare she! How dare she spew such vile nonsense and then suggest I couldn’t ‘bag’ a hot husband if I wanted to? Why does she have to be like this!?!

My blood boils and I want to belt her right in the mouth, but since I’m opposed to violence as a conflict resolution tool, I go with totally immature and childish instead.

“For your information, Nussy,” I start, purposely using the nickname *she* hates just to watch her eye twitch. “My *husband* is incredibly handsome, distinguished and...well, I don’t think it’s polite to discuss money, but...” I hold my left hand up, brushing my hair back to show off the ring. Her mouth falls open, but I’m not finished. “And honestly, I’d have loved for you to be at the wedding, but my husband—Gabe, that’s his name—was just so eager to make me his wife that we couldn’t wait another second. He proposed, then flew me to Bora Bora that same day to get married on the beach with just the two of us. It was super romantic. And *very* exclusive. But you wouldn’t really know about that, would you?”

Vanessa's eyes widen with what I can only assume—and hope—is jealousy, and I feel a small sense of satisfaction. Sure, I just lied my ass off. But verbally slapping that look off of Vanessa's face feels worth the shame I'll undoubtedly feel later.

“Bora Bora?”

“Yeah. The place where all the billionaires go. It was beautiful, Ness. But enough about me,” I say, trying to steer the conversation away from my imaginary husband. “What's new with you?”

Vanessa flips her long, perfectly highlighted hair over her shoulder and grins. “Oh, you know, just living the dream. David's practice is doing really well and... Wait. Did the jeweler call you Mrs. *Lansing*? Isn't that the name of your boss?”

Shit. The one time she actually remembers a detail about my life and it's my boss's name. Trapped in my lie, I panic and squeak out a response. “Um, yes...Gabe. Gabe Lansing. That's my boss. And my husband. I'm Mrs. Lansing now. Yes. That's right.”

Smooth, Maeve. Very smooth. If you weren't fired before, you sure are now. Gabe will not be impressed if this gets back to him. I have to stop this! Think, Maeve. How do I talk myself out of this without looking like the giant liar I am?

“Gabe Lansing. Isn't he like ancient?” The outrage I felt before now trebles when her insults shift to Gabe. It's bad enough she feels so comfortable putting me down, but my boss is a good man and doesn't deserve her disrespect. “Who knew little Mae-bie had a thing for older men?” She smirks. Steam whistles from my ears.

“Oh yeah. Big time love for the old guys,” I retort sarcastically, rolling my eyes as I set my shoulders and prepare for battle. “And he's not ancient. He's in his late forties—a silver fox. He's very sexy, and I'd appreciate it if you could keep your opinions *and* all of this information to yourself for a while. We're not ready to broadcast our relationship just yet.” *Great work, Maeve. That'll buy you some time.*

Vanessa looks skeptical. “Why the big secret?”

I force an airy laugh, wishing I could shut the hell up, but a mixture of annoyance, pride, and plain old adrenaline is keeping me going. “Because he’s my boss, Vanessa. We have to keep this on the down low until we find a way to handle it professionally. It’s complicated.”

God! Why am I like this?

“OK. I can understand the need for secrecy at work, but you can’t hide this from our family. Does your mother even know?”

“No. It was very sudden. But we plan to share our happy news with the relatives privately at Christmas. So please, not a word until then.” At least not until I can enter the witness protection program and go into hiding. Do they offer a service like that to people to who lie about being married to their bosses to lord it over their uppity cousins?

Vanessa folds her arms across her middle and presses her lips into a thin line. “Fine. I’ll keep the news to myself—for now. But don’t expect me to keep my mouth shut forever. I can’t wait to see the look on your mother’s face when she finds out her precious daughter is secretly married to her old, graying boss. It’s going to be priceless.”

I grit my teeth and plaster a fake smile on my face. “Oh, Vanessa. Always a pleasure seeing you.”

And with that, I turn and speed walk out the door, thanking the gods for doing me a solid when the first cab I hail stops for me. But the moment I get in, my adrenaline bottoms out and the weight of what I’ve just done hits me full force. I take a deep breath and lean back against the seat as the cab pulls away from the curb. How the hell am I going to get myself out of this?

I’ve just lied to my family about being married to my boss. And even worse than that, I have his mother’s Christmas present—a priceless family heirloom—jammed onto my fat finger. I try not to panic, but a wave of anxiety washes over me. Maybe I can become a gas lighter and deny even seeing

Vanessa today, but how am I going to get the ring off my finger before anyone notices that? I glance down at my hand, and the sight of the ring digging into my pudgy fingers only makes me feel worse. There's no way I can lie my way out of this. I shouldn't have tried it on. I shouldn't have pretended I was married to one-up Vanessa. And I shouldn't have gotten out of bed this morning! Fuck my life.

GABE

*W*hat is taking Maeve so long? I glance at the clock for probably the fiftieth time in the last ten minutes. I'm sitting at my desk, trying in vain to focus on work instead of clock watching. But it's been hours since the jeweler charged my credit card and I'm starting to worry something terrible has happened. *I should have paid security to escort her.*

Just as I contemplate giving her a call, my office phone rings. I don't recognize the number on the caller ID and pick it up instantly. *Please be her.*

"Gabe Lansing," I say into the receiver.

"Gabe! So wonderful to finally speak with you," a friendly female who definitely isn't my assistant says.

I frown, trying to place who this could be. A client? "I'm sorry, who is this?"

"Oh, sorry dear. This is Carol Montgomery, Maeve's mother."

Maeve's mother? I sit up straighter. "Is she OK?"

"When I found out what you two had gone and done, I can say with all honesty that I wanted to throttle the girl. But after a little thought, I decided to let it go and just be happy for the both of you."

"Ah..." What on earth is she talking about? I pinch the bridge of my nose. "Mrs. Montgomery—"

“Please, call me Carol. After all, we’re family now!” She gives an odd laugh, and my gut does a somersault at her words.

Family? “I’m afraid I don’t quite follow...”

“Oh, come now. The cat is well and truly out of the bag, Gabe—is that short for Gabriel?”

“Ah, yes. But—”

“Randy and I were rather shocked when we heard the news. Maeve has always been so responsible, and rushing off like that, keeping secrets from her family, doesn’t really sound like her. But when we looked you up on that googling interwebs and saw how very handsome and, er... *accomplished* you are, we realized our Mae was just doing what felt right. We couldn’t be happier!”

My head is spinning. What news? I don’t really understand much about Maeve’s family dynamics besides picking up over the years that they can be a little overbearing. But this is next level. Who calls their daughter’s boss out of the blue and acts like an old friend—well, family in her words—when we’ve never even met?

“I’m glad you’re so happy, Mrs. Montgomery.”

“Carol. Please, dear. It doesn’t feel right any other way.”

I close my eyes and try not to sigh out loud. “OK, I’ll call you Carol. But you’ll have to remind me what exactly we’re talking about. I’m a bit lost.”

“The wedding, of course!” Carol exclaims. “No need to pretend. Maeve confessed everything!”

“Uh...She did?”

“In her own way. But, Gabe, we were so surprised she didn’t want a proper wedding instead of a tiny ceremony on the beach in Bora Bora. But I know Maeve has always been an independent spirit. And it all sounds so very romantic. Did you take photos, at least?”

Wedding? Bora Bora?? My mouth drops open in shock. I must have misheard her. But before I can respond, Carol keeps

rambling cheerfully.

“Anyway, Randy and I understand. When it’s meant to be, it’s meant to be! We’re just thrilled our daughter has found a nice man like you who can take great care of her. Even if we wish, you’d been a bit more traditional and asked our permission first. But let’s let bygones be bygones.”

Ask their permission? Just what exactly does Carol think is going on between Maeve and me?

“Carol, I think there’s been some confusion,” I start, but the woman isn’t listening to anything but the sound of her own voice.

“I’ll pass you over to Randy now. He’d love to welcome you to the family as well,” Carol continues briskly. “We’ll see you and Maeve at Christmas! The whole family will be there—a big reunion happening this year—I can’t wait to see how red my sister’s face—”

“Don’t start with that nonsense, Carol!” a gruff male voice says in the background before the phone muffles and all I can pick out are a few words here and there about a rivalry and something being put to bed. There’s a ‘so help me god’ in there as well. Then the line crackles and that gruff voice is in my ear.

“Sorry about that, Gabe. Good to finally talk with you, son.”

Son?? Now Maeve’s father is calling me son? This has to be a prank.

“Um... You too, I suppose?”

Randy chuckles jovially, like I’ve made a joke. But I haven’t. I have no clue what’s going on. “Listen, son. I’m gonna level with you here. Normally, I’d want any man courting Maeve to come have a chat with me first. But Carol seems convinced it was all rather impromptu and spontaneous. And I know Maeve has always had a wild streak. She kept it well hidden, but those books she reads...” He sighs, and I’m guessing he doesn’t approve of Maeve’s reading preferences. “I’m not mad. I’m just...disappointed.”

I never thought I'd have a need to facepalm in my life. But in this moment, it's the only response I have in me. I'm too overwhelmed to do anything but make vague noises as Maeve's dad gives me what I'm guessing is a stern talking to. I honestly wouldn't know. My father was never around.

"I'll get over it, of course. But when you've only got one daughter..." He makes a sound like someone just nudged him in the ribs. "Anyway, as long as my girl is happy, I am too." Randy guffaws. "I'll let you get back to it. See you soon, Gabe!"

The line goes dead before I can manage another word, and I sit there staring at the receiver for a good minute, stunned. What a bizarre conversation. Why would both of Maeve's parents be under the impression we're...married? That's what that call was about, right? There must be some mistake.

Shaking my head to get some feeling back into my scrambled brain, I hang up my desk phone and grab my cell to call Maeve. It goes straight to voicemail.

"Maeve, it's Gabe. Please call me back as soon as you get this. It's rather urgent."

I end the call and stare at my phone, willing it to ring. But the screen remains dark. Where could she be?

Exiting the phone app, I login to my bank account, checking the most recent credit card transactions for a clue. There's the charge from the jewelry store, time stamped over two hours ago. But no other charges after that.

My brow furrows. She was supposed to ship the ring to my mother after picking it up. But there's no charge from a courier or the post office.

I call her cell again. Still no answer. Then I do what anyone concerned about another's wellbeing would, and I put a call into the local police station and hospitals. No one fitting her description is at either. I try her again and it still rings out. I resist the urge to throw my phone across the room in frustration. This is so unlike her.

Maeve is one of the most responsible people I know. It's not like her to just disappear after picking up such a valuable item. Did something happen to her? My mind races through horrible scenarios—a car accident, a mugging, a medical emergency. Did she hit her head and dream that we got married while unconscious? That would explain why her parents called me. But you'd think they'd mention an accident...

I take a deep breath, trying to stay calm. There has to be a reasonable explanation. Her phone could have died. Maybe she got tied up running a personal errand. Maybe the parcel carrier is crazy busy and her parents are senile... Surely everything is fine and I'm worrying over nothing.

But as the minutes tick by with no word, it's harder and harder to stay logical. I've never felt this powerless. I'm used to being in control, being able to find solutions to problems. But I can't think myself out of this one. So here I sit, absolutely useless.

Maybe I should go to her apartment to check if she's there? Maybe drive around near the jeweler searching for her? But maybe that crosses the line from concerned boss to creepy stalker... I don't know what to do. Maybe I just have to hope she checks her messages soon, so I know she's OK.

After what feels like an eternity, I can't take it anymore. Too bad if I look like a creep, I'm worried! Grabbing my coat and keys, I'm determined to do something—anything—besides sitting around slowly losing my mind.

Just as I reach the door, my cell phone rings. I fumble to answer it when I see Maeve's name flash across the screen.

"Maeve! Thank god. Are you all right?" The words rush out in an anxious jumble as I wait to hear her voice.

MAEVE

I stare down at the enormous diamond ring still stuck fast to my finger, willing it to magically slide off. Of course, it remains jammed in place, the center stone winking mockingly up at me.

My phone starts buzzing again with yet another call. It's been going off non-stop for hours—my mother, my father, Aunt Daphne, *Vanessa*. I quietly seethe. This is obviously her doing. I can't believe I thought for a minute she'd keep her big mouth shut. She will literally do *anything* to make herself look good, and throwing me under the bus seems to be her favorite way to achieve that.

With a sigh, I head over to the freezer and pull out a bag of frozen peas. I've tried everything from dish soap to cooking oil to wrapping my finger with thread, and nothing is helping. In fact, it's only made the swelling worse. Time to move onto cold compresses. If I'm lucky, the ice will shrink my finger enough for the other methods to work, but if it doesn't, I guess I can just wait until frostbite sets in and my finger snaps off... I shudder at the thought.

Shoving my hand *inside* the bag of peas, I pull one out and crunch on it since I haven't eaten since breakfast, and wander over to where my phone is anxiously buzzing away on my kitchen counter.

Just as I reach it, the screen lights up with an incoming call. It's my mother. Again. I send her off to voicemail, then scroll through the many missed calls on my screen, eating peas

and just lamenting everything that is my life right now. Then I spot a voicemail from Gabe. And a bunch of missed calls.

I nearly choke on my frozen peas. *Shit!*

'Maeve, it's Gabe. Please call me back as soon as you get this. It's rather urgent.'

The moment I hear his tone coupled with the word urgent, I start to physically shake. "I am so fired," I whisper to myself as I fumble with the screen and pull up his number to call him back. But I hesitate, my thumb above the green call button on the screen. What do I say? *Uh, sorry boss. But the ring getting to your mom will be a little delayed. How long? Oh, about twenty pounds. I'm literally eating vegetables and nothing else to make this happen. So I should probably get back to it. Oh, and before I let you go, my entire family thinks we're married. OK? Cool. Bye now!*

Bile rises in my throat. The truth is so not going to work in this situation—not if I want to keep my job *along* with my boss's respect. No. The only option here is to continue lying until I figure out a way to fix it all. Seems crazy, I know. But sometimes you dig yourself a hole so deep that it's best to keep going until you reach the other side.

"You can do this," I coach myself, taking a deep, calming breath and hitting call. It answers right away.

"Maeve! Thank god. Are you all right?" Gabe's voice comes through the speaker in a rush of concern. Guilt twists my gut.

"Yeah, I'm fine!" I say, trying to sound casual and not like I'm freaking out over expensive jewelry theft. "Sorry I disappeared. I just came down with a nasty case of food poisoning." I fake a convincing groan for effect. "Must have been that suspicious street cart hot dog for lunch. Anyway, I rushed straight home to, uh, deal with it. The ring is here with me, though."

"Food poisoning? That's awful. I'm so sorry to hear that." He sounds relieved. Little does he know... "Well, just focus on feeling better. Don't worry about work until you're well."

“Thanks, Gabe. I’m sure I’ll be fine by morning. Was there something urgent you needed earlier? You sounded stressed in your voice message.”

There’s a pause on his end. “Oh, uh, no. Nothing that can’t wait until you’re back on your feet. Go rest.”

He may be a man of mystery, but I know his demeanor well enough to know when he’s holding something back, but I don’t want to push him. I’m already in hot water with this jewelry situation. I can’t afford to make things worse.

“Thanks, Gabe. I should probably let you go. Being on the phone is making me nauseous again.” I make loud retching sounds for effect.

“OK, OK, point taken. Feel better soon, Maeve. Let me know if you need anything.” Gabe’s voice turns warm, and I instantly feel like I might actually throw up. I hate deceiving him.

“Will do. Bye Gabe!” I hang up and blow out a long breath as I pull my hand out of the bag of peas and stare at the ring on my finger. How the hell am I going to get this thing off without damaging it? And what if I can’t get it off at all? Am I supposed to just drive out to his mother’s place and present myself on Christmas morning with a bow tied around my wrist? That would be terribly awkward. But it *would* get me out of spending Christmas with *my* family—something to consider.

My cell phone buzzes with yet another text and I scowl down at the screen. It’s my mother again, peppering me with question after question about this surprise marriage. Leave it to blabbermouth Vanessa to spill the fake news. I’m so upset. But it’s completely my fault. I told one lie that felt great in the moment, but the repercussions have landed me in fake-wedding hell. So not worth that single moment of glee I felt when Vanessa frothed over the ring.

In desperation, I try lathering up my finger with hand soap again, but the ring holds fast. This thing is not budging. I’m half convinced it’s been cursed by some vengeful witch to forever trap the foolish mortals who dare to try it on. Judging

by the size of this rock, it probably has a long history of cursing clueless peasants.

Well, joke's on the cursed ring, because I am determined to get this thing off somehow. There has to be a logical, non-amputation solution. Maybe I can find a jeweler or someone with a pair of bolt cutters and a welding kit discreet enough not to ask questions.

Frustrated and fed up, I decide I need a break before I get so frustrated that I actually consider chopping off my finger. I pour an overflowing glass of wine—grapes count as salad—cue up Netflix, and settle into the couch. A cute rom-com should help me temporarily ignore the dumpster fire that is my life right now.

Interestingly, the movie that pops up first on my feed is *Runaway Bride*. The universe must be laughing its ass off at my predicament, but hey, maybe this will give me some ideas about how to get my family off my back. I mean, I could just go with the truth—that I made it all up—but that would mean admitting to Vanessa that I'm jealous of her and her amazing life. And admitting to my mother that her constant need to brag about me to her sister has made a relationship with my cousin impossible. Ew. That doesn't feel good. My family drives me insane, but I don't want to upset any of them. No. I think it's best that I stay on this newfound path of mine and cover this lie with yet another lie—just call me Pinocchio. I'll go to Christmas alone and tell them Gabe and I both realized we rushed into things and had the marriage annulled a week later. In the meantime, I'll get the ring cut from my finger and repaired in the morning, and once I've paid a courier whatever it takes to express it to Gabe's mother, all will be right with the world and my boss—my beautiful, kind and oh so sexy boss—will be none the wiser. I can do this.

GABE

“Morning,” I say, nodding to security as I arrive at the office early the next morning, hoping to catch Maeve before the usual chaos of the workday begins. I couldn’t stop thinking about her last night, worried she was seriously ill yet also suspicious it was merely a cover story for whatever is going on with her family—and possibly the ring.

As I step off the elevator and pass reception, I spot Maeve hunched over her desk, typing away furiously on her computer. She looks up at the sound of my footsteps and immediately straightens her back, a hint of a blush creeping up her neck and tinting her cheeks.

“Mr. Lansing!” she exclaims, smiling awkwardly as she stands up from her chair. “You’re early today. Good morning.”

“Hi, Maeve,” I reply, taking a step closer to her desk. “You feeling OK today?”

“Yes, yes,” she says quickly, looking down at the papers in front of her. “Woke up this morning fresh as a daisy. Just busy catching up on what I missed yesterday.”

I take a moment to study her face and notice the faint bags under her eyes. She’s also bundled up more than usual, with a wool hat pulled down over her ears and a pair of dark fingerless gloves on her hands. Odd for the office, but maybe she wasn’t lying about being sick after all...

“Is something wrong with the heating?” I ask, gesturing toward her gloves.

“No, no, nothing’s wrong,” she says, shaking her head. “I just have a bit of a chill. Nothing to worry about.”

I nod, not completely convinced. I’ve known Maeve for years now and she’s always been a terrible liar.

“We should talk in my office about yesterday. I had an interesting—”

“Actually!” Maeve interrupts, holding her gloved hand up between us as she takes a step back. “I think I should keep my distance for a day or two. Wouldn’t want to get you sick just in case this thing wasn’t just food poisoning. I’d hate to give you a stomach flu.”

I raise an eyebrow. “I’ll think I’ll survive. I *need* to speak with you, Maeve. In my office. Now.”

“But, the germs—”

“Now!” She winces and a few other early comers turn our way at the sound of my raised voice. I take a breath and soften my tone. “I didn’t mean to yell. I’m sorry. But this can’t wait.” With a nod, she complies, following me into my office. I shut the door behind us.

“Have a seat.”

Maeve perches nervously on the edge of the chair across from my desk. Her shoulders are tense, gloved hands clutched tightly in her lap. She refuses to meet my gaze.

I take a deep breath. “I received a very strange phone call yesterday from your parents.”

Her head snaps up, eyes huge. “You spoke to them?” she whispers.

I nod.

“I’ll go clean out my desk,” she mutters, starting to stand.

“Sit!” I bark, my voice resonating off the walls. Maeve jumps, then sinks back down into the chair. “We *are* discussing this, Maeve. I beginning to see why I couldn’t get a word in with your parents.” I mutter the last part under my breath as I steel myself for this rather difficult conversation.

“I’m sorry, sir. I’m listening.”

“I know. And Thank you. Again, I’m sorry for snapping. This is just...” I don’t finish the sentence and instead pinch the bridge of my nose, letting out a breath before meeting her eyes with a level glare. “Your parents seem to think we eloped in Bora Bora. Any idea how they got such a ridiculous notion?”

Maeve’s lower lip trembles, her eyes glistening with tears. “I may have told my cousin that we did,” she admits, her voice barely above a whisper, her words trembling.

I lean back in my chair, rubbing my forehead with one hand. “Why on earth would you do that, Maeve?”

Her eyes flick to mine and then quickly away. “It seemed like a good idea at the time?” It comes out as more of a question than an explanation. And when she quickly swipes at the corner of her eye and sniffs, I immediately regret my confrontational tone. I circle around the desk and crouch down beside her chair.

“Hey, it’s OK. Just tell me what happened. I’m sure there’s a reasonable explanation, and it’s nothing we can’t fix.”

“OK. But first, I need you to know I’m really sorry, Gabe. I’m not usually like this.”

When I nod encouragingly, she slowly takes off her glove off her left hand and I almost gasp. Instead, I keep my cool and stare down at the enormous diamond ring encircling Maeve’s puffy, inflamed finger. It’s unmistakably the heirloom I sent her to pick up, now firmly stuck in place.

“I’m so sorry, I’m just so sorry,” Maeve says again, fresh tears spilling down her cheeks. “I never should have tried on the ring. That was so stupid of me. But it was just so pretty and sparkly and before I even realized what I was doing, I had slid it onto my finger. And of course, like the absolute idiot I am, it got stuck right away.”

“You’re not an idiot, Maeve,” I say, placing my hand on her arm in comfort.

“Hold back your judgement. You might want to take that back when I tell you what I did next.” She pauses to hiccup

back a sob, taking a shaky breath before continuing her rambling confession. “So, I was in the jewelry store, panicking and trying to get it off my finger, when my cousin Vanessa showed up. I don’t think I’ve ever mentioned her to you, but we’ve never gotten along. She’s always been the popular overachiever and I’m just the awkward bookish cousin. Everyone thinks she’s perfect. And she loves telling me every chance she gets.”

Maeve rolls her eyes, but I notice a flash of pain and jealousy there. “She never misses a chance to not-so-subtly rub her perfect life in my face. So when she saw the ring just as the jeweler mistakingly called me Mrs. Lansing, she assumed I must be married to someone too embarrassing to introduce to the family. So I got so angry. She just... immediately started suggesting that I couldn’t possibly land a great guy and she wouldn’t stop. So before I even realized what I was saying, I blurted out that you were my husband, and we’d spontaneously eloped in Bora Bora and kept it this big secret because of office politics and all that.”

She shakes her head, looking down at her lap. “It was stupid. I don’t know why I lied. Well, I do—I enjoyed seeing her jealous for once instead of smug. But then, of course, it backfired because Vanessa couldn’t keep her mouth shut and now my whole family thinks we’re married and they won’t stop blowing up my phone.”

Fresh tears spill down her cheeks as she meets my eyes again. “I’m so embarrassed, Mr. Lansing. I tried all night to get the ring off, but it won’t budge. I even came in early to go to a jeweler first thing to get it removed, but they weren’t open yet. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I hope you understand it was a moment of weakness and I never meant for any of this to happen. I just... there’s no real excuse besides I just got carried away pretending to be someone better than I am for a minute. But I’ll do whatever it takes to fix this. I can promise you that.”

She takes a shaky breath then dissolves into sobs, and my heart quite literally shatters for her. I can’t even imagine what’s gone on to make her feel anything less than the perfect

angel she is. This Vanessa character deserves more than just a moment of jealousy. Why, as far as I'm concerned, Maeve is the perfect woman. No one could ever compare.

"Hey, it's all right," I soothe, gently taking her hand in mine and inspecting the ring. It's really jammed on there.

"It's not," she sniffs. "I've messed up so bad, Gabe. I understand if you want to fire me. This was so out of line. But..." She hiccups. "I promise I'll get this all straightened out with my family. I'll tell them everything by the end of the day. No one on this earth will even *think* you and I are together. I promise. I really promise."

I can't stand seeing her like this. My poor, precious girl. "Won't that just be giving your cousin exactly what she wants?" I ask, trying to keep my tone neutral. "A way to embarrass and belittle you?"

She nods, a fresh wave of tears spilling down her cheeks. "Yes. But I can handle the embarrassment. It's kind of standard for me. I know I've probably lost all of your respect, but I just don't want to risk losing my job."

"You aren't fired." I rub my thumb over the top of her knuckles, quickly releasing her hand when I realize I've been holding it all this time.

"I'm not?"

I smile and pull the clean handkerchief from my pocket, brushing a tear from her cheek. "Of course not. And I haven't lost respect for you either. Your family sounds..." I let out a sigh. "It's not really my place to say, I suppose. But I don't like what I'm hearing. You deserve better, Maeve."

"I do?" I've never seen someone so taken aback before. She seems so small in this moment that I want to gather her in my arms and keep her safe always.

"Of course. And as far as that ring goes, we'll go to a jeweler together and get this removed properly. I'll figure out another gift for my mother, so the jeweler has time to fix it. The important thing for me is knowing that you're OK."

“I’m OK,” she whispers, sniffing. “Well, as OK as I can be in this situation.” She looks up at me with wide, wet eyes. “Gabe, I’m so sorry. I never meant for this to happen.”

“I know, Maeve,” I say softly, feeling a twinge of guilt at the anger I’d felt earlier. “Here.” I hand her my handkerchief and uses it to blow her nose.

“Thanks.” She holds it out to me, but I raise a hand. She can keep it.

As she wipes away her tears, I can’t help but notice how beautiful I find her, even with red eyes and a runny nose. And suddenly, the thought of her coming clean to her family and ending up ridiculed just doesn’t sit right. I’m no fan of liars, but at the same time, I can understand a lapse in judgement. Her cousin sounds like a nightmare. And I can’t help but feel even more protective of Maeve than I did before. With the knowledge I have now, I feel it’s my duty to shield her from any harm that may come her way. Any man worth his salt would do the same.

“Maeve,” I say, my voice low as the craziest idea I’ve ever had forms in my mind. “This might be a bit unconventional, but hear me out—what if there was something we could do to prevent your cousin from making a fool out of you?”

She looks up at me, hope in her eyes. “Like what?”

“Well, we could make this lie a reality—just for the holidays, of course.”

She pulls back, frowning in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, let’s pretend we’re married until the holidays are over.”

“Gabe, no. That wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“It’s fair if it’s my idea. And we don’t have to do anything legally binding. We can just go along with it and let your family think we’re actually married. I’ll be the most devoted husband they’ve ever seen. It’ll drive your cousin crazy and give you the chance to feel like she can’t get to you for a

change. I'll be there to protect you from whatever she tries to throw your way."

Her eyes grow wide with surprise, but she doesn't immediately protest. "You'd do that? F-for me? Why?"

I smile at her, my heart warming at the sight of the gratitude and disbelief in her eyes. "Because you're important to me, Maeve. And I can't stand the thought of you being embarrassed or humiliated for a silly mistake. Besides," I pause, leaning in closer to her. "I have to admit, the thought of making someone like your cousin jealous of you is rather appealing. She seems like an unpleasant person, and I think you've probably put up with enough."

"She makes me crazy," Maeve admits, and I can't help but chuckle.

"Then that settles it. I was planning on having a quiet Christmas at home since my daughter is with her mother's family this year, but now I can brush up on my acting skills instead. By the end of the holiday, your cousin won't be so smug around you anymore. I'll make sure of it."

I give her a wink, and then she throws her arms around me, hugging me tightly. "Thank you, thank you, *thank you*, Gabe! I am so relieved right now. You don't know how much this means to me. I...I don't think anyone has ever stuck up for me, or put themselves out like this for me before. I'm... I'm overwhelmed and so, *so* grateful."

My spine stiffens. *No one's stuck up for her before?* It's time that changed.

I hold her a little tighter, reveling in the feel of her body against mine. I know I shouldn't be having these kinds of thoughts about my employee, but I can't help it. There's something about Maeve that draws me to her. Maybe it's her intelligence or her wit, or maybe it's the way her body fits perfectly against mine. Whatever it is, I can't deny that I'm attracted to her. Not anymore. Not when I feel like I just got handed exactly what I wished for this Christmas. Her.

MAEVE

Christmas Eve

The weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas normally pass in a blur of festive bustle. But this year, time seems to accelerate even more as my family's Christmas reunion looms ever nearer. I'm caught between being excited that I get to spend Christmas and New Year with the man I've been lusting over since I was hired, and dreading it because this is all a lie—I'm still not entirely sure why he's willing to go along with this. But I'm also petrified to ask.

Since getting the ring literally *cut* from my finger, Gabe and I have barely discussed our fake engagement plan beyond agreeing to keep it quiet at the office—no sense in causing a stir over something that isn't even real. Yet despite the minimal preparation, I catch him watching me pensively sometimes when he thinks I don't notice. Ever since I revealed my little white lie, our easy rapport has shifted into uncharted territory. I'm not sure if he's uneasy around me, and perhaps second guessing his decision to go along with my fib, or if he's simply trying to figure out how he should act around me now. It's obvious I have feelings for him. I mean, why else would I pretend he's the guy I got fake married to? It's something I should probably address with him, but for the life of me, I can't find a way to work it into our conversations about budget reports and client meetings.

As the day of the family reunion draws closer, my nerves are in overdrive. Vanessa has been texting me non-stop with updates on the event, going on about showing off her new diamond tennis bracelet and how she's throwing a massive New Year's Eve party on the Oakwood Falls estate. I can just

tell she's going to be completely insufferable this week, and I can't help but feel like I'm walking into a trap. She was competitive with me before, so I can't imagine how much worse it's going to be now that I'm actually showing up with a handsome billionaire 'husband' as my plus one.

But as I stand in front of the mirror, holding up two dresses and trying to decide on an outfit for the first night of the reunion, I realize I don't care what she thinks. I'm about to spend an entire week with the man of my dreams.

A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts, and I open it to find Gabe standing there, looking at me like he's never seen me before. His eyes trail over my body, drinking in the deep-red sweater dress I've chosen to wear on the drive out to Oakwood Falls, and I can feel my cheeks flushing under his gaze. "Hey," he says, his voice low and hoarse. "You look beautiful."

I can't help but smile at the compliment, feeling a warmth spread through my body. "Thank you," I reply, feeling suddenly shy. "You don't look too shabby yourself." I nod toward his dark blue jeans and cable-knit sweater. I don't think I've ever seen him looking this casual, and I have to admit that I like it.

"I can change if you think this isn't dressy enough."

"No." I hold up a hand but halt it midair so I don't connect with his chest, even though my fingers burn from wanting to close that distance. "You look perfect. Come in." Forcing my hand back down to my side, I take a step back to let him into my apartment. I may have crisis cleaned the entire thing from top-to-bottom today just so it was spotless for this very moment. I'm desperate to impress him. "I'm almost done packing, if you don't mind waiting five minutes."

"I'll wait as long as you need me to," he says with an easy smile as he steps into my home and takes a slow look around. There isn't a lot to see.

Just a small living room with a couch, a TV, and a few photo frames on the wall. To the left of the living room is a small kitchen, and to the right is a bedroom with a queen bed

and a large closet. “This is nice,” he says, turning back to me. “Cozy.”

“Does that mean it looks like a closet compared to where you live?” I ask teasingly.

He laughs. “Not at all. It means that I feel welcome. Your home is lovely, Maeve.”

My heart flutters as Gabe steps closer to me, his voice as warm and inviting as he’s complimenting my apartment. The air around us feels charged with electricity, and I can’t help but wonder what it would be like to feel his lips on mine, to welcome him into my body as well as my home... I shake my head, trying to push the thought out of my mind. This is just pretend, Mae. Just pretend.

“Do you want something to drink? I’ve got soda, coffee, tea, hot chocolate. Oh, and water.”

Gabe smiles and all I want to do is open my mouth and let every word I’ve never said about how wonderful I think he is spill out of them. “I’m fine. Thank you, though.”

“OK. I’ll just...” I turn away from Gabe and point to my bedroom before walking toward it, trying to mentally calm myself down. I need to focus on packing and getting out of town, not on the way my body reacts to seeing Gabe standing in my home. As I start tossing clothes into my suitcase, I hear movement in the doorway behind me.

“Can I help with anything?” he asks.

I have an itch you can scratch with your tongue...

My cheeks heat at the thought, and I turn around to see him standing only a few feet away, his eyes locked on mine. My breath catches as I take in the way his broad shoulders stretch his sweater and the way his jeans fit him perfectly. He’s so incredibly handsome, and I’ve never noticed how well he fills out his trousers before... *gulp*.

“I...I can manage,” I stutter, trying to control my breathing as I try not to get caught staring at his package, turning back to my suitcase to squeeze in the last few items. In my flustered state, I end up just shoving things in haphazardly. Predictably,

the overstuffed bag refuses to close. I wrestle with the zipper, but it's firmly stuck halfway.

"Here, let me do that," Gabe says. He comes up behind me, so close I can feel the heat radiating from his body. My heart races as he reaches around me to grasp the suitcase, his arm brushing against mine.

"If you can just press here and here, then I can tug this part like so..." he murmurs. Together we force the zipper closed, that bag feeling more and more like a metaphor to my almost bursting emotions.

"There we go." He smiles down at me, our faces inches apart. I stare wide-eyed up at him, pulse thundering. God, he's even more beautiful up close. Smells good too.

Possibly sensing my wonder, Gabe clears his throat and steps back. "Want me to take this out to the car?"

I nod mutely, watching as he hefts the case off the end of my bed with little effort.

"Gabe." I stop him before he reaches my bedroom door. He turns and meets my eyes with his brow raised in question. "Before you do that, I just wanted to make sure one last time that you're sure you still want to do this? Spending time with my family is no walk in the park, and pretending we're married on top of immersing you in my own private hell might get a little... complicated. Especially when we return to work. I want you to know that I'd understand if you wanted to change your mind." I let out a breath, glad I got all those words out without getting tongue-tied.

He frowns. "Of course I still want to. Why wouldn't I?"

I shrug helplessly. "I just don't want you to feel obligated. This whole mess is my fault. You're really saving my ass here. I'll owe you forever."

Gabe steps closer again, gently grasping my shoulders. "Maeve, listen. You don't owe me anything. If anything, I owe you."

I blink in surprise. "What do you mean?"

“When you started working for me, my life was utter chaos. You brought order and stability when I needed it most. Every day for the past five years, you’ve made my life better.” I’m so touched by his words that tears prickle the backs of my eyes. “I’m happy to finally be able to do something for you in return. So forget your worry about me. I don’t want to be anywhere but by your side this Christmas.” His voice drops lower. “Now let’s go convince your family how madly in love we are.”

My throat closes, my heart swells, so I just nod. I don’t need to convince anyone of something that’s true on my side.

As we head to the car side-by-side, I can’t keep a goofy grin off my face. Maybe this holiday week won’t be so bad after all. And maybe—just maybe—Mr. Lansing, *Gabe*, has some real feelings developing for me, too.

A girl can dream...

GABE

The drive to Maeve's family estate passes quickly as we chat and joke, keeping the mood light. We've always gotten along well in an office setting, but getting the chance to really socialize with her over something that has nothing to do with work is great. We should have pretended we're married to get her relatives off her back a long time ago.

"So, give me the rundown of all the relatives I'm about to meet," I say when the navigator says we only have about forty-five minutes left on our trip. "Any tips for impressing them?"

She rolls her eyes and grins. "The fact you're a living, breathing man showing up with me will be enough to have them fawning all over you. But there are a few things to note, I suppose. My nan will try to pinch your cheeks, so it's up to you if you dodge or let her have it. My Uncle Jake will bale you up to ask about a thousand different questions about the engine of your car. I have no idea if he knows what he's talking about when he oh's and ah's about it. But if you nod and smile, he'll be happy. My dad tells truly terrible dad jokes, so just laugh politely—and don't ever bring up politics with him or things will get really heated. Oh, and my cousin Brooke is obsessed with exotic birds. She won't stop talking about her cockatiel and macaw."

"Noted. Laugh at bad jokes and feign interest in birds and cars," I reply. "Anything else I should know? You haven't mentioned your mother."

Maeve's expression turns serious. "My mother... she can be a bit... intense," she says, choosing her words carefully. "She means well, but she can also be quite critical. Just don't take anything she says too personally. And whatever you do, don't compliment the stuffing at dinner. Years ago, my mother and Aunt Daphne had a massive fight over stuffing. Aunt Daphne claimed ownership over my mother's stuffing recipe, and it's been a sensitive topic ever since. Just avoid it altogether."

I nod, taking all the information in. "Got it. No stuffing."

"Oh no. Eat the stuffing. Just don't talk about it. It'll be worse if you don't."

I can't help but chuckle. "OK. I'll eat the stuffing." I glance at her briefly as we make our way down a long stretch of country road. "So the rivalry goes back to your mom and her sister too, huh? Then it got passed on to you and Vanessa?"

Maeve nods solemnly. "Yeah. Mom and Aunt Daphne competed with each other their whole lives, and as much as I actively tried to avoid it, it just kind of trickled down to me and Vanessa. It got to a point while we were in high school that I'd try hiding my report cards because every A plus was a crowing moment that would turn into the bragging olympics. My mom would say, 'Oh, Maeve is doing so well at school, top of the class in biology,'" she says, putting on a voice for her mom. "And then my aunt would say, 'Well, she'd want to be smart if she's going to get anywhere in life. She'll never be head cheerleader like my Vanessa.'" Maeve wrinkles her nose and folds her arms across her chest, clearly still feeling the sting of those comparisons.

"I'm sorry you had to deal with that," I say softly, wanting to offer some sort of comfort. "But you turned out pretty amazing, regardless of what they said."

She smiles at me, and it's like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

"I guess I just learned to tune out their comments and focus on what I wanted to do with my life."

“That’s a good attitude to have,” I reply, feeling a sudden urge to reach out and touch her hand. But I resist, not wanting to make things awkward between us. “And look where it’s gotten you. You’re successful, independent, and you have a boss who’s willing to be your fake husband.” I grin at her, hoping to lighten the mood. Maeve laughs and shakes her head.

“Which reminds me. Out of everyone you interact with this week, whatever you do, don’t let your guard down around Vanessa. She’s beautiful to look at, but those teeth of hers are sharp. So is her tongue.”

I nod, taking the warning seriously. “I’ll make sure to keep my guard up.” The last thing I want is to slip up and make things worse for Maeve. The whole reason I’m here is to help her save face and show up her cousin for a change. Well, it’s not the *whole* reason. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t hoping for the chance of turning this fake relationship real.

Maeve sighs as she settles against the headrest of her seat and looks out the front window. “I guess the most important thing is to relax and be yourself. You’re pretty impressive as you are, Gabe. So I know they’ll love you.”

Her sincerity makes me smile. If I wasn’t already falling for this beautiful woman beside me, I definitely would be now. Even through her own nerves, she still manages to be sweet.

We spend the next thirty minutes going over our fictional story about our Bora Bora wedding, quizzing each other on relationship details in case anyone interrogates us. Before I know it, the sprawling country estate comes into view and something about it feels familiar, making me wonder if Vanessa’s in-laws are somehow connected to my family. I feel like I’ve been here before.

“Is it too late to turn around and forget all about this?” Maeve asks in a rush, her breath quickening, sweat beading on her brow.

I reach for her hand. “It’s not too late, if that’s what you really want. But, Maeve, you’re stronger than this. We’re in this together, remember?”

She takes a deep breath before nodding. “Right. Together.” She gives my hand a squeeze before we pull into the driveway.

“You think you’ll be all right?”

She turns to me, attempting a smile. “Yeah, just nervous, I guess. I’ve never brought a date to one of these things before.”

“A date? Dear girl, I’m your husband.”

Releasing a lighthearted laugh, her shoulders relax and she seems slightly less miserable as we come to a stop along the circular drive outside the big double entry doors.

“Ready to put your acting hat on?” she asks, her hand reaching for the door handle.

“Before you get out of the car, there’s something I need to give you.” She quickly turns back to me and gasps when I pull the ring box from my pocket.

“You didn’t.” Maeve’s eyes widen in recognition as I lift the dazzling heirloom ring from the velvet case.

“I did. I even had it resized, so hopefully it won’t get stuck again,” I explain, gently sliding it onto her finger. It’s a perfect fit.

“What about your mother? Wasn’t this meant to be her Christmas gift?”

“Believe me, what I sent instead has well and truly made up for me keeping the ring. And look.” I tilt her hand slightly so the light catches the diamonds. “It’s like it was made for you.”

“This is too much,” she whispers. “I don’t know if I can wear this.”

“A wife of mine deserves the best. I trust you to take care of it.”

“OK.” Her voice is barely audible as she looks from the ring to me and gulps.

“Ready to face these relatives as a united front, Mrs. Lansing?”

Maeve's face lights up at my words. "Let's do this."

I don't care if this is pretend. Being here to support her ruse feels right. As we walk hand-in-hand up the front steps, I'm determined to play the part of an adoring husband convincingly and make this Maeve's—and my—best Christmas yet. And by the New Year, who knows? Maybe that ring will stay on her finger by choice this time.

MAEVE

*M*y nerves are in overdrive as we enter the grand foyer of Blake's family estate. The sheer opulence of the space! Rich, polished hardwood floors and a grand staircase that leads up to an enormous crystal chandelier that hangs from the two-story ceiling like a glittering icicle. It casts a soft glow over the foyer and reflects off of the gold accents in the furniture and decor. I can't help but feel a little intimidated, to be honest, but Gabe's steady presence beside me is reassuring. He squeezes my hand lightly and gives me a quick wink that instantly makes me feel like I can face anything my relatives dish out.

"You're here!" my mother says after a butler—a *butler*—lets us in, and then we're immediately swarmed by various family members, welcoming us excitedly. I brace for the onslaught of passive aggressive comments and prying questions about my marriage. But to my surprise, no one tries a guilt trip or a sly remark at all. They all seem genuinely happy for me, and they greet Gabe warmly instead of scrutinizing him. Even my critical mother cracks a wide smile and hugs him like a lost friend. This feels wrong.

"He's very handsome," she whispers while my uncle asks Gabe about the 'torque' under the hood of his car. Gabe happily rattles off details and my uncle seems delighted. Then my teenage cousin Brooke comes into view and Gabe asks her if she knows anything about bird watching. Her eyes light up. "And so polite!"

I beam, relieved she approves. Gabe is charming them all effortlessly. His hand rarely leaves the small of my back, subtly possessive. My insides flutter wildly.

Just when I'm allowing myself to relax and realize I'm actually enjoying an encounter with my family, the clicking of heels on marble makes my spine ice over.

"Oh god. Here she is," I whisper to Gabe as Vanessa breezes in from the kitchen, looking runway-ready as always. Her calculating gaze sweeps over Gabe appreciatively before she greets me with an icy smile.

"Maeve, darling! So glad you could make it." Her voice bellows out across the room as she extends her arms like she's coming at me with a hug—we don't hug—and her tone drips with false sweetness. I grit my teeth, readying myself for whatever comes next, when Gabe slips an arm around my waist and spins me so I'm facing him. Then, without warning, he cups my face and captures my lips in a passionate kiss. A shocked squeak escapes me before I melt into it. My toes literally curl in my boots and I sag like a boneless rubber chicken, and if it wasn't for the fact his mouth is sealed over the top of mine, I'd probably be groaning like one too. *Huuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!*

When we finally break for air, I'm speechless and weak-kneed, my hands fisted against Gabe's lovely knit sweater. Because if I don't hold on tight, I'm gonna be a puddle on the floor. *Wowsa!* That man can *kiss!* Just the right amount of tongue and lip sucking... Oh lord. If he does that again, I'll likely need to take a pregnancy test.

"Er-herm." Vanessa clears her throat to get our attention then presses her glossy lips into a thin line when we look her way, irritated she didn't get the reaction she wanted.

"What a... loving display," she forces out. "Welcome to the estate."

Gabe smiles, all charm. "Thank you. We're exhausted." He shrugs off his coat and holds it out to her expectantly. "If you could show us to our room, my wife and I would appreciate a chance to rest. It's been a long drive."

Vanessa stares at his coat like he's trying to hand her dog poop. "Excuse me?"

"Oh!" Gabe feigns surprise. "I almost forgot. You'll need my keys. Our luggage is in the back of the Rolls out front."

"Uh... *what?*" Vanessa holds her hands up and cringes back like he's now trying to hand her a baby with a full diaper as well.

Gabe jingles the keys. "The car. Our bags are inside." He turns to me. "Gosh, the staff here isn't very helpful."

The room goes silent. Vanessa's face turns bright red, and she sucks in a breath like someone just socked her in the gut.

"I'm not staff!" she hisses, suddenly cognizant of everyone's stares. Her eyes blaze with denial and anger and embarrassment all at once. I can almost hear her teeth grinding, and for a moment I'm afraid she's going to lunge at Gabe and attack him. Then she turns on her heels in a huff and storms off, her arms flailing wildly like an angry bird of prey.

Gabe just laughs and grins at me with mischief in his eyes before my uncle interrupts with a face lit up like a little boy on Christmas. "I'll get your bags if you'll let me move your car around back. I've always wanted to drive a Rolls-Royce Sweptail."

"Sure. Knock yourself out. You can even take it for a spin if you like," Gabe says, dropping his keys into my uncle's upturned hand. He looks at them like he's Daffy Duck in the cave of wonders.

"Four hundred and fifty-three horsepower," he whispers, each word thick with awe. Then he spins around and runs off gleefully.

"I think you just made a friend for life and an enemy for life in the space of thirty seconds," I say, taking his offered elbow as the butler returns and gestures for us to follow him up the stairs to our room.

"Dinner is at seven-thirty sharp!" my mother calls after us. Aunt Daphne turns to her and asks if she plans to discuss that 'rudeness' with me, but I just tune them out. For once, I feel

like the princess in the fairytale instead of one of the forest animals scampering around at her beck and call.

As we follow the butler up the grand staircase, Gabe leans close to me and whispers into my ear, “Do you think I made a good first impression?”

I chuckle and nod. “You definitely left an impression, that’s for sure.”

The butler stops in front of a set of double doors and opens them to reveal a luxurious suite. The room is decorated in shades of pale blue and cream, with plush carpets and velvet drapes. The king-sized bed sits in the center of the room, flanked by nightstands with crystal lamps. A fireplace crackles merrily in one corner, casting a warm glow over the entire suite.

“Wow,” I breathe, taking in the opulence. There’s even a little seating area off to the side, where we can relax and enjoy the view of the gardens through the large balcony window.

Normally, I want to poke around and take a look in the ensuite to see if it has a bathtub, but as soon as the door closes behind us and we’re alone, I turn to Gabe and burst into a fit of giggles.

“I can’t believe you just did that!”

“Did what?” Gabe asks, his lips quirking into a smile. “Let your uncle drive my car?”

I shake my head, and he steps closer, his gaze intense yet filled with affection. “No. Before that.”

“Oh, you mean when I kissed you?”

I blush, breaking eye contact as the heat creeps up my neck. “Well, yes. That was a shock. But I was referring to when you treated Vanessa like a maid.”

Inching closer, he lets out a warm chuckle, then leans in close to whisper in my ear. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat.” His hot breath sends a shiver down my spine, and I feel my cheeks heat even more. I don’t know if he’s talking about the kiss or how he treated Vanessa, but either way, my body gets all tingly

and I have to pull away before I do something silly like tearing off all my clothes and begging him to fill me with his little babies.

“I’m going to shower.” I walk around the bed and head toward the ensuite.

I don’t even make it two steps before he calls out to me.

“Maeve?”

I turn around and see him standing by the window, his hands in his pockets. “Yes?”

“I know you’re not interested in competing with your cousin. But if it came down to it, you’d win with me every time.”

My heart hammers as I stare at him, his words ringing in my ears. It’s so lame, but I think that’s probably the sweetest thing a man has ever said to me. I barely resist the urge to run back and kiss him again. Instead, I swallow the lump in my throat and force myself to nod my thanks, then turn around. The moment I turn the shower on, I cry. I’m not even sure why.

GABE

Christmas Eve dinner begins smoothly enough. The dining room is as lavishly decorated as the rest of the house, with a huge fir tree sparkling with crystal ornaments in the corner and a table decorated with delicate china and silverware set at each place setting.

As Maeve and I enter, her relatives are already mingling with drinks in hand. It strikes me that there aren't any children at this reunion, but I suppose the three generations in attendance—Maeve's grandmother, her children and their spouses along with their teenage or adult children, of which Maeve and Vanessa are the oldest—are at that point in life where children are a future thought.

The butler greets us with a silver tray of champagne glasses and I take two, handing one to Maeve. She takes a sip and I can tell she's nervous from the way her fingers tremble slightly.

I put a hand on her lower back to steady her and guide her to where the others are standing. A chorus of polite laughter rings out in response to a shared anecdote from a tall, doughy man, who can only be the infamous Dr. Blake Westington III—Vanessa's husband. The moment he spots us, he immediately steps out of the circle to greet us.

"You must be Maeve's new husband!" he exclaims, pumping my hand enthusiastically. "Blake Westington, so nice to meet you."

Up close, it's apparent Blake is rather homely with limp brown hair, ruddy cheeks and small dark eyes that bulge slightly. His skin has the pale, puffy look of unbaked bread. Despite his unimpressive appearance, his gaze is sharp and assessing, his demeanor calm, kind and polite. I like him better than his wife already.

"Gabe Lansing. Pleasure to meet you as well."

"Sorry I couldn't greet you when you arrived. I was with a last-minute patient," Blake says. "Couldn't be helped."

"No need to apologize, we completely understand," I reply, my arm firmly around Maeve's middle possessively. "Your wife was more than accommodating."

Maeve hides her smirk behind her champagne, and I give her a tiny squeeze before turning back to Blake. "So, what kind of doctor are you?"

"I'm a plastic surgeon," Blake responds proudly. "I specialize in facial reconstruction and enhancements."

"Ah, I see," I say, nodding thoughtfully. "Well, I'm sure your patients are very grateful for your work."

Blake beams at the compliment and begins to launch into a detailed description of his latest procedures, but I am distracted by the arrival of Maeve's grandmother, a petite, regal woman with a shock of snowy white hair and the most piercing blue eyes I've ever seen. She approaches us with a grace and confidence that commands attention.

"Hello, my darlings," she says, reaching up and pinching both mine and Maeve's cheeks at the same time. I smile through it. "I hope you're enjoying the party."

"Nan, this is Gabe, my...husband," Maeve introduces me, giving me a gentle nudge forward.

"It's lovely to meet you, Mrs..." I trail off, unsure of her last name.

"Call me Agatha, dear," she says, smiling warmly. "Morrison was my husband's name. He passed away some years ago."

“I’m sorry for your loss, Agatha,” I say sympathetically.

“Thank you, dear,” she replies graciously. “We were all shocked to hear you and Maeve had eloped, but I can see now that you make a lovely couple. I’m sure as newlyweds, the last thing you wanted to do was spend your first Christmas in a stuffy old place like this, but it’s nice you made time for us all.” Her serene smile falls suddenly, like a mask dropping to the floor. “Especially since you didn’t bother inviting us to the wedding, and we had to hear about it from Vanessa instead of you.”

I feel Maeve tense beside me, but I put on my most charming smile and take a step closer to Agatha. “You’re right, Agatha. We could have stayed in the city, but we made the effort to come out here for some quality family time. I don’t like speaking for Maeve, but I’m confident when I say that we’re both so glad you appreciate our efforts.”

Agatha’s expression softens slightly, but there’s still a hint of bitterness in her tone when she speaks. “I just wish we could have been there for your special day.”

“I understand,” I say. “But Maeve and I wanted something small and intimate.”

Agatha nods, her eyes flickering between Maeve and me. “Well, I suppose that’s understandable. But you must understand that family is important, Gabe. And if you’re going to be a part of this family, you must prioritize that.”

My smile remains fixed on my face. “My priority is my wife, ma’am.”

Blake clears his throat. “I should probably go see what’s keeping, Vanessa,” he says, receding from the conversation the moment the tension amps up.

Agatha stares at me for a long moment, her lips pursed into a thin line. “Of course,” she murmurs finally, her gaze darting back to Maeve as if I’m no longer a concern of hers. “And how are you finding married life, my dear?”

Maeve’s shoulders relax slightly, and she smiles softly at her grandmother. “It’s been wonderful, Nan. Gabe is the

perfect husband.”

Agatha’s smile returns, but it’s strained. “I’m glad to hear that.” She turns to me again. “Well, I should go mingle. Nice meeting you, Gabe. Merry Christmas.”

“You too, Agatha.”

We stand silently as she crosses the room to where Maeve’s Aunt Daphne stands, and the two of them start whispering to each other while looking back at us. I feel like I’m in some dystopian world where this is highschool and I’m the new kid trying to fit in. But I know better than to let some mean-girl types get under my skin. Maeve, on the other hand...

“Are they always like that?” I ask.

“Yeah,” she murmurs, blinking rapidly before turning to me and plastering a smile on her face. “Regretting coming yet?”

“Not at all. It’ll take a hell of a lot more than a passive aggressive grandmother to scare me away. Agatha has obviously never been in the same room as a bunch of Lansings before.”

She smiles up at me. “That bad, huh?”

“Pure torture,” I say, bumping her fondly with the side of my body.

Skippping the unpleasanties with the rest of her family, we make our way to our allotted seats around the dining table. We settle into our seats just as Vanessa makes her grand entrance, slinking into the room wearing a low-cut red dress that hugs her figure and leaves little to the imagination. I bristle immediately. Not because I have anything against her outfit—I honestly don’t care what this woman wears—but because of the way her eyes immediately find Maeve, sweep her up and down before she smirks triumphantly, her hand on her hips as she sashays into the room and links arms with her husband. It’s so obvious that she’s trying to outdo Maeve, who’s dressed in a demure black dress and shiny red shoes, a brooch of holly pinned just above her breast to make her dinner outfit festive.

The moment Vanessa appears, Maeve's spine straightens, and I place my arm around the back of her chair. I've barely spent an hour with these people, and I already think Maeve must be a saint from putting up with this behavior all her life. I want nothing more than to be her shield, her protector, and her cheer squad. Leaning in slightly, I brush my lips near her ear and do just that.

"Ignore her, babe. You're the sexiest woman in this room."

Maeve pulls back on a gasp and looks up at me, her eyes softening, chest heaving. "You don't have to say that to me."

I reach up and brush her hair back from her face. "Why not? It's true."

The table fills up fast, Blake at the head of it, Vanessa at the other end, and Maeve and I seated next to each other with the rest of the family in the middle. The table is adorned with red and green tablecloths, twinkle lights, and a beautiful centerpiece of pine cones and holly.

Vanessa holds court, her long manicured nails slicing through the air as she details her luxurious trips around the world with Blake. Every time Maeve or I—or anyone else, for that matter—try to add something to the conversation, Aunt Daphne quickly redirects it back to Vanessa. The sound of clinking silverware and polite laughter filling the room as I quickly get the memo that this is the Vanessa show and no one else gets to shine. No problem.

"Tell everyone about that time Blake flew you to Paris for a surprise dinner at the Eiffel Tower," Aunt Daphne says, her eyes shining with pride as she looks around the table. "He booked out the entire restaurant, so it was just the two of them."

Vanessa launches into a long-winded tale about her romantic dinner with Blake, flashing the massive diamond on her finger every chance she gets. The entire time, Maeve looks like she's about to bolt, twisting her fork between her fingers as she chews slowly and keeps her eyes on her food. It's like I can see her shrinking into herself, and the idea that this gorgeous vivacious woman could ever feel the need to make

herself small infuriates me. We're sitting with her *family*. The people who are supposed to love and protect her. Well, she's got me now. And I'll be damned if anyone makes her feel small again.

Just as I decide to make it my life's mission to show Maeve how brilliant she is, Vanessa turns her calculating eyes toward my wife. *Here we go.*

"So tell me, Maeve. Has Gabe ever whisked you away somewhere romantic, like Paris?"

Before Maeve can respond, Vanessa covers her mouth and laughs. "Oh, sorry, I forgot. You two are a dirty little secret. I doubt you get out much."

Maeve flushes, clearly flustered as her mouth gapes, unable to form a response. So I place my hand on her knee under the table and give it a squeeze as I jump in to respond for her.

"Actually, Verna. The only reason we don't get out more is because we're too busy making up for lost time in the bedroom," I say casually. "Isn't that right, darling? I just can't keep my hands off you."

I give Maeve a meaningful look. She coughs, then nods. "Yes, wonderful stamina on this one."

Gasps sound around the table. "Maeve!" her mother admonishes. "I raised you better than that."

At the same time, Vanessa scowls my way. "It's *Vanessa*."

"Who?" I frown, fighting my grin because making this woman look foolish for trying to belittle my wife has become my new favorite pastime.

"My name. You called me Verna. It's Vanessa."

"I could have sworn you said your name was Verna. My mistake. I'll get it right in the future," I say, taking a sip of wine before turning to Uncle Jake and asking him how he enjoyed driving the Rolls. When he launches into a gushing description of every feature the limited edition car has to offer,

I smile silently to myself, reveling in my stolen spotlight while Vanessa mopes and pokes at her food quietly.

When dessert is served, there's a lull in the conversation and Blake takes the opportunity to tap his knife against his glass to get our attention for a speech. "Friends and family, I want to thank you all for joining my wife and I at this lovely estate for Christmas. We have a lot of planned, as well as a fireworks display to ring in the new year..."

What follows is a lengthy, rambling monologue as Blake explains the upcoming schedule and expounds on the history of various Christmas traditions and the importance of family. Our desserts are long finished by the time his speech is over, and I can see the weariness on everyone's faces as they politely applaud. I raise my glass, trying to inject some energy into the room. "Cheers to the hosts for graciously opening their family home for all of us to enjoy!"

Everyone raises their glasses and joins in with their thanks you's and compliments about the beauty of the estate. Blake lifts his finger and opens his mouth as if to make a point, and as expected, Vanessa glares down the table at him and shakes her head. I lift my napkin and wipe at my mouth to hide my smile. *Gotcha.*

"I wonder, Blake, have you any relation to the Davenports?" I ask once he's sat down and is tucking into his now-cold pudding. He frowns and shakes his head.

"Can't say I am. Why do you ask?"

I lean back in my chair, looking at him pointedly. "No reason. It's just that your estate looks strikingly similar to the Davenports'. I guess it's just a coincidence."

Blake looks up quickly, his face frozen as he locks eyes with Vanessa, who snorts and rolls her eyes. "Who on earth are the Davenports?" She doesn't wait for me to answer, simply because she doesn't *want* me to answer. "Who even cares? How about we play a game of charades?"

I smile inwardly at Vanessa's sudden change of topic, but I let it go because my intended message has been well and truly

received. I'm onto them. And they know it. As the group starts to clear the table and move into the living room, I hang back.

“What's got you grinning like that cat who's got the cream?” Maeve leans in and speaks low so only I can hear.

“I'll tell you when we're back in the room,” I say, stretching my arms and feigning a yawn so we can do just that.

MAEVE

As soon as we're back in our room after dinner, I lean against the closed bedroom door and look at Gabe. "Spill."

He loosens his tie as he grins at me cheekily. I have the sudden urge to cross the room and grab that tie so I can tug him to me. I push the thought away.

"Quit teasing. What aren't you telling me?"

"I know the owners of this estate."

"What do you mean?" I ask, my eyes narrowing as I step out of my shoes while he sits on the edge of the bed and undoes his laces.

"The Davenports I mentioned at dinner? They're friends of my family. They own this place, and they make a killing by renting it out whenever they aren't using it."

I gasp. "Are you telling me Vanessa is *pretending* to be the lady of the manor?" I put a posh accent on for the last few words.

Gabe chuckles. "I sure am. Seems we aren't the only ones pretending to be something we're not."

"Wow," I say, blinking several times as I try to figure out why Vanessa would do such a thing. She's got the rich doctor husband and a luxurious lifestyle. What more could she want? And why would she need to pretend to have more? "Do you think she's in some kind of trouble? Or maybe she's just bored and looking for some excitement?"

Gabe shrugs. “I have no idea. But it’s definitely something to keep in mind as we navigate the rest of this week. She obviously puts a great deal of value into her social status.”

“She always has,” I say as I head into the bathroom to remove my makeup, leaving the door open so we can keep talking.

“Maybe we can use that to make her behave,” he suggests, kicking off his shoes and then peeling off his socks with a satisfied groan. I stand at the mirror removing my earrings.

“I don’t think you understand the lengths that woman will go to in order to save face, Gabe. You’re more likely to get *me* in trouble with the way you’re behaving.” I glance at him through the open bathroom door.

He looks up, a challenge in his eyes. “Do you want me to stop?”

I move to lean in the doorway, openly admiring him sitting on the edge of the bed, digging his toes into the plush carpet. “No. I know I should be the bigger person and be gracious, and all that. But seeing you shut Vanessa down is way too much fun.”

Gabe grins. “Music to my ears.”

With a smile I can’t shake, I return to the bathroom mirror, squeezing toothpaste onto my brush as I watch re-runs in my mind of the way he jumped to my defense. If I wasn’t smitten with him before, I certainly am now. “I can’t believe you pretended to forget her name.”

His muffled laughter floats in from the other side of the door. “You’ll let me know if I go too far, won’t you? The last thing I want to do is embarrass you.”

I finish brushing and saunter back to the bedroom, my lower belly tightening when I find him half-naked, pulling a soft t-shirt over his head. *Mr. Lansing works out...* He catches me looking and grins. It takes me a moment to remember what we were talking about.

“The um, story about making up for lost time in the bedroom might have been borderline. You saw the way my

mother reacted to that one. Dad wasn't far behind."

He picks up the decorative pillows from the bed and tosses them to the side. "So getting you to stand at the end of the bed and help me rock the thing so it bangs against the wall is a bad idea?"

I can't help but laugh at his suggestion, feeling a surge of warmth spread throughout my body at the thought of dropping the pretense and getting in that bed with him to make it bang against the wall for real. "You are having way too much fun with this pretend relationship stuff."

His eyes twinkle as he grins back at me. "I'm not hearing a no."

Pressing my lips together to suppress my smile, I shake my head. "Gabe, let's keep this pretend marriage about appearances only. We don't need to go overboard and give them any reason to be suspicious."

He looks at me with a mixture of disappointment and amusement. "You're the boss. We'll just go to sleep then. Conserve our energy for another day of tricking everyone into thinking we love each other for real."

Pulling the blanket off the end of the bed, he drops it on the floor along with his sleeping pillows and I realize what he's doing.

"Don't be silly. This bed is gigantic. We're both adults." I place my hands on my hips and tilt my head as the smile I'm struggling to keep at bay takes over again. "Besides, I can't let my hero sleep on the floor after the way you defended my honor tonight."

He chuckles and concedes, and we climb into bed together, smoothing out the blankets and leaving enough space between us for another adult to fit in.

"Good night, Maeve," he says, flicking off his bedside light. I reach over and do the same.

"Good night, Gabe."

As soon as the lights go off, all I can hear is his steady breathing, and all I can feel is his body heat radiating toward me. It's an unfamiliar feeling, being so close to someone, let alone someone I'm not actually in a relationship with. But it's not entirely unwelcome. In fact, it's kind of thrilling.

My mind wanders to what it would be like to have him touch me, to kiss me. I try to shake the thoughts from my head, reminding myself that this is a pretend marriage, a game we are playing, and I can't let myself get carried away.

But the more I try to push the thoughts away, the more persistent they become. And when Gabe shifts in his sleep, his arm brushing against mine, I suck in my breath. Maybe I should just admit that I have a crush on him. I know it's wrong to crush on your boss, but I can't help the way I feel. He's handsome, charming, and successful. Plus, he's *here*, pretending to be my husband, standing up for me in front of my family. That's not really boss/employee behavior, is it?

I turn my head to face him and see that he isn't asleep at all. His eyes are still open, staring up at the ceiling. "Gabe," I whisper, testing the waters just in case he's one of those weird people who sleep with their eyes open. "Are you still awake?"

He turns toward me, his face now close enough to mine that I feel his breath on my skin. "Yes."

I take a deep breath and try to swallow my fear. I want to tell him how I feel, tell him that I've dreamed of him in bed beside me too many times to count, that I fell for him the moment I met him and imagine daily that I'll hand him his coffee or a file and he'll catch me by the wrist and pull me into his arms and confess that he can't live without me... But as present as the words are on the end of my tongue, the weight of them is too great and I chicken out. "Tell me about your family."

"My family?" He sounds surprised.

"Well, yeah. It'd be weird if I married you and I didn't know how many siblings you have."

"I'm the oldest of seven."

“Oh, my gosh. See? I should know that. What about your parents?”

“My father passed when I was your age, actually. My mother is in her eighties and eternally disappointed in me.”

“How could she be disappointed? You...You’re amazing.”

He chuckles humorlessly. “I appreciate you thinking so. But I’m a forty-nine-year-old bachelor with a child born out of wedlock.”

“She thinks you should have married your daughter’s mom?”

“Oh god no. She probably would have had a heart attack if I’d done that. My daughter’s mother was just a fling. My mother wanted me to marry someone more...suitable to take on the Lansing name. She hasn’t even met my daughter.”

“I’m sorry,” I say softly. “That must be tough. On both of you.”

“It’s fine,” he says, but the strain in his voice tells me otherwise. “She’s a great kid. Way more mature than most girls her age. If anything, it’s my family who’s missing out on the pleasure of having her sit at their table.”

“Is that why you don’t go home for Christmas? Because they don’t accept your daughter?”

“Partly. But it’s also just easier to stay in the city. Gigi and I have our own little traditions now.”

“I’m sure they’re great,” I say, feeling a sudden rush of affection for him.

“They are,” he agrees, and for a moment we’re both quiet, lost in our own thoughts.

“It must be hard doing Christmas without her. No wonder you agreed to this whole charade.”

He chuckles and finds my hand in the dark and gives it a gentle squeeze. “Sure, I miss her on the years she’s with her mom, but we’ll call, and I’ll see her at Easter. It’s normal for us.”

“OK,” I whisper, keenly aware of the way his thumb plays with the ring that started everything. He pulls his hand back and shuffles his body toward me.

“I’m not doing this because I’m lonely without my daughter this Christmas. I’m doing this because I care about you, Maeve.”

My breath catches in my throat and it takes a moment before I can speak. “I…” I start, but even then the words can’t find their way out of my throat.

“I’m sorry,” he says quickly. “I shouldn’t have said that. It’s not fair to you. I’m your boss. And this is just pretend.”

I nod, unable to speak. The air between us is suddenly thick with tension, and I can feel my heart racing in my chest. I know I should say something, anything, to break the silence, but my mind and mouth just aren’t connecting.

“Get some sleep,” he says finally, breaking the tension and rolling over. “We’ve got a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

I lie there, staring at the ceiling, my mind racing. Did he really just say that he *cares* about me? Like, *romantically*? Or am I reading too much into this and he just cares about me as an employee and friend? Either way, I can’t shake the feeling that there’s something more going on here than just a boss and his employee pretending to be in a relationship for the holidays. Pity I’m too petrified to open my damn mouth and find out what that is.

GABE

I wake slowly the next morning, gradually becoming aware of a warm weight pressed against my side. Blinking my eyes open, I glance down to see Maeve nestled close, her head resting on my shoulder and an arm draped casually across my chest. If I had to make a list of all the things I'd like this Christmas, waking up with Maeve in my arms would be the top of that list. *Merry Christmas to me.*

My breath catches, heart swelling at her proximity. She looks so peaceful like this, all the worry smoothed from her face and her breathing deep and steady. I can't help the surge of protectiveness that rises up in me as I realize how much I care about her. Unable to resist, I brush a strand of golden hair back from her cheek. She stirs slightly and makes a soft sound that does strange things to my insides.

Careful not to wake her, I ease out from under her embrace and slide from the bed. After a quick shower, I head downstairs to grab some coffee. The house is quiet. Most of the guests and family are still asleep after our late night. I've always been an early riser, so I'm happy for the silence while I sit at the kitchen island, newspaper in hand.

I'm barely past the headlines when Vanessa strides in wearing a robe that's just a little too short, flashing a suggestive amount of leg. She pours herself coffee, then perches on the stool beside me, crossing her legs slowly.

"Good morning, Gabe," she purrs, inching closer. "Seems I'm not the only early riser in the house."

“Seems that way.” I sip my coffee and continue reading. She doesn’t seem to take the hint, however, and slides closer until her knee touches my thigh. I glance at her and quirk my brow.

“Don’t you want to wish me a Merry Christmas or something?”

I fold the paper and slide it away as I turn to face her. “Perhaps later. I’d rather say it to my wife first.”

Vanessa’s face falls, and she leans back, her eyes scanning my face. “What is it you see in her?”

I bristle the moment the question leaves her lips and stand up, towering over her. “Everything I want,” is all I say in answer as I pick up my mug of coffee and head back to the pot, pouring one for Maeve, before leaving so Vanessa can be in the kitchen with her favorite person—herself.

“Don’t get too caught up playing the perfect husband and wife,” Vanessa calls after me. “No one believes it.”

I pause in the doorway and glance back. “Who says we’re playing?”

Her eyes narrow, but I don’t stick around for a response. Back in the room, I set Maeve’s coffee on the nightstand just as she stirs awake. Her face lights up seeing me there.

“Merry Christmas, wife,” I say softly.

“Merry Christmas, Gabe.” She smiles and sits up, stifling a yawn. “Have you been up long? I didn’t snore and wake you, did I?”

“Not at all. I’m an early riser, but this morning, I woke up later than normal with you peacefully snuggled up to me.”

“Oh gosh. I’m so sorry.” A pretty blush stains her cheeks.

“Don’t be. I didn’t mind one bit.” I hand her the coffee, and our fingers brush together for a moment, sending a jolt of awareness up my arm. I sit down beside her on the bed, taking in her tousled hair and sleepy eyes. She looks so beautiful in the morning light.

“Thank you,” she says, taking a sip of coffee. “It’s perfect. Just the way I like it.”

“I know it’s normally you making the coffee, but I do pay attention.”

She smiles up at me, and we sip in comfortable silence for a few moments. I can feel her eyes on me, and I turn to meet her gaze. “Everything OK?” I ask, a hint of a smile on my lips.

She bites her lower lip, hesitating for a moment. “I was just thinking about last night.”

I raise an eyebrow, intrigued. “Which part?”

Her eyes lower, and she stares into her mug like the coffee inside is the most interesting thing in the room. “I keep thinking about something you said,” she starts.

“OK.”

“You, um, said you care about me.”

“I did,” I say. “And I do.”

“How?”

I put my coffee aside and turn to her fully. “How do I care about you?”

Maeve nods, her eyes meeting mine. “Yes. I mean, I know you obviously care in a way that’s more than a boss/employee situation. You wouldn’t be here pretending to be my husband if you didn’t. But, I just... I’m asking how much more you care, because it feels like maybe it’s more than friends, but I don’t understand exactly how much more.”

I take a deep breath and reach out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “Maeve, I care about you in every way possible. When I look at you, I see a beautiful, kind, and talented woman. I care about your happiness, your safety, your well-being. And, yes, I also care about you in a romantic way. This doesn’t feel like pretending for me. And I don’t want it to be.” I scrape a hand across the back of my neck and release an awkward chuckle. “You know, I didn’t even know what fresh air felt like in my lungs until you breezed into my office and interviewed as my assistant. I’m infatuated with you, Maeve. I

think about you day and night. And when you smile, all I want to do is kiss you and..." I stop mid-sentence and let out a breath. "This is crazy. I'm far too old for you, and—"

Before I can finish, Maeve set her mug aside and leans in, planting a gentle kiss on my lips. "It's not crazy," she whispers against my mouth. "It's exactly what I want too."

The moment our lips meet, it's like a dam breaking open. Five long years of suppressed longing come flooding out as I kiss Maeve deeply, urgently. I've wanted her for so long but never dreamed my feelings could be reciprocated.

She melts into me, her arms wrapping around my neck as she sighs into my mouth. I deepen the kiss, relishing the taste of her lips as my hands roam her body, memorizing every curve as I pull her close, lying back on the mattress until she's straddling my lap. I groan as she grinds against me, my hands grasping her hips. Our kissing grows more frantic, my heart pounding wildly. I've wanted this—wanted her—for so long.

My fingers find the hem of her nightshirt, skimming up the smooth skin of her thighs. Maeve gasps, arching into my touch. Just as I'm about to lift the material up and over her head, my cell phone on the nightstand starts buzzing loudly.

We break apart, breathing heavily. Maeve rests her forehead against mine, chuckling. "You should probably get that."

I press a soft kiss to her swollen lips before reaching for my still buzzing phone. "It's my daughter," I say, swiping to answer.

Maeve climbs off me, and I immediately miss her warmth. "Morning, sweet pea," I say into the phone. "Merry Christmas to you too..."

As Gigi chatters excitedly about her holiday so far, I reach for Maeve's hand, linking our fingers together. She smiles and squeezes gently. I focus on my daughter's voice, but all I can think about is picking up where we left off with Maeve as soon as this call is over.

“I miss you too,” I tell Gigi. “But I’ll see you soon, OK? Tell your mom and grandparents Merry Christmas from me.”

We chat a few minutes more before saying goodbye. I set my phone aside and pull Maeve back into my arms. “Now, where were we?” I murmur.

She grins against my lips. “I think you were about to unwrap your Christmas present.”

MAEVE

Gabe's mouth seals over mine, our bodies pressing closer together as he rolls over me, his hands trailing down my sides and igniting my skin. I've dreamed about this so many times that it's hard to believe it's really happening. Just as his fingers toy with the elastic waist of my panties, the handle on our locked door jiggles, followed by a loud knock.

"Why is this door locked?" my mother demands.

"No," I groan, pulling back, panting, throbbing.

Gabe smiles ruefully. "Next Christmas, we're staying in the city."

Next Christmas? I smile to myself as Gabe calls out to my intruding mother, my mind spinning because we just shared our first *real* kiss and he's already planning something a year from now? Pinch me, I'm dreaming.

"I hope you two are decent." My mother's voice muffles through the door. "Everyone's gathering downstairs for breakfast before presents."

I drag a hand through my mussed hair and take a steady breath. "We'll be right down!"

"Be quick, please."

"We'll be fast as we can," I call out as Gabe drags his mouth down my neck, sucking lightly at my pulse point as he lets out a groan.

"Baby, with what I want to do to you, there's no way this is going to be fast." Gabe holds himself over me, then steals one

more quick kiss before we reluctantly take a raincheck and get up to make ourselves presentable.

As we head to breakfast hand-in-hand, I can't keep the grin off my face. We've confessed our true feelings and shared multiple passionate kisses that have left me aching for more. After years of longing, it seems like a Christmas miracle.

We're the last to join the rest of the family downstairs. As we approach the dining room, I feel a nervous flutter in my stomach. Through the arched doorway, I can see Vanessa already seated at the head of the long table, Blake at her side. Her lips curl into a subtle smirk when she spots us, no doubt reveling in her position of power.

I tense, old doubts and insecurities rising to the surface. Will she find new ways to make me feel small, even after how far Gabe and I have come?

Sensing my unease, Gabe squeezes my hand and presses a soft kiss to my temple. "I've got you," he whispers. With his arm wrapped firmly around my waist, my confidence returns. For once, I'm determined not to let Vanessa's games unravel me. Not when I finally have everything I need right here by my side.

We take our seats next to each other and help ourselves to fluffy pancakes, fresh fruit, and crispy bacon from the spread on the table. The chatter and laughter of my family fills the room as we eat. Under the tablecloth, Gabe's hand casually comes to rest on my thigh, his thumb idly stroking back and forth. That simple, subtle touch sends tingles of anticipation through me.

I meet his eyes, and we share a secret smile. Later, when we're alone, I'll show him just how much I appreciate everything he's done for me. For now, I plan to cherish every stolen caress and kiss, allowing the tension to build and build until we finally get the chance to be blissfully alone. I can't wait.

"Time for gifts," Blake says, clapping his hands together as he stands from his seat at the table. "Seems ole Santa remembered where we were and dropped a few goodies off."

With a ripple of laughter going around the table, we all set our napkins aside and follow him into the library, where another large tree sits laden with gifts.

Gabe sits beside me, his hand resting comfortably along the back of the sofa, fingers brushing slowly against my shoulder as I rest my hand on his knee. I've never felt more content in a room filled with my family members. He makes my life better, and we've only just begun.

Blake plays Santa Claus and hands out gifts. Vanessa, of course, ends up with a mountain of them and squeals each time. But her behavior doesn't seem to affect me one bit. My eyes are only for Gabe as we take every opportunity to exchange tender glances or affectionate touches—much to Vanessa's thinly veiled annoyance.

"This one is for you, Gabe," Blake says, handing him a small, brightly wrapped box. "From Maeve."

"I hope you like it," I whisper, suddenly feeling nervous as I turn to watch him open it.

"It's so tiny," Vanessa says in the background, her voice muffled under her pile of greed.

"I don't even have to look at it to know I love it," Gabe says warmly, keeping his attention solely on me while he slides his finger under the tape to undo the wrapping. I bite my lip in anticipation, not breathing at all when he gets to the small wooden box and opens it to reveal a platinum pocket watch engraved with the initials G.L. *Please like it.*

"It's beautiful, Maeve. Thank you," he says, leaning in and kissing me softly. He turns the watch over in his palm.

"Now you'll have something to check when you're wondering what's keeping your assistant too long," I tease.

"I'm only impatient because it hurts my eyes not to see you," he murmurs, leaning in and pressing his lips to mine again. I melt.

"Gross," Vanessa exclaims as Blake passes her another gift.

“I love it, Maeve,” Gabe whispers, so only I can hear. The softness of his words makes the feeling inside me swell to bursting.

“I love you,” I whisper, unable to stop the words from flowing out of my mouth. *Oh no.* Gabe pulls back, his eyes looking a little shocked while his mouth curves up slightly.

I don’t know if I want to take it back or say it again. Did I just fuck up?

Before I can assess the situation properly, Vanessa loudly interrupts our moment, drawing all attention back to herself as she models the luxurious fur coat Blake gifted her. It’s when I’m looking her way that Gabe nudges me lightly and produces a pocket-sized wrapped gift for me.

“This is for you, baby,” he says, placing the rectangular prism in my hand.

I glance down at it and smile. “You didn’t have to get me anything. I already have all I need.”

“And you deserve so much more,” he says. “Open it.”

I slide my finger under the wrapping and gasp when I find a heart-shaped locket inside. The gold is rose-toned, with intricate floral patterns along the circumference. On closer inspection, I spot two small diamonds gleaming from the center.

“Oh Gabe,” I whisper as I open it to find a photo of the both of us taken at the office Christmas party. I remember the moment so clearly. I was laughing at something a friend of mine was saying, and while I knew Gabe was there, I had no idea he was looking at me the way he is in this picture—like I’m his world. “It’s so beautiful.” I have to bite my lip to keep from crying, but the picture isn’t all of it. There’s engraving on the other side too, and I run my thumb over it as I read his words. “All my love, Gabe.” My eyes lift to find his as my first joyful tear falls. “All of it?”

Gabe takes my hand in his and kisses the ring on my finger. “All of it,” he whispers. “Until the end of time.”

I'm suddenly overwhelmed by emotion and throw my arms around his neck, holding him so tight I never want to let him go. It feels like we're two teenagers, so full of feelings that neither of us can hang up the phone. I don't want anything to get in the way of this moment, but of course it does. My family wouldn't be my family if they didn't interrupt, just as everything is falling into place.

"I think it's time for a family photo!" my mother crows, and just like that, the moment is gone. But it doesn't matter. Gabe and I are now one hundred percent together. He loves me. I love him. And there is nothing any member of my family can do to change that. And for once, I don't care what they think.

GABE

“*R*eady your balls!” Uncle Jake calls out, his arm above his head as he stands in the middle of an open field while the rest of us crouch in our teams, preparing ourselves for his command. After the gifts were set aside and the wrapping paper tidied up, Maeve’s family decided to rug up and take a walk to work off our breakfast in preparation for an even bigger feast later. It wasn’t long before that walk in the snow turned into a competitive snowball battle with in-depth discussions about rules and victory conditions.

I grab a chunk of snow and pack it tightly, glancing around the fallen trunk of a tree I’m hiding behind for a target.

“Launch!” Uncle Jake calls out, and just like that, snowballs are flying through the air.

Maeve squeals as a snowball from her cousin Brooke hits her shoulder, the powdery snow exploding across her pink coat. Grinning, I creep up behind Brooke and deliver a perfect snowball right to the back of her head.

“Hey!” she cries, whirling around. When she sees it was me, she laughs. “This means war!”

Soon, snowballs are sailing back and forth as we all take cover behind trees and the frozen fountain, pelting each other mercilessly. I glance around for Maeve and spot her crafting snowballs behind a hedge. I sneak up and tackle her into the soft snow, both of us laughing.

“No fair, you’re bigger than me!” she protests, trying to squirm away. I pin her down and sprinkle snow across her

face.

“All’s fair in love and snowball fights,” I say. Her nose scrunches adorably as she shakes powder from her hair. I lean down and kiss the tip of her cold nose before I realize just one peck isn’t enough, and I lower my mouth to hers, kissing her deeply and passionately. The taste of her lips mixed with the cold snow on her skin is exhilarating, and I can feel myself getting lost in the moment.

But just as the kiss intensifies, an explosion of cold hits the back of my neck, trickling icily under my collar. “I told you this was war!” Brooke calls out, cackling as she rushes off.

“Oh, this is so not over,” I yell after her, helping Maeve up before we both load up with snow balls and rejoin the battle.

Across the yard, I notice Vanessa sitting sullenly on the steps, refusing to join in. Maeve follows my gaze and frowns. “I’ll be right back,” she says, scooping up some snow as she walks over to her cousin.

“Heads up, Vanessa!” I hear Maeve call out. Vanessa’s head snaps up just as the snowball hits her shoulder directly, spraying flakes across her stylish wool coat.

“Maeve! What the hell?” Vanessa shrieks, jumping to her feet.

Maeve just laughs and lobs another snowball that hits Vanessa square in the chest. “Come on, stop being such a stick in the mud! Come join us!”

Vanessa’s eyes narrow, and she shakes her head, brushing the snow off her coat. “Snowball fights are for children,” she says in a huff before turning on her heel and marching inside, muttering about how she’ll never get the water stain out if the snow melts on her fancy coat.

Maeve just laughs and shakes her head as I walk up to her and wrap my arms around her waist. “Well, that was a bit of drama,” I say, kissing the top of her head.

“Yeah, it was.” She smiles and rests her head against my chest. “But what can I say? My family is...something else. It’d be nice if we could all have fun together for once.”

I nod in agreement, taking in the peaceful winter landscape around us. The calm before the storm of family drama always feels so surreal. But I don't want to dwell on that now. Instead, I turn to Maeve and tilt her chin up, admiring her snow-dusted eyelashes.

"I have an idea," I whisper, hoping she'll play along. "Let's go explore the woods. Just you and me. No drama, no family, just us."

Maeve's face lights up and she nods eagerly, grabbing my hand as we run toward the tree line, leaving the sounds of the snowball fight until it's just us. Blissfully alone.

We run through the woods, the snow crunching beneath our feet as we laugh and weave between the trees. The cold air stings my cheeks, but I barely feel it with Maeve's hand in mine.

As we make our way deeper, we stumble across a small cabin. It's old and weathered, but still standing strong. The windows are caked in a thin layer of frost and the door is slightly ajar, as if inviting us inside. Maeve looks at me with a curious expression and I can tell we're both thinking the same thing. Without a word, we step inside.

The cabin is musty and dark, with only a few rays of sunlight filtering through the small windowpanes. But as my eyes adjust, I notice that it's surprisingly cozy. There's a fireplace with a stack of chopped wood nearby, and a few old blankets thrown over a rickety couch. Maeve and I exchange a grin, knowing exactly what we're going to do. We're going to make this cabin our own little sanctuary, away from the inevitable drama that's likely to come once everyone gets inside and Vanessa commands center stage again. It's our first Christmas together as a couple, and I'll be damned if I'm going to spend the entire time catering to selfish people who don't treat my wife the way she deserves.

"What do you think this place is?" Maeve asks, locking the main door while I remove my hat and gloves, getting to work starting a fire.

I shake my head. “Who knows? An old caretaker or hunting cabin. But I’m glad we found it,” I reply as the flames take hold in the fireplace. I stand up, turning to face Maeve. “You know what would make this even better?”

Maeve cocks her head to the side, shaking off her coat as a smile plays on her lips. “What?” she asks, clearly intrigued.

Without a word, I take my coat off too, then take her hand and lead her over to the couch, pulling her down onto my lap. I lean in and kiss her, slow and deep, my hands trailing down her back and tugging her closer. Maeve moans softly against my lips, her fingers tangling in my hair as she deepens the kiss. The warmth of the fire and the softness of the old blankets surrounding us create an intimate cocoon, and I feel as if we are the only two people in the world.

As we break the kiss, Maeve looks at me with a mix of desire and uncertainty in her eyes. “Are you sure we should be doing this here?” she asks, her voice barely above a whisper. “You don’t think anyone will walk in on us, do you?”

“Did you lock the door?” I ask, pulling her closer to me. Maeve nods, and I continue, “Then we have nothing to worry about. We can do whatever we want.” I kiss her again, feeling her body respond eagerly to mine. Maeve’s hands start to roam, her fingers tracing the muscles of my arms and shoulders before reaching down to teasingly trace the hard lines of my torso. She tugs at my shirt, prying it out of my jeans and pulling it up over my head, her eyes drinking in the sight of my bare chest.

“You are so fucking sexy,” she murmurs. “You know that, right?”

I smirk and press a kiss to her lips before answering. “I was thinking the same thing about you.”

Maeve’s hands skim down my stomach, her fingertips tickling as they pass over my navel, making me suck in my breath and groan. “Maybe we could hole up in here for the rest of the holiday,” she whispers, her lips trailing down my neck, her teeth nipping at my skin.

“I wouldn’t say no to spending an entire week in a tiny cabin alone with you,” I say, my breathing growing heavy as Maeve traces a line down my chest with her tongue. Her fingers hook into the waistband of my jeans as she shifts higher and takes my lip between her teeth, tugging gently. A groan of pure pleasure rumbles out of my chest as my muscles tense and my cock swells.

My hands slide under Maeve’s top, my fingers stroking the soft skin of her back before reaching around to palm her ass. She arches into my touch, her hips grinding against mine as she moans into my mouth. My jeans are even tighter now, the thick bulge of my cock pressing painfully against the zipper.

As Maeve’s tongue teases my bottom lip, I pull away and grab the edge of her sweater, removing it and tossing it aside.

I reach around and unhook her bra, pushing it off before sliding my hands back around to cup her breasts. “So beautiful, Maeve,” I murmur, teasing her nipples with my thumbs until they stand erect. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve dreamed about these tits of yours?”

She laughs. “I’m sure you dream about them a lot.”

“Maybe a bit too much,” I say. “They’re the only thing I can think of sometimes.”

“Really?” The look in Maeve’s eyes makes my cock throb even harder. “You really think about my tits?”

I nod, my lips brushing against hers as I speak. “Every day, I think about fucking them, about how good it’d feel to suck your tits in my mouth, take your nipples between my teeth. I think about how amazing it’d be to slide my cock into your tight pussy, then pull it back out, letting your juices run over my cock until I can’t wait any longer and I just have to shove it back in. I think about how you’d moan as I fuck you faster and faster, how you’d scream when you came.”

“Oh, God.” The breath catches in Maeve’s throat and a tremor rattles through her body. “I think I just came a little listening to that. God help me when we actually do it.”

Chuckling, I kiss Maeve's forehead before repositioning us so that we are lying on the couch. I crawl up her body until I'm hovering over her, my hand slipping inside her leggings and exploring her curves. She gasps as my fingers brush against her soaked heat, her legs instinctively parting to give me better access.

"So wet already," I murmur, my thumb caressing her clit as my fingers delve inside her. She moans and arches her back, grinding against my hand as she runs her hands over my chest. "Damn, Maeve. You're so fucking hot."

"More," she says breathlessly. "More, please."

I add a second finger and continue to stroke her, all the while watching her face as she writhes beneath me. She closes her eyes and lets out a soft cry, her head thrown back, mouth hanging open, and chest heaving. Her tits are just fucking fantastic, with nipples that are hard little points, skin flushed like a rose in bloom. Her pussy is just as hot as I imagined, clinging to my fingers as I pump them in and out.

I lean down and kiss Maeve deeply, my tongue tangling with hers as my fingers continue to fuck her. Her hips grind against me and she moans loudly, "I'm close. Please, please, I want to come on your cock."

"Not yet," I say, smiling against her mouth. Her lips are parted, her eyelashes fluttering. She's so fucking beautiful and I can't believe that I get to watch this angel of a human come undone.

"Please," she begs, her nails digging into my back. "Please, I can't wait."

"Let go," I murmur. "I want to see you come on my hand, baby. Let me feel you come apart."

And when she does, it's fucking amazing. Her entire body shudders and she screams. "*Gaaaaaaaaaabe!*" Her back arches off the couch as though I've switched a fucking electric current to her clit. Her pussy clamps down on my fingers and her hips buck, her juices spilling out as she comes.

“Jesus,” I breathe, still rubbing her clit as she comes down off her orgasm. “I think I just discovered my new favorite activity.”

“Oh my god,” she says, brushing her hair back as she pants. “Oh my god.”

I slide my hand out of her leggings and smile down at her as I lift my fingers to my mouth and suck off her juices. “You taste so good, baby.”

“Holy shit. Take off your pants,” she says in a rush. I smirk and stand up, removing my jeans and boxers as she watches with hungry eyes. My cock is hard and ready, throbbing with anticipation. “Now it’s my turn to make you feel good.”

She reaches for me eagerly, her hands wrapping around my shaft as she leans in and takes the head of my cock into her mouth. I groan at the sensation of warmth and wetness that envelops me, her tongue swirling as she slides her mouth lower and lower. My fingers go into her hair and I begin to lose control, moaning as I strain against the desire to thrust too deep.

She hums, but before she can take me any deeper, the door slams open. “Holy! Fuck!”

We fly apart, Maeve wrapping her body in the blankets while I grab a pillow to cover my junk as I quickly sit next to her, my body blocking her protectively. It all happens so fast that it takes me a moment to realize it’s her father is standing there, wild-eyed and looking like he’s ready for a fight.

“Dad! What are you doing!?” Maeve yells.

“What is with this family and locked doors?” I mutter, adjusting the pillow to make sure it’s properly covering my groin.

Maeve’s father just stares at us wide eyed.

“Has something happened, Randy?” I ask, really wishing he’d at least close the door so it wasn’t so damn freezing in here right now.

“You guys... you were... I heard screaming...” He’s so out of his depth here, he can’t even speak. But I guess that’s what you get running around busting down doors.

“Oh my god, Dad,” Maeve shrieks. “What is wrong with you!? You have to get out of here right now.”

He awkwardly turns away and shuts the door behind him, apologizing, then telling us Vanessa wants lunch to start earlier than planned, “So you need to get back to the house or miss out.” Then his footsteps tell us he’s leaving as they crunch away in the surrounding snow. Both Maeve and I just sit there and stare at the busted lock in shock. What the actual hell?

“Well,” Maeve says, finding her bra and sweater on the ground. “That was really weird. I’m so sorry my family is like this.” After getting her bra on, she tugs the sweater over her head.

“At least that one was well intentioned,” I say, shrugging as I pick up my pants and start getting dressed as well.

“I just can’t believe he busted down the door,” Maeve mutters, shaking her head. “I mean, what the hell? We don’t knock anymore? What did he think we were doing?”

“Maybe he thought we were playing prisoner, and I had you tied up,” I joke, hoping to lighten the mood. She smiles for a moment, then lets out a sigh.

“Why can’t they just be happy for me for once? They’re just so...overbearing. They have to know where I am, what I’m doing, who I’m with and why all the damn time. I’ve had enough. I need some space.”

I step over to her and pull her into me, kissing her forehead. “You know, you don’t have to just sit back and take it. You can let them have it.”

Maeve shrugs. “I know... I just don’t know what to do about it. I don’t want to make it worse. I’m just...” her voice trails off.

“You’re tired of feeling like you’re not in control of your own life,” I finish for her.

“Yeah,” she sighs, dropping her weight back down onto the couch. “I feel like the only version of me I’m allowed to be around them is the version they created for me. I thought coming here with you would make them treat me the same way they treat Vanessa, but...”

“They’re still trying to put you back in your box.”

Maeve nods, fresh tears pooling in her eyes. “I’m just so tired of it all. I know we came here pretending to be a couple, but now things have changed. And even if they didn’t change, they damn well know this is our first Christmas together. I wanted it to be special. But they always manage to ruin everything.”

My heart aches seeing her so upset. I wrap my arms around her, stroking her hair. “I know, baby. And I’m sorry this isn’t turning out how you hoped.”

She sniffles against my chest. “It’s not your fault. You’ve been absolutely wonderful through all of this. I’m the one who dragged you here.”

“Hey.” I tip her chin up to meet my gaze. “I wanted to come. Don’t for a second think you forced me into this. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than by your side.”

Maeve manages a small smile. “Really?”

“Really,” I confirm. “In fact, how about we get out of here? The city might be cold this time of year, but at least we’ll have privacy. We can order takeout, cuddle by the fireplace at my apartment.... Screw what your family wants. Let’s be alone together and *really* enjoy the holidays.”

Her face brightens at the suggestion. “That sounds perfect, actually. I’ve had enough family time already to last me a year.”

I chuckle. “Then it’s settled. We’ll make an excuse that we’re not feeling well and leave after lunch.”

Maeve throws her arms around my neck. “Have I mentioned lately that you’re the best?”

“It’s always nice to hear,” I say, kissing her softly.

Hand in hand, we make our way back through the snowy woods toward the house. Despite the awkward encounter with her dad, I can't keep the grin off my face. A romantic, private week alone with Maeve is exactly what I've been dreaming of.

As we enter the house, her family is gathering around the dining table. I catch a few curious glances our way, no doubt wondering about our disheveled appearance after sneaking off. But for once, Maeve doesn't seem bothered by their prying eyes. She squeezes my hand, a new confidence in her smile. This Christmas belongs to us, and nothing can ruin that now.

MAEVE

Besides the quiet strains of Christmas music playing from the speakers, the room is eerily quiet as Gabe and I head into the dining room hand-in-hand. The air is thick with tension, but both of us are so happy to be together that we can't stop smiling. Sure, my dad kind of ruined our intimate encounter in the cabin, but during the walk back to the main house, we've already found a way to laugh about it. And after Gabe reminded me how hot it was making me come for him, and how he can't wait to get me alone to do it again, I feel like I'm floating on a cloud of happiness. For the first time in ages, my family drama doesn't feel like the end of the world. All that matters is the amazing man by my side.

As much as I want to hug my bliss to my chest and give it a cute name, it's snatched away from me the moment we take our seats. Across the table, Vanessa glares at me coldly. Her lips are drawn into a tight line, eyes smoldering with barely contained fury.

"Did you enjoy dumping the family on Christmas for your little planned romp in the woods?" she spits.

I tense, the harshness in her tone hitting me like a splash of cold water. "It wasn't planned. We went for a walk and found a cabin," I say evenly. "We'd have been back in plenty of time for lunch if you hadn't moved it up."

Vanessa snorts. "Don't try to pin the blame on me, Mae-by. It's not my fault the food was ready early. But you'd have known that if you weren't *sneaking* away." Her gaze sweeps over me disdainfully.

“What are you implying?” Gabe interjects, his voice frigid.

“I’m not implying anything,” Vanessa says, feigning innocence. “Seems strange to me you just happened to find a cozy cabin to hide in. Just making an observation.”

“Your observation is wrong,” Gabe returns. Vanessa rolls her eyes.

Aunt Daphne pipes up from down the table. “The person I feel sorry for is Randy. He told us he came across the two of you in quite a compromising position. How shameful.”

Gabe barks out a laugh while my cheeks burn with embarrassment and I avoid making eye contact with my dad.

“He thought Maeve was being attacked with the way she was screaming,” Aunt Daphne continues. A few shocked murmurs sound around the table. “The disrespect. Aren’t you going to say anything, Carol?”

My mother straightens her spine, but before she opens her mouth, Gabe barks out a, “That’s enough.” She shrinks back, but Aunt Daphne and Vanessa pay him no mind.

“And you don’t even have the decency to clean yourselves up before you march in here looking like you just rolled around in hay,” Vanessa adds.

I sink lower in my chair, humiliation flooding me. I should defend myself, but no words come out.

My mother finally chimes in, shaking her head. “I didn’t raise my daughter to behave so inappropriately. Especially not when your cousin has so graciously opened her home.”

Gabe barks out a laugh again.

“Maybe you should have kept a tighter leash on her growing up,” Aunt Daphne retorts. “She wouldn’t have grown up so blatantly promiscuous.”

“Watch your mouth when you speak about my wife,” Gabe growls, the sound of his chair scraping across the floor causing everyone to go silent.

Vanessa's lip curls. "Says the man who waltzed on in here, acting like he's above everyone. But it turns out you're just some old guy who can't keep it in his pants." She sits back looking smug. "That's right, I did my research. I found out you have a sixteen-year-old daughter from a one-night-stand with some dancer in California. Seems you'll screw anything with a pulse."

Their bickering washes over me, the judgment feeling like physical blows. All my old shame and insecurities swell up, threatening to pull me under, tuck me in on myself.

Then suddenly, something in me snaps. I'm done being polite. I'm done letting them make me feel small. This isn't the Maeve I want to be—cowering and voiceless.

I stand up abruptly, my palms slamming down on the table. The dishes clatter and everyone turns to stare at me.

"You know what? I'm sick of this." My voice booms. "I'm sick of all of you judging me and talking down to me like I'm a piece of trash. I've spent my entire life trying to please you people, trying to follow your strict rules, and it hasn't done me a bit of good." I shake my head, anger making my voice tremble. "You've all put me down my entire life. I'm always the black sheep, the scapegoat. And I'm not doing it anymore."

I turn my glare on Vanessa. "And you. You've hated me from the start just because I dared to be born first, dared to be clever when all you cared about was beauty. I never wanted to compete against you—that was forced on me. But I am the one who's saying stop, enough. I'm not competing with you anymore. The only person I need to please is myself."

Then I look at my stunned relatives. "I'm done being your verbal punching bag. I'm done being the doormat you clean your feet on. Consider this my last family Christmas. I want nothing more to do with any of you."

With that, I toss my napkin on the table and storm out of the room. My hands are shaking, but for the first time in my life, I feel free. I feel brave. I feel like I'm finally choosing me.

Gabe is right on my heels as I take the stairs two at a time. In our room, he grabs my suitcase and opens it out on the bed while I throw my things inside without bothering to fold them.

“That was amazing, Maeve. I’m so proud of you for standing up to them.”

I nod, feeling a sense of relief but also a twinge of guilt. “I just wish it didn’t have to be like this,” I say. “I wish we could be a real family, one that lifted each other up and didn’t tear each other down.”

Gabe comes over and puts his arms around me. “I know, but sometimes we have to create our own families with people who truly love and support us. And you know I’ll always be here for you, no matter what.”

I lean into his embrace, feeling safe and loved. “I’m so grateful for you, Gabe. And in a way, I’m extra grateful this ring got stuck on my finger, because without it, I don’t think we’d be here right now.”

He cups my face in his hands and presses a kiss to my forehead. “You’re right. We probably would have spent another five years bottling up our feelings without it. But you know what?”

“What?”

“I feel like this was the magic of Christmas stepping in to give us a push in the right direction. Maybe it’s time we start our own traditions with just the two of us.”

I smile, feeling a warmth spread through me. “I would like that more than anything.”

Gabe grins and takes my hand, sliding the ring off my finger. “Let’s make it official then.” He slowly lowers to the floor on one knee. “Maeve, will you do me the honor of marrying me for real?”

Tears well up in my eyes as I nod, feeling overwhelming joy and love. “Yes, Gabe. I will.”

He slips the ring back onto my finger and pulls me into a passionate kiss. As we break apart, I can’t help but feel like

this is exactly where I'm meant to be. With Gabe, starting a new chapter in our lives together, while leaving behind the old.

From now on, I'm going to live life on my terms—following my own dreams, not anyone else's expectations. It won't be easy breaking free of old patterns, but leaving this place behind is the first step toward the future I want, one where the possibilities are wide open and happiness is defined by no one but me and my husband-to-be.

"Let's get out of here," Gabe says, hefting the suitcase off the bed and offering me his hand when we've finished packing.

"Gladly," I say, smiling through the hurt and holding onto this man tight as the both of us leave together, and I'm finally, *finally*, set free.

GABE

We don't bother returning to the dining room on our way out of the house. Enough has been said that anything more would just be prolonging things. Her family's hurtful words still ring in my ears, and I'm pained that Maeve has experienced a lifetime of this nonsense without me by her side to speak up for her. But I'm so damn proud of her right now as we stride toward my car, suitcases in hand. She stands tall, eyes dry and focused ahead. Seeing the new confidence in her makes my chest swell.

We're loading our bags into the trunk, almost free and clear, when Vanessa decides to come storming outside.

"You can't just leave!" she shrieks, face mottled with rage. "It's *Christmas!*"

I step between her and Maeve, blocking Vanessa's path. "I think it's time we go, Vanessa. Maeve has had enough. And I've had enough for a lifetime after only one day with you."

Vanessa's eyes flicker with fury before she explodes. "You think you're better than us, don't you? You think you're too good for our family? Well, you're not! I know your secret. And if you don't get back inside and apologize to me in front of everyone, I'm going to tell them all this whole marriage thing is a sham. You're faking." She crosses her arms, her expression triumphant. "And don't bother denying it. I heard you two whispering last night. You're both pretending to trick everyone into thinking you're better than you really are."

I bark out a sharp laugh. “Funny, I was just about to say the same about you.”

Vanessa’s smug expression falters. “What are you talking about?”

It’s around this point when the rest of the family filters out, obviously wanting a front-row seat to all the shouting.

“Listen, I was raised a gentleman. So I wasn’t going to mention this. But since you just aired all our dirty laundry within earshot of the entire family, I don’t feel too bad airing yours.”

“I don’t have any dirty laundry,” she sneers.

“And yet you started sweating when I asked about the Davenports. You might remember them as the people you rented this estate from. You’ve been masquerading in a home that doesn’t even belong to you.”

She laughs uncomfortably. “He’s lying.”

I stare her down cold. “When you did all that ‘research’ on me. Instead of trying to find ways to make me look bad, you might’ve looked a little more thoroughly into the Lansing name and our connections. The Davenports have long been family friends of ours, and I have, in fact, stayed on this very estate as a boy. I can call them if you like. I mean, it’s Christmas, so they’ll be pissed. But...” I pull out my phone and bring up their number so she can see it on my screen.

Vanessa pales, eyes darting around frantically. “I...I don’t know what you mean.”

Before she can sputter more denials, Blake steps forward, looking distressed. “It’s true, Vanessa made me rent the place to impress everyone. All the luxury she constantly demand has put us in massive debt. I...I can’t keep up...”

He dissolves into apologies and explanations as Vanessa screams at him to stop talking. The rest of the family joins in, everyone yelling over each other about the deception.

Maeve and I exchange a look, both of us ready to make our escape from the chaos. As we get into the car, her uncle and

cousin linger near us, avoiding the family fray.

“You two have a safe drive back,” Uncle Jake says, clapping me on the shoulder. “And Maeve—I’m real proud of you sticking up for yourself today. I wish I was half as brave as you.”

Maeve smiles, blinking back tears as she hugs him. “Come visit when you’re in the city sometime, OK?”

He nods, and her cousin Brooke opens her arms for a hug.

“I hope you find what makes you happy, Mae,” her young cousin adds earnestly.

“You too. And please don’t be a stranger. Just because I’m walking away from them doesn’t mean you can’t tell me all about your birds.”

“I’d like that,” Brooke whispers, blinking back tears as we share our goodbyes, Maeve whispering her thanks.

“Merry Christmas!”

I start the engine, squeezing Maeve’s hand as we pull away from the estate and start the long trip back to the city to finish our Christmas the way it started—together.

“How are you feeling?” I ask once we’re on the main road.

Maeve lets out a long breath. “Honestly? Lighter than I have in ages.” She grins over at me. “Thank you for everything. Having you by my side really gave me the courage I needed.”

I lift her hand to my lips, kissing her knuckles. “You’re the strongest woman I know. I’m just glad I could be here to witness you realizing it, too.”

We drive in silence for a while, and from the corner of my eye, I can see Maeve playing with the ring on her finger, quietly studying it.

“We can get you a different one if you’d prefer,” I say, glancing at her briefly. Her head snaps up.

“What? Oh no. I love this ring. So much. I just...” She angles her body to me slightly as she looks my way while I

drive. “I was wondering if your mom is going to be mad. It’s an heirloom, right?”

“Right. But I wasn’t fully honest with you about *why* I was giving it to her.”

“Why were you giving it to her?”

“Because I’m about to turn fifty and I still hadn’t chosen a bride. Mother said that if I wasn’t going to use it, I needed to return it to the family vault.”

She lets out a gasp. “Your family has a vault? What are you, Richie Rich?”

I chuckle at her comment, glad to see her relaxed and joking around. “No, just old money. And you know, I didn’t really want to part with the ring, so I feel like you trying it on and getting it stuck was the Christmas miracle we all needed.”

“You’re my Christmas miracle,” Maeve whispers, and I glance at her with a smile that I don’t think will ever fade.

“Let’s agree that we both got exactly what we wanted this Christmas.”

Maeve lets out a giggle and I can’t help but notice the little blush that creeps up her cheeks.

“What’s that look?” I ask.

“Just my imagination doing what it always does around you. I’m thinking dirty thoughts about *getting* something from you to make my Christmas amazingly perfect.”

“Ah, you’re talking about my dick.”

She erupts into a fit of laughter as she nods, and I decide that *this* right here is how I want to spend the rest of my life. Laughing with her.

MAEVE

The city lights glitter in the distance as day turns to night on our way back from Oakwood Falls, the warmth of the car cocooning us in our own little festive world. When I look back on this in years to come, I'll think back to this moment and hail it as the point in my life I started living for myself. After walking away from my family, I feel lighter than I have in years. Like a massive weight has been lifted and I can finally breathe free.

Beside me, Gabe glances over and smiles, reaching for my hand. "Almost home," he murmurs.

Home. The word sends a happy shiver up my spine. I know he just means back to the city, but the promise that one word implies makes my heart thud a little harder. Because it's how Gabe feels to me. These past days, he's been my rock and my strength. He was only supposed to be my husband for the holidays, but now, he's my home. I've never felt as safe and secure with anyone as I do with him.

As we traverse the city streets, we chat lightly about our new holiday plans. Takeout and binge watching movies on the couch sounds like heaven after the drama of late. And as we get closer to Gabe's apartment, despite the lightness and ease of our words, there's an undercurrent of tension building, the promise of what's to come when we're finally alone and not a single person can burst in on us or demand we join them for a meal. *I'm guessing we'll be naked for most of those movies...*

My stomach flutters just imagining it. After years of longing and wishing and imagining, tonight will be the night I

finally get to be with Gabe completely. The thought alone has me pressing my knees together.

As we pull up out the front of his building, snow starts falling in light flakes. Gabe comes around and opens my door, the flakes catching in his salt and pepper hair. I know I keep saying this, but he's never looked more handsome to me than he does in this moment.

"Careful," he warns as I step out of the car and onto the snowy sidewalk. He takes my hand and pulls me close, his other arm wrapping around my waist. I melt into him, feeling the heat of his body through his coat and mine.

"I've got you," he whispers, his breath warm against my ear.

I look up at him and see the desire in his eyes, the same desire that's been burning within me since we first met. Without another word, we make our way to the elevator, our hands intertwined. The ride up to his floor feels like an eternity, my heart racing with anticipation as I watch the numbers take us all the way up to the penthouse. As soon as we step inside the apartment, Gabe slams the door shut and pins me against it, his lips crashing down on mine.

The world disappears as we dive into each other. My hands slide down his back to his buttocks, pulling him against me, and I feel the hard length of him pressing into my belly. Our mouths break apart as we gasp for air. The breath from my lungs floats out between us, then puffs back in as he exhales.

"Give me your phone," he rasps, his voice deep and raw.

I nod, barely able to form words as I reach into my pocket and hand it to him.

He takes it from me, then gets his own, turning them both off and setting them aside. His gaze is intense as he reaches past me and bolts the door.

"I'm not willing to gamble with the possibility of us being interrupted again," he says firmly. "Even if this place is burning to the ground, I'm not leaving before I've had my fill of you."

The hunger in his voice sends a wave of desire flooding through me. He takes my face in his hands and kisses me fiercely, as if he's trying to consume every inch of me. His tongue indulges every inch of my mouth, exploring and calling to me. I touch every part of him I can reach, running my hands through his thick hair, squeezing his ass, and pushing my hips against him. My nipples stiffen, aching to be free of the layers of clothing that are keeping them from his hands and mouth. His hands slide down my body, resting on my hips, then sliding to my ass. He pulls me against him and I can feel every inch of him against me.

“Oh, Gabe.”

Without breaking contact, Gabe walks me backward through the apartment. We bump against walls, stumbling and laughing between heated kisses until my the backs of my legs hit the bed and Gabe lowers me down gently, his weight settling over me.

“Tell me I'm not dreaming,” I whisper as he holds himself above me, his hand moving past my sweater and skirting along the waistband of my leggings, delighting the skin at my waist.

“You're not dreaming.”

“Thank god,” I gasp, my fingers going into his hair as his mouth finds my neck. “I have a recurring dream that goes a lot like this.”

“Oh, yeah?” He pauses and lifts his head so he's looking into my eyes. “Tell me how it goes.”

For a split second, I feel myself clamming up. How do I tell him that the recurring dream involves a lot of naughty things even I'm not sure I'm ready for? But the way he's looking at me, it's like he already knows.

“You have to promise you won't laugh,” I whisper, my heart pounding.

“I promise. Now tell me.”

“I...I don't know how to say it without it coming out wrong.”

He growls, lowering his head and nipping at my earlobe. “Say it anyway.”

“In my dream, you carry me to bed, strip me slowly and call me ‘baby’ while you fuck me senseless,” I whisper. “It’s amazing.”

A devilish grin quirks the side of his mouth. “That’s so perfect. That’s exactly what I was planning to do...” He pauses and brushes his mouth against mine. “Baby.”

“Oh god,” I moan, my hands sliding into his hair. “I think this is the part where you take off your shirt.”

He quickly sits back, doing as I ask, lifting his arms so I can yank off his t-shirt and get a good look at those sculpted muscles that have just the right amount of hair peppered across them.

“You’re so fucking hot,” I murmur, punctuating my words with a kiss against chest, sucking lightly on his skin.

“You are too,” he growls, bending to kiss me again, then pausing to grin against my lips. “You make me so damn happy, Maeve.”

“You make me happy too,” I whisper, my hands roaming over those washboard abs of his, enjoying the way his six-pack tenses.

“I’ll be even happier when you’re naked.” I chuckle as I sit and lift my arms so he can pull my sweater over my head. He sits back and looks thoughtful as he eyes me in my festive red bra. “This looks amazing, don’t get me wrong, but I think we can do better here.” I giggle as he reaches around and unhooks my bra, his breath catching as my breasts fall free. “Fuuuck, now that’s what I’m talking about.”

“I like it when you say ‘fuck’,” I purr, reaching forward and brushing against the bulge in his jeans.

“Oh, baby. I’d like it more if I could do all kinds of fucking to you,” he growls, leaning in and sucking a nipple into his mouth as I moan, arching back slightly.

“Oh yes. This feels a lot like the dream,” I say, fisting his hair as he teases my nipple into a stiff peak.

“What else was in your dream?”

A shiver runs through me as he bites down, pulling my nipple into his mouth and groaning like a man who’s only getting his first taste of a lollipop. “Oh god, that’s good.”

“Tell me,” he murmurs, releasing my nipple but continuing to brush his thumb over it in slow circles.

I lean forward, putting my lips close to his, our breaths mingling. “You tell me to lie down.”

He lets out a delighted moan, trailing his lips over my skin until his mouth is next to my ear. “Lie down, baby.”

A shiver of delight rolls through me and I do as I’m told, lying flat on my back as he grabs the waist of fur-lined leggings and shimmies them off me, dropping them on the floor.

“God, you smell good,” he murmurs, lifting my leg and placing it over his shoulder, dragging his tongue over my inner thigh. “Those panties are drenched, Maeve. I’m so hard for you, too. Tell me what’s next. I wanna be your dream man.”

“You already are my dream man.” I grin, running my fingers through my hair as he presses kisses along my skin.

“Tell me what to do,” he demands.

“You’re going to kiss up my thighs until you reach my panties. My red panties. You’re going to pull them off with your teeth and then you’re going to lick me until I’m begging for you to fuck me.”

“Holy shit,” he murmurs, swiping his tongue over my skin, less than an inch from my panties. “Holy shit, you’re a fucking goddess.”

He presses a wet, open-mouthed kiss to the inside of my thigh and I find myself panting.

“You’re mine, Maeve, aren’t you?” he murmurs, pressing a hard kiss to my skin.

“Yes,” I moan, arching my back. “Yours, Gabe.”

“You’re mine and I’m going to lick you until you come.”

“I’m soaking wet for you,” I whimper. “Please—”

My words are cut off by the feeling of his lips pressing against the center of my panties. He pushes his tongue against the soaked fabric, opening my pussy lips and allowing my wetness to seep out. I groan, lifting my hips to meet his mouth, my fingers tangling in his hair as his lips work their way down, licking at my clit through the fabric. I can feel his hot breath against my skin and it’s making me desperate for more.

“Gabe, please,” I moan, lifting my hips again, desperate to feel his tongue on me. “Please.”

His hands slide underneath me, cupping my ass and drawing me closer as he yanks my panties down my thighs with his fingers and teeth, nibbling his way back up then stroking his tongue over my clit.

“Gabe!” I gasp, my eyes rolling into the back of my head. “God, I need you, please, please, just fuck me! I want to come on your cock this time.”

“Tongue first, Maeve,” he rasps in between his laps at my pussy, spreading my lips with his fingers. “Tongue first and then I’m going to fuck you so hard that you scream my name while you cream all over my cock.”

“Yes,” I moan, rocking my hips as he swirls his tongue over my clit and then drags it downward, pressing it against my opening. “Yes, Gabe, oh, god, I want your tongue inside me so bad!”

He kisses my pussy, slipping his tongue inside my hole as he grips my ass. My back bows and my toes curl as he works me like he’s starving for me, licking and sucking me hard as I moan and writhe.

I’m so close, I can feel it bubbling in my core, making my insides clench.

“I’m going to come, Gabe,” I gasp, tossing my head from side to side. “I’m going to come all over your face.”

“Maeve,” he groans, the vibration driving me past the point of no return. I come in hot, sweet pulses, my walls clenching as I scream his name.

“Gaaaaaaaabbbbbbbeeee!”

I moan, my body shaking with the force of my orgasm.

Gabe pushes two fingers inside me, keeping them there as I ride the waves of my orgasm, stroking my G-spot and licking my clit as he works me.

“That’s it, baby. Come hard for me. I can’t wait to make you do it again,” he says as he shifts back and looks down at me, his mouth glistening as he shoves his jeans down his hips and fists his big cock in his free hand. “You see how fucking hard and desperate I am for you?”

I moan as I watch him jerk his hand up and down his shaft and rock my hips in time as he finger fucks me. Nice and slow, he’s drawing this out for the both of us.

“Oh god. Yes. Please, Gabe.”

“Is this what happens next, baby? I put my big dick inside you?”

“Yes. Yes. That’s what happens.”

“Say the words, baby.”

I moan again, a long, low sound that has Gabe jerking his hand faster and curling his fingers inside me. I cry out. So close. “Gabe. Please.”

“Tell me what you want. Tell me how bad you want my cock inside you. Say it to me. I want to hear you.”

“I want your cock, Gabe,” I force out, my throat dry. “I want you to fuck me. I want you deep and hard.”

“Oh, baby. You’re such a dirty girl. Such a dirty, dirty girl,” he murmurs, lining his cock up with my entrance and gliding his tip through my juices.

“Oh, please, Gabe. I want it. I need you to fuck me. Now.”

“Good girl.”

He thrusts all the way in and I cry out from the intrusion and the ache of pure pleasure that follows. His hands go to my knees, pushing them back as he heaves into me. His balls smack the underside of my ass with each deep thrust, and my body shudders and convulses with the incredible friction.

“I want to go slow, baby,” he says, groaning as he eases back. “I want to treat you good. But I’m not going to last long. You feel so fucking amazing. I don’t know if I can take it slow.” He makes a harsh sound and buries his face in my neck. “I love the way you feel. Love the tight, wet heat of you. I could stay here all night, just shoving into you.”

“Please. Please, Gabe. I want it hard. I need it,” I whisper back, rocking my hips to grind against him. “Fuck me like a bad girl. Make me come again.”

He growls and thrusts deeper, harder, faster. The bed thumps against the wall in tune with our rhythm, the headboard creaking. I dig my fingers into his shoulders, holding back a scream as Gabe stiffens and swells inside me. I know he’s close.

“Oh, baby, that’s it. You’re so tight around my cock. I don’t know how much more I can take of this.”

“Make me come. Make me yours.”

With a feral snarl, he slams into me with a hard thrust. His fingers go to my clit, fingers strumming over the swollen nub. He sinks into me, deeper and harder, until he’s right up against me. His other hand goes to my breast, squeezing the soft flesh as he fucks me. I throw my head back and scream as I come, my pussy fluttering around his thick, hard length.

“Oh, fuck, Maeve.” Gabe’s cock jerks inside me, and I feel the hot rush of his release. He growls as he lets go. “You feel so good.”

His mouth crashes against mine in a hungry kiss, his tongue pushing deep. I taste myself on him, salty and sweet. When his mouth lifts from mine, I whimper at the loss.

“Mmm,” I moan. “Don’t... stop.”

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, grinding his hips against me. “You’re killing me, baby.”

“Uh-huh.” I move my hands over his back, my fingernails lightly raking his skin. “You feel so good inside me.”

His hips keep moving as he touches his forehead against mine.

“Never get tired of fucking you,” he murmurs.

“Me, either,” I whisper as his pace slows and we come down together from that incredible high. Five years of pent up longing hits hard when you finally let it go.

When the clock chimes as it clicks over to midnight, I suck in a breath. “Oh, look at that. Christmas is over.”

He kisses the side of my neck and whispers against my skin, “And what a Christmas it was.”

As he rolls off me, I turn and look at him in the pale moonlight filtering through the curtains. “I love you, Gabe.”

He smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling. “I love you too, Maeve.”

As we lie together in the afterglow, I reflect back on this whirlwind holiday. In many ways, it was the hardest Christmas I’ve ever endured. Facing my toxic family and walking away from them was excruciatingly difficult.

But in other ways, it was also the best Christmas of my life. Because out of that pain came healing. And out of confronting my past came clarity about the future I want—one lived wholly for myself.

Most importantly, this Christmas brought me Gabe. The man I’ve dreamed of, who sees me, knows me, loves me. Our unexpected romance was the real gift I’ll cherish for the rest of my days.

In leaving behind my previous life, I’ve gained so much more. A future filled with hope, joy and possibilities. And a partner to share it with.

As Gabe pulls me close and I listen to the steady beat of his heart, I know I'm finally home. The world feels full of promise, and I can't wait to see what our life together will bring.

This year was a Christmas I'll never forget. One that broke me down but ultimately set me free. And as I snuggle into Gabe, I'm infinitely thankful that in the end, I got everything I could ever wish for—true love and a husband for life.

EPILOGUE 1 - GABE

One Year Later - Christmas Eve

I straighten my bow tie in the mirror, anticipation thrumming through me. In just a few hours, Maeve will walk down the aisle toward me and we'll officially begin our new life together as husband and wife—no pretending this time.

It's hard to believe how much our lives have changed in just one year. We started as co-workers pretending to be newlyweds for the holidays, and after the true feelings we'd both been hiding surfaced, we've barely spent a day apart. And now, after months of living together, we're finally ready to make things official.

And that's not all that's changed, it's been a year of growth and change all round. Maeve started her own consulting business, finally finding her passion in helping women overcome adversity and succeed on their own terms. I took a step back at work, no longer feeling the need to fill my days with ceaseless activity, and so I could make sure I supported her wherever she needed it—even if it was just a foot rub and a warm meal at the end of a long day. Together we've found balance, focusing on the things and people that truly matter.

While my apartment was certainly big enough for the both of us, I wanted Maeve to have the home of her dreams, a place we could lie back and grow old together. So we ended up purchasing a cozy house on the outskirts of the city. Mornings are spent lingering over coffee on the back patio, watching the sunrise paint the sky in dazzling hues. Evenings bring candlelit dinners and long talks curled up by the fire, sharing dreams, hopes, fears.

At night, I fall asleep with Maeve in my arms. On weekends, we sleep in, make pancakes, go on long drives. We laugh often, have inside jokes, and know each other deeply. It feels easy in a way I never expected love could be, and there are times when I really regret waiting so long to let my feelings be known. But at the end of the day, I'm just glad we're together now, and that after today, we've got the rest of our lives together to look forward to.

We've kept the ceremony and location a secret, inviting only our closest family and friends. Maeve has reconciled with her parents, the difference now being that she has clear boundaries with them. It's a work in progress, but she seems happy to be building a healthier relationship with them away from the influence of her grandmother, her Aunt Daphne and Vanessa. Shockingly, Vanessa did reach out and apologize for the years of mistreatment. But I don't think Maeve is quite ready to let go of the hurt she caused. I guess only time will tell with that one. And whatever she decides, I'll be right there by her side cheering her on.

There's a knock at the door and my daughter Gigi pokes her head in, her eyes bright with excitement. She is the only member of my family in attendance today. So while Maeve's family quickly adjusted their behavior when they risked losing her, mine is still sticking to their guns. But that's OK. I have my own family now, with my daughter and my soon-to-be wife. They're the people who matter to me most.

"Dad, you look so handsome!" Gigi exclaims, rushing over to give me a hug. I wrap my arms around her, marveling at how much she's matured this past year.

"Thanks, sweetheart," I say, kissing the top of her head. "Hard to believe in just a few moments, I'll finally be a married man."

"No more gallivanting around town as a single man."

I chuckle at that. "I don't think I've ever been the type to gallivant."

She lifts her brow. "Mom might have a little something to say about that," she teases, and I roll my eyes. "I'm so happy

you chose Maeve, Dad. She's going to make a great stepmom. I've thought that ever since that time when I was fourteen and she babysat me while you had a work emergency. I was so mad at you for treating me like a baby who needed to be watched, but Maeve made it really cool. We bonded."

My eyes well up with tears. I never thought I'd get to have the family life I was originally sold short on. And now I have everything I could ever hope for.

"If I remember correctly, that's around about the time you started in on me to ask her out." I chuckle at the memory and Gigi lets out a laugh.

"That's because I could see how amazing you two would be together." She takes a step back, smoothing down her bridesmaid dress. "And I guess I was right. Can't wait to stand up there with you both today. Oh, and Maeve looks absolutely stunning. You're gonna lose it when you see her."

"I'm sure I will." Maeve could be wearing a burlap sack and I'd think she was perfect. "You look stunning, too. Like a princess."

"I'm seventeen now, Dad. Well past my princess phase."

"OK, queen." I chuckle, warmth blooming in my chest. Ever since I announced my engagement to Maeve last Christmas, she and Gigi have bonded even more. Before she was just my 'cool assistant', but now Maeve is the perfect mix of friend and role model to Gigi. She never tries to mother her, and Gigi loves her for it. They chat for hours, go shopping, bake cookies together on the weekends Gigi spends with us, and they just generally get along. Maeve really has made our lives whole.

"I'll take it. Now don't go getting too mushy on me," Gigi teases when I snifle, the emotion of the day welling up and pressing behind my eyes. I'm so damn happy. "You have to make it through the ceremony first."

"I'll do my best," I say with a smile. "No promises, though."

Gigi's expression softens, then she hugs me tight once more. "I'll see you out there."

As she hurries out, I take a deep breath and drink in this moment. My past, present and future colliding in the best possible way. I can't wait to start this next chapter and wake up tomorrow as a married man. It's literally the only thing on my Christmas list this year—Maeve as my wife.

EPILOGUE 2 - MAEVE

I stand behind the curtain, heart racing, as the opening notes of the processional music begin. In just moments, I'll be walking down the aisle to receive the most wonderful gift a girl could ever ask for—I'm getting married to the man I love.

It's hard to believe that exactly one year ago today, Gabe was in my cramped apartment, commiserating with me over the dreadful week we were about to spend with my family. I was anxious and insecure, dreading their judgment and fearing that they'd see through my fib and realize Gabe and I weren't really married. But that spontaneous lie ended up changing everything for the better.

Now, I don't condone deceit. But pretending to be married to Gabe sparked the kind of romance I'd only ever dreamed of. Behind Gabe's professional exterior was a tender heart and kindred spirit. He saw me, understood me, cherished me. Just as I did him.

Stepping up beside me, my father offers his elbow, smiling softly. "Ready, darling?"

Seeing him here symbolizes the reconciliation we've slowly built over many months and a lot of long and truthful talks. Early in the new year, when emotions had calmed down a little, my parents reached out and then came to the city to sit down with me and sincerely apologize. They regretted their actions and would do anything to keep their only child in their lives. Of course, I was a little reticent, but little by little, we started rebuilding that trust, and while boundaries remain

firmly in place, it means so much to me that they could both be here today to support me.

“I’m more than ready,” I say, grinning ear to ear as I loop my arm through my father’s, blinking back happy tears.

“You’ve been beautiful since the moment you were born, but today, my darling daughter, you look absolutely radiant.”

Emotion swells in my chest and thickens my throat. I think that might be the nicest thing my dad has ever said to me. “Thanks, Dad,” I manage, giving his arm a squeeze as I rapidly blink my eyes so I don’t cry too early. But it’s no use, today is so full of feeling, my heart can’t hold it all in. Thank god for waterproof mascara, am I right?

As the music changes, the curtains part and together, Dad and I follow the flower girl, Brooke and Gigi down the aisle. They’ve become fast friends during the wedding prep, which has made me beyond pleased. My two favorite girls in the world, dressed in matching dresses and leading the way to my future with Gabe.

In the pews, I spot my mother dabbing her eyes and snapping a bunch of pictures on her phone. A big part of our healing was done while planning this wedding together, and I’m grateful for that. She had been so eager to be involved, to help me choose the flowers and the dress and the menu. It was a fun bonding experience, and it felt like we were starting over with a clean slate.

When I look to the side of her, I find my Uncle Jake beaming proudly, and yes, even my grandmother, Aunt Daphne and Vanessa are here to bear witness too. While I was sure I was entirely done with all of them by the end of last Christmas, they’ve each reached out to me in their own way over the last few months, and it’s helped me to see them in a different light. I’m still cautious, but I’m willing to give them a chance. I think it also helps that my outburst last year gave Blake the strength he needed to stand up to them, too. He and Vanessa have been working hard on their relationship in counseling, and I’m proud of both of them for that. It can’t be easy admitting to the hurt you’ve caused the people you love,

and while Vanessa and I may never be close, I appreciate her efforts to change and wish her the best.

As we approach the altar, my heart races with excitement and nerves. There's Gabe, looking like a GQ model in his tailored suit. The moment we lock eyes, the entire world falls away, and all I see is him, eyes shining from love and joyful tears. I'm crying too. I can't help it. After a lifetime of loneliness and doubting my worth, I've finally found my worth with his unending love and support.

"You look so beautiful, baby," he whispers as my dad steps back and he takes my hand. "I just want to say 'I do' and take you home to see if that dress looks as beautiful on the carpet as it does on you."

I blush and giggle through my tears. "Let me use that tie to cuff you to the bedpost, and you've got yourself a deal."

He lets out a chuckle and lifts my hand to kiss my knuckles. "We're getting married."

"I can't wait to be your wife for real this Christmas."

The officiant gestures for Gabe and I to face each other. "The couple has written their own vows to share today."

Gabe clears his throat, unshed tears making his voice husky. "Maeve, a year ago I was lost, just going through the motions. But your spirit breathed new life into me. Your smile ignites my days. Your strength inspires me. And your love fulfills me completely."

He smiles through his tears. "With you by my side, I laugh more, dream bigger, and feel whole. I vow to always see you, hear you, respect you. To lift you up and stand beside you. I promise my heart is yours, today, tomorrow, and all our tomorrows to follow."

I have to pause a moment to collect myself, his words piercing my soul. Finally, I find my voice.

"Gabe, this past year with you has been the greatest gift. In your arms, I discovered who I was meant to be. You believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. Your love allowed me to shine. I vow to nurture our bond every moment of every

day. To be your support, your respite, your home. I promise to love you with my whole heart, unconditionally and forevermore.”

I slide the ring onto his finger, whispering, “Always.”

Gabe blinks back more tears as he slides the band onto my finger in turn. “Always,” he echoes.

The officiant beams. “I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

“Gladly.” Gabe’s hands cup my face with exquisite tenderness.

He leans in and our lips meet, soft and sweet at first. But as the kiss deepens, our passion ignites, and I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer, feeling the heat of his body against mine and the joy of our new union.

Our guests cheer and applaud, and we break the kiss, grinning at each other. We turn toward the crowd, hand in hand, feeling electrified by the love and support surrounding us.

As we walk down the aisle as husband and wife, I can’t help but feel like the luckiest woman in the world. Gabe is everything I ever wanted in a partner, and more. With him by my side, I know that we can conquer anything life throws our way.

When we reach the end of the aisle, Gabe spins me around and dips me low, eliciting laughter and cheers from our friends and family. We rise back up, still locked in each other’s arms. “I love you so damn much, Mrs. Lansing. Having you as my wife is the greatest Christmas present of all.”

I beam up at him. “I think I have a cherry to go on top—or a Christmas star to top the tree if we’re continuing the Christmas theme.”

He straightens me up and looks at me in question. “What do you mean?”

“Well... I might have taken a test this morning.”

It takes a moment for the words to register, and then his face lights up. “We’re having a baby?”

Tears of joy spring to my eyes as I nod. “Yes! We’re having a baby!”

Gabe picks me up in his arms, spinning me around as we both laugh and cry at the same time. He sets me down and cradles my face in his hands, pressing a gentle kiss to my lips.

“I love you so much, Maeve.” His voice is thick with emotion. “You’ve given me everything I never dared to hope for. We’re going to have such a beautiful life together.”

“I love you too,” I whisper. “Merry Christmas, husband.”

He kisses me again. “Merry Christmas, wife.”



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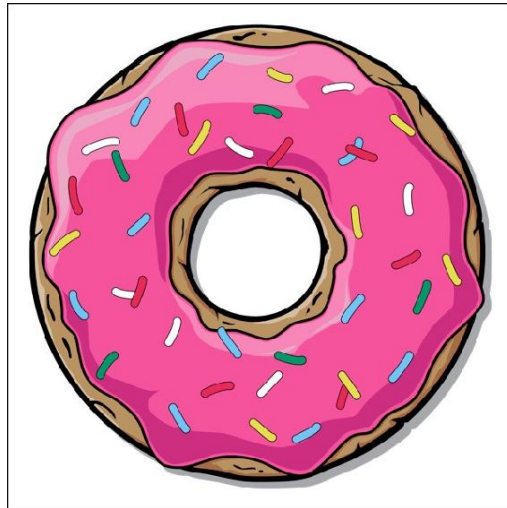
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