



Who Needs a Billionaire

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Category: Romance, Billionaire Romance

Description: A fake marriage is the answer to their problems, but love was never part of the deal.

Augustus “Gus” Schultz has always been the black sheep of the family, and he’s earned that label with his playboy ways. His greatest desire is to prove to his father that he’s put all that behind him and is worthy of taking on a bigger role at Schultz Chocolate. But when he’s asked to step away from the company for appearances’ sake, he must devise a plan to convince everyone he’s changed. Merritt Christiansen loves helping women feel pretty and confident, and her dream of taking her safe, organic cosmetics line global is about to come true. Until she doesn’t secure the capital she was hoping for and is forced to consider a crazy alternative. Gus thinks his proposal is ingenious. A fake marriage contract with Merritt, who is brilliant and respectable—not to mention beautiful—will demonstrate his ability to commit and fit in with the company’s wholesome image. Merritt thinks he’s lost his mind, especially since they can’t stand each other. But how can she refuse when he offers to fund her business expansion as part of the terms of their marriage? And if pretend crosses the line to real, how will they come away with hearts unscathed?

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Page 1

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

ONE

It didn't feel much like Christmastime.

A mild breeze blew in from the ocean, the grass and trees were lush and green, and the early evening sun was lazing about over the horizon, blanketing the canyon in a warm glow, and transforming the sky the softest shades of pink and peach.

One foot in front of the other, Augustus Schultz ran along the canyon trail. This was the first time he had chosen California over his home state of Michigan for the holidays. The consistently pleasant weather, the beach, and the solitude were exactly what he needed right now.

As an heir to the Schultz family fortune, Gus was no stranger to fame or the unique struggles it could cause. His father had taken the family business, Schultz Chocolate, and made it into a household name, creating an empire from a once failing company, and that had put Gus and his siblings, Sebastian and Skylar, in the spotlight, much to their father's dismay. And while his brother and sister had always handled their celebrity with an air of professionalism and maturity, it had brought out the worst in Gus. He'd spent much of his twenties living the playboy lifestyle while causing bad publicity for the company.

And this was part of the reason he was in California and not with his family for Christmas. Because despite how hard he'd worked over the past couple years to change, he'd been pushed aside and passed over for appearances' sake.

So he ran. From Michigan to California. Away from his problems.

And he ran. From his friend Adelia's house, where he'd been crashing for two months, through the Malibu canyon trails. To clear his mind and pray. To devise a plan to prove to his family that the irresponsible behavior was behind him, and that he wanted his rightful place at Schultz Chocolate.

As Gus came to the end of the trail and ran along the road, he thought about how grateful he was that Adelia had let him stay with her and how thankful he was that she lived away from the public eye because of her own celebrity status. Being the daughter of Hollywood's biggest power couple wasn't easy for her.

They had known each other since they were kids when his family bought a second home in Malibu very near Adelia's parents. Being an only child, she had loved hanging out with Gus and his siblings and had become like a sister in no time at all.

Gus followed the curve of the road and thought back to those early years with fondness. Things had been so much simpler then, before parties and girls and trouble with the law. The feelings of shame began to push in, and he ran faster, focusing on the music coming through his headphones, trying to clear his mind. He had to let that all go. He needed to—

A sudden whoosh of air swirled around him and something hard bumped his arm as a car sped past, kicking up dust in its wake. He stumbled forward in surprise, lost his footing, and landed on his side. His elbow hit the rough road first, followed by his hip, and he groaned through the pain and cursed loudly at the driver.

The vehicle's lights suddenly turned red and appeared to be moving toward him.

"Coming back to finish me off?" he hollered as the car came to a stop.

The door of an ancient-looking dark blue BMW convertible opened to reveal black heels attached to slender, toned legs stepping out of the car. His gaze traveled the

curve of her calves and up her legs and took in the woman as she walked toward him.

A petite brunette in a little black dress stared down at him with mouth agape. “Oh my goodness!” She crouched down beside him. “Are you all right?”

He sat up and inspected his elbow, which was scraped up, blood seeping from the wound and mixing with the dirt.

She gasped. “You’re bleeding.”

“No kidding.” He couldn’t mask his sarcasm.

“Should I call 911?” Panic was written all over her face.

“Then you’d have to explain why you were driving so fast and running people over.” He eyed her. “They might even take you to jail.”

Her face turned as white as a ghost. “Would they do that?” She was kind of adorable when she was nervous.

“It’s possible. Attempted vehicular homicide is serious.” He smirked as he shifted to examine his hip, which would probably end up with a nasty bruise but wasn’t ripped up like his elbow.

“I didn’t even hit you,” she said, “and I certainly would never plan to hit someone on purpose.”

He groaned as he stood and shook off her arm when she tried to help him up. “How do I know you didn’t do it on purpose?”

Her mouth fell open again.

“And you did hit me. Your mirror hit my arm.” Hit wasn’t exactly accurate, more like brushed against, but he couldn’t resist giving her a hard time.

“No, I didn’t. Did I?” Her eyes widened. “I didn’t hear the car hit. Let me see.” She reached for his arm, but he cringed away.

“Don’t get near me. I don’t know what you’re capable of.”

A smile slowly spread across her face as she looked at him. “You’re just messing with me, right?”

Page 2

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Why would I do that when my life was clearly on the line here?” He forced a straight face when he said it, even though he really was messing with her. “I could’ve died tonight. Right before Christmas.”

The expression on her face fell. “You’re right. I was driving too fast. I was running late. I knew not to do it, but I looked down at my phone for a second and when I looked up, you were there.”

Okay, now he actually was angry. He’d been teasing her before, but he really could have died if she had kept looking at her phone. “You know what, maybe we should call the police and report this after all.”

Her shoulders sank. “Whatever you want to do.”

He looked at his arm again. “I want to go back to five minutes before you hit me, and I want you to put your stupid phone away.”

“I’m sorry.” She appeared devastated.

The longer he looked into her big brown eyes, the more he found himself drawn to her. He began to get lost in them for a moment, so much that he didn’t realize she’d taken his unmarred arm and was looking it over.

“Was this the arm you say I hit? I don’t see any marks or anything.” She looked up at him, and he yanked his arm away. Her eyes narrowed as she stared him down. “You’re lying about me hitting you.”

“You knocked me flat on the side of the road. Why would I lie?”

“I know I’m at fault for causing your fall, and I own up to that completely. But I’m one hundred percent positive my car did not make impact with your arm. So, call or don’t call, but I will not admit to hitting you, because not a hair on your body was touched by my car, sir.”

She said sir in the most sarcastic tone he’d ever heard, and it swirled up a fury inside him that rivaled anything he had ever known before.

“Well, ma’am, your mirror most definitely touched me. Maybe it didn’t strike me hard enough to knock me down, but it was enough to cause me to fall. And I’m sure the officer would like to know you were texting and driving when all this went down.”

“I was not!” She stepped forward into his personal space. “I told you, I looked at my phone for a second. I wasn’t texting. I would never do that.”

“It’s still against the law to be on your phone while driving in the state of California.” He took a step closer.

“I know the driving laws.” She didn’t back down, narrowing her eyes at him.

“I beg to differ.” He looked over at her car. “Does that piece of crap even pass California emissions standards?” When he looked back, her nostrils were flaring.

“Listen, I have someplace to be. I’m very sorry for what happened, but I’m not going to stand here debating with you one second longer.” At that, she spun on her heel and marched to her car.

“Don’t text and drive!” he called after her.

She grumbled something under her breath as she climbed in, shot him a dirty look over her shoulder, then drove away.

Gus walked the rest of the way to Adelia's, annoyed and somehow curious about this woman who had almost been the death of him. Despite the accident, he felt rejuvenated by their little sparring match, and he wondered if he'd ever see Little Miss Hit-and-Run again.

TWO

After the kerfuffle down the road, there was nothing Merritt Christianson wanted more than to enjoy Adelia Allen's Christmas party. Her heart rate was still elevated from the thought of nearly killing someone—even if that someone was a sarcastic pain in her backside.

She let out a breath to calm herself, straightened her dress, and rang the doorbell.

Adelia's smiling face greeted her. "Merritt! You look amazing!"

"Oh, thanks. But look at you." Adelia wore a sleek red gown, her long blonde hair styled in elegant thick waves, which harkened back to classic actresses of the 40s and 50s. She exuded glamour, and whenever she turned on that sultry gaze of hers, she seemed to channel a young Lauren Bacall.

"Oh no, you have something on your dress."

Merritt looked down and saw the ugly line of dirt above the hem of her dress. She brushed it away as best as she could. "Good thing I wore black."

Adelia shrugged. "That's better. Nobody will notice." She tilted her head to the side. "Come in. Everyone's out back."

She took in the foyer, where guests were greeted by three silver Christmas trees of various sizes decorated with shiny red ornaments on their branches. They entered beneath strings of white lights draped from the center of the ceiling outward, forming a tent above them that gave the room a warm and inviting glow.

“Adelia, this place! Did you do all this yourself?”

Page 3

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“It was my vision, but I hired someone.”

“It looks amazing.”

Adelia smiled from ear to ear. “Thanks.”

A pathway of more trees and lights led to the sliding glass doors that opened to the patio, which looked even more exquisite with strings of round bare bulbs draped across the space above three long tables, all decorated with poinsettia centerpieces in crystal vases and gold accents everywhere. It was the most beautiful Christmas display Merritt had ever seen. Especially when she thought back to the modest celebrations she’d had growing up. She was lucky if they had one Christmas tree back then, let alone multiple trees.

Merritt moved toward one of the tables.

“Sit here.” Adelia guided her to sit across from Giovanni.

“Hello, beautiful.” Giovanni stood and leaned over the table toward her.

“Hey, Vanni!” She closed the distance, and he placed a kiss on each of her cheeks.

He leaned back to look her in the eyes. “You know you’re the only one I allow to call me that, right?”

“I know.” She smiled as she took her seat, and he returned to his. “Where’s Whit tonight?”

“Family thing.”

“Why aren’t you with her?”

“Maybe I should’ve said dysfunctional family thing.”

“Ah.”

Giovanni was one of the first people Merritt met when she moved to Los Angeles fourteen years before, straight out of high school, to attend UCLA. It didn’t really make sense that they became friends. She was quiet and studious, working toward her chemistry degree, while he studied art—specifically photography—and was a social butterfly, often dragging her out of her dorm room to mingle at this party or that. It was his extroverted ways and Italian charm that helped to move him up in the art world, landing him a gig with a magazine, where he became instant friends with Adelia while photographing her to publicize one of her movies. And it was Giovanni who had introduced Merritt to Adelia a few years back.

“Leeches. All of them.” Giovanni nodded toward the other guests, his dark brown waves falling over his eye. “I bet not a single one of them actually knows a thing about who she really is or even cares to know. They all want to say they attended Adelia Allen’s Christmas party. As if she’s their ticket to notoriety.” His voice dripped with disgust as he pushed his hair back from his face.

Merritt gave him an appreciative smile. “At least she has us.”

She scanned the crowd to see if there were any familiar faces, and her gaze settled on a man coming around the side of the house. He was dressed in a T-shirt and shorts and was holding his ... elbow.

Her mouth fell open as she watched the man she’d almost hit with her car wander

across the yard like he owned the place.

“What’s wrong?” Giovanni asked.

She nodded toward the man as Adelia approached him and pressed her hands against his chest, turning him around, and pushing him toward her pool house.

“Oh, that’s Gus,” he said. “You haven’t met him?”

She shook her head. They hadn’t exactly been properly introduced.

“He’s an old friend, staying in her pool house right now. Came from Michigan to get away from family drama, apparently.”

“I’m from Michigan too,” she replied, finding their commonality interesting.

“That’s right. You are.” He lifted his chin toward Gus. “His family owns Schultz Chocolate.”

Her eyes widened. “Are you serious?” Schultz Chocolate was one of the biggest chocolate companies in the world. Her heart skipped in her chest as she realized she could have killed one of the heirs to the Schultz fortune. She suddenly felt sick to her stomach.

Adelia returned to the party several minutes later and approached the table with a sigh. “He fell while running and scraped up his arm.”

Merritt tensed.

“Is he okay?” Giovanni asked.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Yeah, he’s getting cleaned up.”

“I didn’t know you had someone staying in your pool house,” Merritt commented.

“Our families have known each other for years.” She let out another sigh. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with him. He really should go home and spend Christmas with his family, but he’s being so stinking stubborn.”

“Isn’t he always?” Giovanni asked.

“More so than usual,” she replied.

“He didn’t look dressed for a party.”

She rolled her eyes. “He forgot I was having people over.”

That seemed to fit with what little Merritt knew of the man. “Sounds like an inconsiderate jerk if you ask me.”

“Well, she didn’t.” That voice she’d heard not an hour before interrupted their conversation.

She turned to see the very person they were talking about—now dressed in chinos and a wrinkled button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up—looking down at her with disapproval.

“I’d say Adelia’s a good friend for letting you stay here, and if you were a good

friend to her, you would've respected the fact that she was having a party, instead of showing up late and covered in sweat like you just ran a marathon."

His eyes narrowed. "You don't know anything about my friendship with Adelia, so you should probably keep your opinions to yourself."

Merritt huffed, and her blood began to boil. "And maybe you should've put a little more thought into your attire, rather than picking up the first thing you found laying on the floor."

His mouth was now agape.

Adelia cleared her throat to break up their little spat. "Augustus Schultz, this is Merritt Christianson. Merritt, meet Gus."

He reluctantly held his hand out between them, which annoyed her, so she didn't bother reaching out to shake his.

"Spoiled brat." He lowered his hand with disdain.

Her eyes shot to his. "Excuse me?"

"You're not excused."

"You know nothing about me, except my name."

"And the fact that you're as fake and pretentious as the rest of the people at this party."

"Gus!" Adelia snapped.

He rolled his eyes as he walked toward the bar.

“He has some nerve.” Merritt was fuming.

Adelia raised an eyebrow at her. “Well, you didn’t exactly give him a warm welcome.”

Merritt shrugged.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you, but he’s been through a lot lately. Maybe cut him a little slack.”

Merritt knew nothing about his troubles, but she knew how to be a decent human being, which was a skill he seemed to be lacking. She looked across the yard to where he stood, chatting with some other guests. His sandy brown hair fell loosely around his ears, and she noticed it was damp—at least he’d showered the sweat and dirt off. It was clear he took care of his body, which she’d noticed earlier, in spite of herself. She pushed that thought to the back of her mind, remembering how rude he’d been to her.

Gus glanced in her direction and caught her watching him, and she turned her attention back to Giovanni, who was chatting with Adelia. She was glad they hadn’t noticed her staring at him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him coming toward them, and she was relieved when he moved to the other side of the table to sit next to Adelia.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“I should send you to the pool house with no dinner,” Adelia scolded him.

“You’re cute for thinking that would work.” He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, which made Merritt wonder what kind of relationship they had.

Adelia gave him a dirty look. “Did you talk to your family?” she asked.

He took a sip of his water.

“You didn’t? Come on. It’s almost Christmas. They’ll want to hear from you.”

“I’ll call Skylar later.”

“That’s better than nothing, I guess.” She wrapped her arms around him from the side and hugged him before getting up and going to check on dinner.

Gus sat quietly, not talking to anyone, looking kind of miserable.

Merritt noticed the bandage on his arm and had the urge to say something, maybe even apologize for being so harsh at first.

His eyes met hers. “What?” he snapped.

“Nothing.”

“Oh, there’s something you want to say. I can see it in your eyes. So say it.” He paused for a millisecond then rolled his eyes again. “I don’t know why Adelia thinks

any of you people are really her friends.”

She gritted her teeth. There was no way she was going to apologize now, and she was angry at herself for considering it.

“You’re one to talk.” She finally found her words. “You’re obviously close if she’s letting you live here. Yet you didn’t care one iota that she was having a party tonight.”

“Who says iota?”

“Furthermore, you insult her friends without a second thought. And yes, I am her friend. A real friend wouldn’t act the way you’re acting.”

He grunted.

She glared. “Haven’t you ever heard the phrase ‘think before you speak’?”

“I say what I’m thinking, and I don’t feel bad about it.”

She leaned forward. “Maybe you should.”

He angled his body to face her, leaning closer to the table. “Maybe you should mind your own business.”

“Maybe you should go back to the pool house.” She leaned in more, her body over the table now.

He leaned across the table, facing her down. “Maybe you shouldn’t text and drive.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, her blood reaching boiling level again. “Maybe you

should run against traffic like you're supposed to."

"So this is my fault?"

"Hey!" Adelia was standing at the end of the table, staring back and forth between the both of them.

Gus looked up at Adelia with what appeared to be regret on his face and stood. "I'm sorry, Deals. I think I'll just call it a night after all. Clearly, I don't care one iota about this party." He glared at Merritt when he spoke. "Furthermore, I'm not very good company tonight."

Merritt had never wanted to punch someone before, but she came very close in that moment.

Adelia shook her head. "Obviously."

Gus hugged her good night and walked toward the pool house, and Merritt was relieved to see him go.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Adelia's eyes turned on Merritt. "What was that all about?"

"He's rude and insulting and immature and—"

"That's a pretty strong reaction to someone you just met," Giovanni interjected with one eyebrow raised high.

"You heard him, Vanni."

"Yeah, he wasn't very nice. But then you weren't too nice to him either."

"Can you blame me?"

"I feel like you two need a do-over," Adelia said. "Maybe a reintroduction when you're both in a better mood or something."

"I'm in a fine mood. At least I was until he walked in."

Giovanni was right. It was a strong reaction toward someone she'd just met. But no one had ever provoked her that way before, and she'd lost control of her mouth over it. With that level of anger, she could've spit nails.

Merritt did her best to enjoy dinner, but she couldn't shake the annoyance Gus had caused. At least he hadn't stuck around and ruined the entire party for her.

THREE

Gus stared blankly, unable to pay attention to anything he was seeing on the television screen. All he could think about was the brunette spitfire, who was currently eating dinner with his friend, yards away from where he was sitting in the pool house.

So, she was Merritt. Her name had come up in conversation with Adelia, but they'd never had occasion to meet. She definitely wasn't what he was expecting. Adelia had made her sound like such a great girl. She'd even teased about setting them up, which he wanted nothing to do with. He could find his own dates, thank you very much. And Merritt ... well, she was definitely not his type. And he couldn't deal with her attitude. She had no right to be rude to him after she nearly ran him down with her car.

It was really too bad because she was a beautiful woman. If she had a different personality, and if they'd clicked rather than biting each other's heads off, maybe he would've asked her out.

He stared over at his phone. He had yet to tell his family he wasn't coming home for Christmas. He knew Skylar would try to convince him to come, but he just couldn't.

After Sebastian got engaged to Genevieve and announced he was stepping down as president of Schultz Chocolate, Gus had let a glimmer of hope shine through that it might be his turn, that their father might choose him to take Sebastian's place. But that hadn't happened. Dad's announcement that Skylar would be president had felt like a ton of bricks landed on his chest, heavy and crushing. Just further evidence that his father would never believe in him.

He couldn't really blame his dad, though. He'd been a screw-up for far too long and had too many brushes with the law to count. But he had truly been getting his life back in order and trying to prove that to his family. Until one stupid drunken mistake at a bar had landed him in a lawsuit and away from the company he loved. Gus knew

that was the reason Dad had chosen Skylar over him.

Feeling hopeless, disappointed, and betrayed, he'd walked away from his family that night two months ago. And he hadn't looked back.

He picked up his phone and stared at it, then opened the contacts and dialed his sister.

"Gus!" Skylar answered on the first ring. "I'm so glad you called. How are you?"

"I'm okay," he replied.

"Are you still at Adelia's?" she asked.

"Yeah." He could hear talking in the background. "Where are you?"

She paused. "Schultz Chocolate Christmas party."

Her reply felt like a knife to the gut. "Oh."

"I'm sorry, Gus. Should I not have mentioned it?"

"It's fine."

"When are you getting in?" she asked.

"I'm ... not coming home for Christmas." There. He'd said it.

"What? Why?"

Page 7

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“You know why.”

“Gus, this is ridiculous. You missed Thanksgiving. You missed my thirtieth birthday party.”

He still felt awful about that. “I know. I’m sorry. Did you get my flowers?”

“Yes, but it wasn’t the same as having you here.”

This call was already more painful than he expected it to be.

“Did you tell Bash you aren’t coming?”

“No.” He didn’t bring up the fact that he hadn’t spoken to Sebastian in two months.

“It’s Christmas, Gus. We’re your family. We should be together.”

“I can’t right now.”

The other end of the phone was suddenly silent.

“Are you still there?” he asked.

She sniffled. “Yeah, I shut myself in a conference room so I could hear you better.”
Another sniffle.

His heart sank at the sound. He was the worst brother ever.

“Sky, please don’t cry.”

“I hate that this is happening. I hate that you’re so far away. I hate that I got the job you wanted.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Okay, maybe I don’t hate the job.”

He could almost hear her smiling. “Listen, I don’t begrudge you the position. You’re great at what you do, and you deserve it.”

“But—”

“Dad wants me to prove that I’ve changed, but he won’t give me a chance. I know I slipped up last summer and brought a lot of negative press to the company and the family, but I thought after four months, he might actually give me a shot. Being passed over again was a slap in the face.”

“I really believe Dad wants you home and in this company again. The more time that passes after that whole debacle with Milton, and the more he sees you’ve changed, the better things will get. You’ll see.”

“I wish I had your confidence in this situation.”

“Coming home for Christmas would be a great first step.”

He’d already taken a first step and a second and a third. Every day since June, he’d chosen the better path, stayed out of bars and clubs, away from women. He’d been sober and focused on business, trying to get back on track. All Dad saw was the old him, drunk and stumbling from a bar after threatening Milton Hanley, Skylar’s

despicable ex. But Dad hadn't been there to hear all the crass things Milton had said about Skylar, and he would never repeat them to his father either. It was Milton's lawsuit against him that had made Dad lose more faith in him and ask that he stay away from the company for a while. Even after their attorney had hashed out a settlement with Milton's and the whole nasty thing was behind him, it still hung over him like a dark cloud. His resentment festered within, and he wasn't sure how to get past it.

"Sorry, Sky. Not going to happen."

"Please, Gus. It won't feel like Christmas without all of us here."

"I don't like disappointing you—"

"Then don't."

"But I have to do what I think is right for me. And right now, this is it."

"Well, at least tell me you'll be with Adelia for Christmas. I don't want you to be alone."

Page 8

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“I won’t be alone.” He heard a resigned sigh and the sound of talking again.

“I better get back to the party.”

“Yeah, you should.”

“Merry Christmas, Gus.”

“Merry Christmas, Sky.”

After they hung up, he stared at his phone, trying to decide if he would call Sebastian. He hadn’t heard a peep from his brother in all the time he’d been gone. And though he knew Sebastian was getting settled in Montana with Genevieve and getting ready for their wedding, he had at least expected a text or phone call. Not that he’d reached out either, but this wasn’t normal for his brother. Sebastian was always the one who looked out for him over the years, checked in on him, cleaned up after all his messes. But maybe Sebastian had tired of all that and had finally given up on him.

He tossed his phone on the couch cushion and stood, wandering to the kitchen for something to snack on.

A soft knock summoned him to the door, where he found Adelia holding a few envelopes in her hand.

“These came for you earlier.”

He took them from her. “Thanks.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to come have some dessert with us?” She nodded across the yard toward her party. “Cherry delight. Your mom’s recipe.”

He smiled, knowing that was Adelia’s favorite. “No, thanks,” he replied.

Adelia reached out and rested her hands on Gus’s shoulders, looking him straight in the eyes. “Is this the life you envision for yourself? Living in my pool house, moping around, feeling sorry for yourself every day? Because I know you were meant for more than this, Augustus Schultz, and I want you to come back to the land of the living.”

He reached up and squeezed her forearms. “Not today, Deals.”

“Okay, but you are coming out for New Year’s with me. I won’t take no for an answer.”

He rolled his eyes.

She lifted an eyebrow at him. “I’m serious, Gus.”

“Fine.”

Her arms wrapped around his neck as she hugged him. “Good.” She let go and gave him a smile before heading back to the party.

He closed the door behind her and sighed as he tossed the envelopes on the table by the door and headed for his bedroom. A New Year’s party was the last thing on his mind, but there was no way Adelia was going to let him get out of it.

FOUR

The thought of the new year brought Merritt feelings of excitement and anticipation, along with a good dose of nervousness. For nearly a decade, she had been working to start and grow her cosmetics company, and she was finally on the verge of taking it global. More and more, people were in search of clean makeup products made with simple organic ingredients and no harmful additives. But her passion for these products could only take her so far.

What Merritt needed now was a cash infusion for product development and testing, expanded manufacturing, shipping internationally, and marketing worldwide. She was anxious to launch a new campaign with Adelia as the face of Merritt Cosmetics. But there were many hoops to jump through to move on to the next step, and all of them required more money than she had at her disposal.

The day after Christmas, she had met with a venture capital firm, who sounded very interested in investing in her company. But they had said they'd get back to her with an answer by today and she'd heard nothing yet, which was why her stomach was currently a gigantic bundle of nerves.

She stood in front of her full-length mirror, turning left then right, and took one last look at herself. The gold sequined dress she wore was perfect for a New Year's party, and she was determined to push her worries aside and enjoy herself for the evening.

Her phone signaled a text from Adelia.

We're here.

Merritt walked outside to find a black limousine parked in front of her apartment building with the driver standing beside the door, waiting to open it for her.

"Thank you." She climbed inside and was greeted by whistles.

“Wow! You look hot,” Adelia said.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

She smiled at her friend as she slid into the seat beside her and was about to thank her for the compliment when she caught sight of Augustus Schultz. He was watching her from his seat opposite Giovanni and his girlfriend, Whitney.

The smile disappeared from her face. “What are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you too,” he replied. “Glad you aren’t out driving on the roads tonight. Everybody’s safer that way.”

“Don’t start, you two,” Adelia scolded.

Merritt looked away from him, but she could feel his eyes on her.

“Adelia’s right, Merritt,” Giovanni said. “You are smoldering. If I wasn’t already taken, I wouldn’t think twice about kissing you at midnight.”

Whitney flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder as she reached over and gripped his chin, turning him to face her. “But you are taken.”

He leaned in and brushed his lips against hers. “Good and taken.”

Giovanni and Whitney were adorable, and the way they looked at each other made Merritt’s heart ache for that kind of love.

“How was your Christmas?” Adelia asked her.

“Busy. I worked on my presentation for the business expansion pretty much all day

long.”

Adelia gave her a surprised look. “I thought your parents were coming this year.”

Merritt replied with a subtle shake of her head.

“You were alone on Christmas?” Giovanni asked. “Merritt, you could’ve spent it with us.”

“It was fine.” She brushed it off, though she had been disappointed that her parents decided not to come. They’d been saying they would for years, but there was always some excuse for why they couldn’t fly out to see her. She’d gone home a few times in her early years of living in California, but when her company started to take off, she found herself working all the time. When she had started to make some good money, she’d bought them tickets to California, but they remained unused, and she couldn’t help but be upset that they wouldn’t visit her. She knew it was because they weren’t happy with her choice to leave Kalamazoo and move to Los Angeles. Her father had never supported her wanting to start a cosmetics company. But it was something she believed in, and she’d worked hard to make it happen.

The conversation in the limo turned to everyone’s Christmases, except for Gus, who sat quietly. From what she’d deduced, this was not like him. She glanced over and caught him watching her, but he looked away as soon as they made eye contact.

When they arrived at the night club, they were immediately escorted to a private VIP balcony overlooking the dance floor with a hulky guy guarding the stairs. They sat at a semicircle of couches, and a waiter approached. Everyone ordered drinks, and Adelia added a bottle of their finest champagne.

Merritt heard Gus ask for water just as she felt her phone vibrate inside her clutch. Her heartbeat fluttered, and she quickly retrieved the phone and answered, despite the

loud music in the club.

“Merritt Christianson.”

“Hello, Merritt, this is Bernard Hayes from Hayes Ventures.”

“Mr. Hayes, it’s nice to hear from you.”

“I’m sorry for the delay, but I wanted to let you know that we have discussed your proposal and, unfortunately, we’ve decided it’s not a good fit for us at this time.”

Her stomach dropped along with all her hopes and dreams. “Oh.” She didn’t know what else to say.

“I’m sorry I don’t have better news for you.”

She felt herself begin to crack but kept it together. “Thank you for meeting with me. I appreciate the call.” She remained professional instead of doing what she actually felt like—breaking down in loud sobs and begging him to reconsider.

“Happy New Year.”

The line went dead, and she sat staring at the people dancing below. Happy New Year, indeed. All she wanted to do was curl up in a ball and cry. Tears burned her eyes, but she fought them with all her might.

“Merritt, what’s the matter?” Adelia scooted closer.

“Nothing. I’m just tired. Working too much lately.”

Adelia put an arm around her shoulder. “Come on. What is it?”

Page 10

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

The tears broke free, spilling over and streaming down her cheeks. “The investors said no.”

“Oh, Merritt, I’m so sorry.”

She swiped at the tears, hoping her mascara wasn’t streaking down her cheeks. “I’m back to square one again.”

“That’s not true. You’ve got a great business established. You’re way past square one. It just might take you a little longer to move to the next step, but it will happen, Merritt. You’ve created amazing products, and we’re going to get them out there to the whole world.” Adelia gave her a side hug.

“I’m glad you have so much confidence about this because I’m quickly losing mine. I’ve been working and working on this company for over a decade, and I really thought this was going to take it to the next level. I really thought they were going to say yes.” Her chin quivered as she fought back another round of tears.

“Don’t lose hope, Merritt.”

But at the moment, that’s exactly how she felt. Hopeless.

FIVE

Are you going to sit there staring at me all night?” Merritt’s brown eyes appeared black in the low light of the club. “If you have something to say, just say it.”

Gus softened his expression. "I'm sorry you're having a rough night."

She quieted for a moment. "I'm a big girl. You don't need to worry about me."

"I wasn't. Just being polite."

Her gaze fixed on his. "That must've been difficult for you."

A snarky comment popped into his head, but after seeing her cry when talking with Adelia earlier, he stifled his reply.

She took a sip of her champagne as she looked around, no longer acknowledging his existence.

"Do you want to dance?" he asked, again attempting politeness.

Her eyes widened as they met his again. "With you?" Laughter burst out of her.

"Yes, with me." Part of him was glad his comment had made her laugh, but the other part was insulted at the rejection. "I'm a pretty good dancer."

"I'd rather do the chicken dance on the bar."

Gus raised his eyebrows. "I know the D.J. I'm sure that can be arranged." He stood and walked toward the stairs. "I'll go speak with him."

Merritt was immediately at his back. "You wouldn't dare."

"Oh, wouldn't I?"

She maneuvered around him, blocking him from going down the steps, and pushed

him backwards.

“Hey!” He gripped the nearby railing. Her tiny little body was stronger than it appeared, but barely moved him.

She chuckled and headed down the stairs toward their friends. He watched her move across the dance floor. Her confident, sarcastic side was such a contradiction to the emotional, teary-eyed girl he’d seen earlier.

He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop on her conversation with Adelia, but he couldn’t help that he’d been within earshot. He felt bad that she’d been denied the money to expand her business. The disappointment of hoping for something so badly and having that hope dashed in a moment was an emotion he was very familiar with, and he had an unexpected urge to help her in some way. It was why he’d shown a bit of kindness earlier and invited her to dance.

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, Adelia raced over and grabbed his hand, pulling him toward their group. “It’s New Year’s Eve!” she cried. “Out with the old and in with the new!”

“Yeah!” he cried over the music.

“This is going to be the best year of our lives. Am I right?”

“Right!”

Page 11

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

They danced the night away, and for a little while, he forgot about his family troubles and everything that had happened. He let the music and these moments with friends take over, and he felt more alive than he had in a while.

“It’s almost time!” Adelia declared.

With less than a minute left until the new year, excitement buzzed through the crowd. Their little group gathered together and counted down.

“5 - 4 - 3 - 2 - 1. Happy New Year!” they all shouted as confetti rained down.

Adelia hugged Gus and gave him a friendly peck on the lips. Giovanni and Whitney made out on the dance floor. Adelia hugged Merritt. And then Merritt let go of her and turned around, and suddenly, she was facing Gus.

She looked up at him hesitantly. He wasn’t sure if he should hug her or not. They weren’t friends. They barely knew each other. But still, something inside him wanted to reach out to her.

Their gazes held for several awkward beats.

“Happy New Year,” he said.

“Happy New Year,” she replied.

There was confetti stuck to her eyelash and in her hair, and his fingers twitched with the urge to run his hand over her smooth shoulder-length hair and brush it away. But

she turned and walked away, saving him from acting on his foolish instinct.

When they arrived home in the early morning hours, Gus retreated to the pool house. He glanced at the week's accumulation of envelopes on the table by the door—junk mail, bills, and a few Christmas cards. He tossed a couple to the side to read later, then noticed a large cream-colored envelope with his name written in fancy calligraphy on the front. He knew before opening it what it was.

The pleasure of your company is requested at the marriage of Genevieve Anne Willis and Sebastian Kurtis Schultz on Friday, the twenty-first of February.

He continued reading, noting that they were getting married in Montana, where the two had been living for the past couple of months. Genevieve had taken a job there last summer and, once they were engaged, Sebastian couldn't stand being apart from her, so he'd moved there too. His brother, always the romantic of the family.

He flopped down on the couch with the wedding invitation in hand and stared at it. He'd always admired his brother, even though he often felt like he was living in the shadow of Sebastian's greatness. Sebastian had done everything right. He was perfect. The golden boy. He excelled in school, graduated with honors, started working at Schultz Chocolate right out of college. He had the complete adoration of their father and had moved into the position of president when Dad had decided to work less at the company. Then he met a girl, fell in love, proposed, and now they were weeks away from getting married.

Gus hadn't done anything the "right" way. He'd barely gotten through college before moving to California and partying away his twenties. He'd worked off and on at Schultz over the years. Kept things casual with women. Never had a steady girlfriend. Never been in love. Sure as heck never proposed. Never even been close to marriage.

His brain stuttered to a halt on that thought. Marriage meant stability and

commitment. It meant settling down and getting serious. And suddenly, Gus had an idea. A crazy idea, but possibly the most brilliant idea he'd ever had. His mind pieced together a plan, and he couldn't wait to put it in motion.

SIX

Augustus Schultz is here to see you.”

Merritt wasn't sure she'd heard her receptionist correctly. “Can you repeat that, Connie?”

“There's an Augustus Schultz here to see you.”

She left her office and slowly moved toward the lobby. The idea that Gus was standing at the front desk of Merritt Cosmetics was inconceivable. There was no reason she could think of, barring something to do with Adelia, that he would be there. But sure enough, there he was.

Gus gave a small wave as she approached, then he looked around the lobby. “Nice place you've got here.”

“Thanks.” She was confused and slightly annoyed at the interruption in her workday. “Can I help you with something?”

“I hope so.” He looked around again. “Is there somewhere we can talk privately? Maybe we could take a walk.”

“A walk?”

“Yeah, it's probably best if we talk away from your office.”

Her curiosity was piqued, but she was hesitant to go anywhere with him. “What’s this about?”

“Just give me five minutes. I promise it’ll be worth your time.”

She groaned and let out a breath. Knowing him, he probably wouldn’t leave until she agreed. “Fine.” She turned to Connie. “I’ll be back in ten.”

“Have fun.” Connie smiled at Gus, and he winked in reply.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Merritt groaned. “Come on, Casanova.”

She walked toward the door, and he moved ahead to hold it for her. “Thank you,” she forced.

They walked half a block before he gently gripped her arm and tugged her into the alley beside her building, away from the busy foot traffic on the sidewalk. “Let’s talk here.”

“Here?” She glanced deeper into the alley, where a couple of dumpsters were parked.

“Don’t freak out when I say what I’m about to say.” He had a serious expression on his face.

“Should I be nervous?”

“Just hear me out, so we can have a civilized conversation about this.”

Her brow furrowed. “What’s going on?” She was beginning to regret coming into this dirty alley with him.

Gus gently held her shoulders, took a deep breath in and blew it out as he looked her in the eyes.

“Will you marry me?”

SEVEN

Will you marry me?”

Those were four words Augustus Schultz never thought would come out of his mouth. At least not at the age of thirty-one, in a grubby alley, and especially not to Merritt Christianson. She despised him, after all, and he wasn't too fond of her either. Nevertheless, those were the very words he had just spoken.

Merritt's eyes, round like saucers, stared at him in disbelief. Her shocked expression quickly cracked and turned into fits of laughter.

He rolled his eyes, letting go of her shoulders, and exhaled an exasperated breath.

“You're not serious,” she replied when she was finally past her hilarity. “This is some kind of joke, right?”

He pulled a small box from his back pocket and cracked the lid to show her the gigantic diamond ring he'd picked up at Tiffany & Co. that morning.

The saucer-eyes were back again, this time staring wildly at the diamond as she leaned closer and tucked a section of her brown hair behind her ear. “I don't understand.” Her eyes met his. “Why would you want to marry me?”

“I heard you talking to Adelia last night. I know about the financial problems with expanding your company.”

She looked at him cluelessly. “What does that have to do with your idiotic proposal?”

“I'm not an idiot.”

“Maybe not, but your proposal certainly is.” She straightened her back, crossing her arms over her chest.

“This could be mutually beneficial for both of us.”

She took a step back. “Are you that hard up, Gus? Because you could find about a dozen skanks at the bar down the street who would be more than willing to have a mutually beneficial arrangement with you.”

“Hear me out.” He was losing patience with her, as usual.

“Do I have to?”

He groaned. “I was going to suggest a solution to your financial problem, but forget it. I don’t have to deal with this crap.” He snapped the ring box closed and shoved it in his pocket as he spun on his heel and walked toward the sidewalk.

“Wait!” Merritt called after him.

He smirked. He knew that would get her attention. Straightening his face, he turned as she approached.

“What kind of solution?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Marry me, and I’ll give you the money you need for your business.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Wh—why would you do that?”

“To prove to my family that I’m capable of change. I want to be a part of my family’s company again, and that won’t happen unless they believe I’ve settled down and that I’m serious about my future. That I prefer boardrooms to bars, as my dad once said to me.”

A laugh escaped her. “And a wife will show them that?”

“I think it will.”

She shook her head. “You’re crazy if you think I’m going to agree to this.”

“It would only be for a year. I think that’s long enough to seem legitimate so I’ll be welcomed back into the company, and then we can say we’re having problems and part ways when the year’s up.”

“A year? You expect me to spend a year married to you? What if I meet someone?”

Gus snorted.

“Hey, it could happen.”

“Then I guess you can take a lover on the side.”

“You are an idiot.”

“Come on. It’s a win for both of us. I get back in my family’s good graces, and you get the money you need to take your company to the next level.”

She let out the deep breath she had taken and rocked back and forth on her heels, seemingly deep in thought. “Again, why me and not one of those lovely ladies at the bar? I’m sure any one of them would be happy to marry a man for his money.”

“I need someone different, someone that would impress my parents.”

Her eyebrow lifted. “Was that a compliment?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “You’re clearly intelligent enough to have started your own company and made something out of it. That will earn big points with my dad.”

He could see the gears turning in her brain, and he hoped that meant she was seriously considering this.

“What do you say, Merritt?” Gus dropped down to one knee and opened the box again.

Her eyes darted around the alley and toward the sidewalk out front. “Get up, you moron!”

He cracked up laughing as he stood and waved the ring in front of her face. “Plus, you get to wear this huge rock on your finger for a year.”

“Do I get to keep it when we split?” she asked, reaching out to touch it.

He snapped the box closed at the last second. “Are you saying yes?”

“I want a written contract drawn up by a lawyer. I want everything spelled out legally. If I agree—and that’s a big if—I want the money. I don’t want to end up screwed when all of this is over.”

“Nobody will be getting screwed.” Gus lifted his eyebrows flirtatiously, aware of his very obvious double entendre.

She tilted her head and pursed her lips in disapproval. “You’re right about that.”

He shrugged and let out a laugh.

Her gaze went from his eyes to the ring as he took it from the box and stepped closer.

Reaching down, he took her wrist, causing her to flinch. He nodded toward the ring, then lifted her hand and slipped it onto her left ring finger. Her hand was warm in his, her eyes fixed on the diamond, sparkling on her slender finger. He’d never been this close to her before, and he noticed the flecks of gold in her big brown eyes. She was wearing a deep brown shade of eyeshadow on her eyelids with a swipe of shimmery gold under her brows, and her lashes were long and thick with mascara, making those beautiful eyes stand out more.

Beautiful eyes?

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

He mentally punched himself in the gut for that and let go of her hand.

She extended her arm, admiring the ring on her finger. Her eyes moved to look at Gus warily then back at the ring. She shook her head, twisted the ring until it slid off of her finger, and held it out to him. “No way.”

His stomach sank. “No?”

“You’re delusional if you think I’d agree to marry you.”

“It’s not a real marriage. Nothing about our lives would change, except legally you’d be a Schultz.”

“I’m not changing my name when I get married.”

“I didn’t ask you to. But think of all the doors the Schultz name could open for you.”

She seemed to pause then shook her head. “Not happening.”

“Don’t you want the money for your business?”

“I’ll find another way.” She walked toward the sidewalk.

He was disappointed, but then he hadn’t been sure of how she would react when he came up with this plan. He and Merritt definitely weren’t a good match. They had nothing in common. They didn’t get along. He wasn’t attracted to her. Well ... she was a beautiful woman, and he liked women, but her sarcasm and harsh personality

were enough to douse even the tiniest spark of attraction. And that's why she was perfect. There would be no pesky feelings involved. Strictly business.

So, before he let her walk away from this idea for good, he gave it one more shot.

"I'll buy you a car." She needed something other than that worthless piece of crap she drove.

She stopped in her tracks, turning to look at him again.

"Any car you want." His eyes pleaded with her.

"You'll buy me a car if I marry you?" Her eyebrows raised.

"Yes. I know you need one."

"I happen to like my car."

"Your car will soon be going the way of the dinosaur and you know it."

"You're so full of yourself. You think you can just toss money and a car at a girl and get her to do whatever you want. Well, you can't. You can't get me that way, Augustus Schultz. I won't be bought." She spun on her heel and marched out of the alley.

He slipped the ring onto his index finger and spun it around in circles as he watched her round the corner and walk away. He kicked a loose stone across the cement.

So much for his brilliant plan.

EIGHT

Merritt was annoyed and bewildered as she drove toward her apartment in Santa Monica that evening. The nerve. How in the world could Gus possibly think she would marry him? Marry him! The idea was insane. He had to know that. In this day and age, there was no way people actually faked a marriage. Did they?

She was so consumed by the confusing thoughts and questions whirling around in her mind, that she barely remembered parking, letting herself into her place, or pouring herself a glass of wine. But somehow she was now standing on her balcony, overlooking the beach and Santa Monica pier.

She took a seat on the chaise and lay back, staring up at the few stars that were beginning to twinkle in the sky, listening to the waves rolling against the sand. The ocean calmed her, brought her back to herself when the pressures of everyday life and running her own business got to her.

Starting Merritt Cosmetics hadn't been easy. Not by a long shot. She had worked for years, finding just the right combination of safe ingredients, going through all the necessary steps to make sure they were FDA approved before releasing her products. Then she spent years selling from her apartment, building up a following, growing through word-of-mouth before the business started to take off a few years ago.

As popularity increased, the demand had become great. And that was part of the problem because she had found no one willing to stand behind her and loan her the kind of money she needed to take her business to the next level. She had built her tiny company into a thriving business, but the expenses were growing, and she knew it could be so much more with a little help.

She thought about Gus's proposal and groaned as she closed her eyes and pictured him slipping that giant rock onto her finger. It was beautiful, and if she'd actually been in love with the person who gave her that ring, she would've been proud to wear it and profess their love to everyone who saw it. But it was Augustus Schultz. Her

feelings for him were on the opposite end of the love/hate scale.

The sound of her phone ringing inside her apartment made her groan again. She had just gotten comfortable, letting the wine do its thing to relax her. But then, it could be about work. That thought made her set her glass down and walk quickly to where she'd left her purse.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

She didn't recognize the number but answered anyway.

"Hello?"

"Is this Merritt Christianson?" a man asked.

"Yes."

"It's me."

"Me who?"

"You don't recognize my voice?"

"Should I?" He hadn't said enough words for her to recognize him.

"Well, I would hope you'd know your future husband's voice."

She rolled her eyes even though he couldn't see her. "Gus? I should've known you wouldn't take no for an answer. How did you get this number?"

"Adelia."

"You told her about this crazy scheme of yours?"

"Not exactly. She thinks I'm calling to apologize for being rude to you."

“I don’t think she would’ve given you my number if she knew why you were actually calling.”

“She’ll be on board with this,” he replied.

“I highly doubt that.”

“You’ll see.” He sounded awfully confident.

“No, I won’t, because this is not happening. I already told you. There is no way I’m marrying you.”

“I think you’ll change your mind.”

She laughed. “Don’t hold your breath.”

“When you look at your life a year from now, what do you see?” he asked.

“Why do you care?”

“Humor me and think about where you want to be in a year. Would you rather be where you are right now, trying to move forward in your business, stuck at a standstill because of the money, or do you want your products reaching every corner of the world, exploding in every market? Are you content with a company grossing a couple million rather than on your way to some serious money?”

She was quiet. He had clearly done his research on her company.

“I can help you. I’m tired of wasting my wealth, and I’ve been wanting to find a worthy investment. Let me invest in you.”

Her mind raced as she found herself seriously considering his ridiculous plan.

“I know a year seems like a long time, but Merritt, you’ll be so busy, it will fly by.”

“This is crazy.”

“You want to say yes. I know you do.”

“I don’t want to say yes at all. I want to find another way to expand my company without having to marry you.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

It was his turn to be quiet.

“You don’t think we’ll spend the year ripping each other’s heads off?” she asked.

“We don’t exactly get along, if you hadn’t noticed.”

“I know, but maybe we can call a truce.”

She laughed loudly at that. “That doesn’t seem likely.”

“It’s the only way to get to the end the year with exactly what we want—me with a place in my family’s company and you with the hottest products out there.”

She felt disappointed in herself for actually considering this, but getting the money for her business was more than a little tempting.

“That’s what I want,” he said. “What about you?”

“Do you have a lawyer?”

“I know a guy.”

“And we can meet with him and discuss terms before I decide?”

“Absolutely.” There was obvious excitement in his voice.

“I’m not saying this is happening. I’m saying I want to talk.”

“Duly noted.”

“I must be out of my mind.” She shook her head.

“So we do have something in common.”

Merritt felt oddly calm as she sat in the office of Rex Redman, well-known attorney to the stars, and listened to Gus tell this stranger that he wanted to marry her on paper only. Rex sat at his desk with a legal pad before him, scribbling notes as Gus explained how they were looking at this as a business agreement and needed a contract spelling out all the terms.

The man didn’t bat an eyelash. Merritt was sure he’d heard his share of strange requests for legal representation in Hollywood. Their little fake marriage was probably not surprising to him in the least.

Merritt glanced around the office while they talked. The wall behind Rex was plastered with credentials and accolades, so while he reminded her a little of a slimy lawyer on a television show, she didn’t doubt that he knew what he was doing and was successful in his field.

“Let’s go over all the specificities,” Rex said as he looked between her and Gus. “You both agree this will be a legal marriage, lasting a duration of one year.”

“Yes,” they both said.

“Will you live together or separately?”

“Separate,” Merritt said at the same time Gus said, “Together.”

Her eyes shot to his. “You expect us to live together?”

“That’s what married people do.” He looked at her searchingly.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t want to live with you.”

“The house is big. We won’t even have to see each other.”

“What house?” she asked.

“My family’s home in Malibu. It’s up on the canyon near Adelia’s.”

“If you have a house in Malibu, why are you living with Adelia?”

“Like I said, the house is big. It’s lonely there.”

Page 17

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t like this idea. At all.”

His eyes narrowed. “How will my family believe this is real if we don’t live together?”

Though she hated to admit it, he was right. “Fine. But I want a room on the opposite side of the house from you. And I want to be able to come and go whenever I want. If I want to have people over, I want the freedom to do that.”

“People?” He gave her a pointed look. “As in men?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You can’t bring men home, Merritt.”

She didn’t actually plan to, but she didn’t want to put her whole life on hold if she didn’t have to. “Before, when I asked what if I met someone, you said I could take a lover on the side, remember?” She smirked.

He didn’t seem to find that amusing. “That was a joke.”

“Well, what if I meet the one while we’re married?”

He snorted, but she ignored it.

“What am I supposed to do? Tell him about our situation and ask him to wait for me?”

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“This is part of the price of getting what you want.”

She stood and paced back and forth as she thought about it. “And you don’t get to bring women home either.”

He chuckled, and her eyes darted to his.

“Of course not, Merritt. I’m all yours.”

She ignored the hint of flirtatiousness in his voice. “All right. I agree to live with you in your house in Malibu.”

“And go home to Michigan with me if I need you to.”

“I’d rather not.”

He looked at her curiously. “Why not?”

“Personal reasons.”

“Well, that’s where my family lives, so ...”

She dropped into the seat beside him again. “Fine.” She couldn’t hide the exasperation in her voice. If she went to Michigan, she would have to visit her parents, and she didn’t want to do that with a fake husband in tow.

“And my brother’s wedding is in Montana next month. I need you to go with me.”

The thought of meeting his family made her nervous. They were the Schultz family, after all. Their company was huge, and she was more than a little intimidated at the thought of meeting them. “Okay,” she managed.

“Thank you,” he replied.

“What about payment?” she asked. “I’m not doing this for free.”

Gus laughed. “I know that. You’ll get it in three installments.”

She didn’t like that at all. “Why?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“I’m not giving you all the money before I get what I want out of this deal. No way. A third of it will be deposited into your account the moment we say ‘I do’. The second payment will be at six months.” He put his arm around her and pulled her into his side. “And you’ll get the rest when we celebrate our one-year anniversary.”

“You mean when we sign the divorce papers.” She pushed him away.

He dropped his arm and nodded. “Exactly.”

She wished she had all the money up-front, but she understood where he was coming from. “I agree to your terms.”

“Good.” He was looking at her with a little too much sparkle in his eyes, and she turned to Rex.

“Can we add some language stating that I am not expected to fulfill the usual ... duties of a wife ...” She hated this conversation. “In the bedroom.”

Gus chuckled, and she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Of course, Miss Christianson,” Rex replied. “I will add a section regarding no consummation of the marriage.”

“Thank you.”

“We will also be including standard prenuptial agreement language per Mr. Schultz’s request,” Rex stated.

She looked over at Gus, then back at Rex.

“The agreement states that when you divorce, you will have no claim to any of Mr. Schultz’s finances, except that which is spelled out and agreed upon in the marriage agreement.”

“You think I’d go after more of your money?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “We barely know each other. I don’t know what you’re capable of.”

She remembered him saying that on the road near Adelia’s house that night, and it annoyed her. But he wasn’t wrong. They had barely spoken a civil word since they’d met. They were basically strangers. If he wasn’t a close friend of Adelia’s, she definitely wouldn’t be going through with this.

A thought occurred to her. “I’d like to add that the money I receive will be used as I see fit, and Gus will have no controlling interest in my company.”

Rex looked at Gus, who gave him a nod of agreement.

“Very well.”

After going over a few other minor details, Rex left the room for a few minutes, and Gus shifted to face her. “So, you’re happy with everything in the agreement?”

She let out a heavy sigh. “I’m not happy with any of this.”

“But I thought we ironed everything out how you wanted it. I thought—”

“I mean, I’m not happy that I’m about to agree to this insanity.”

I won't be bought. Her own words echoed in her mind and made her feel like a total sellout.

He reached over and lay his hand on hers, giving it a squeeze. "You won't be sorry. I'll make this the best year of your life." He leaned closer, his fresh, ocean-y scent overtaking her. "Heck, you might like being married to me so much, you won't want to leave when the year's up."

She slid her hand out from under his. "Oh, I'll leave. You can count on that."

NINE

Gus stood in front of the bathroom mirror at the courthouse with his hair combed back and face clean-shaven. He brushed a piece of lint from the shoulder of his best Tom Ford suit then looked at his reflection.

This was happening. He was marrying a complete stranger. This was crazier than Sebastian pretending not to be a Schultz when he first met Genevieve. That charade had turned out just fine for his brother, so why wouldn't his plan work as well?

The door to the bathroom opened and in snuck Adelia.

"This is the men's room," he said as he turned toward her.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

She lay her palm over her heart. “You look so handsome.”

He stepped closer. “Are you going to cry?”

“No.” Her chin quivered a little as she blew out a breath.

“This isn’t a real marriage, Deals.”

“I know, but it’s still your wedding. I always get teary at weddings.”

He hugged her. “Thanks for doing this.”

She nodded as she straightened his tie.

Adelia hadn’t exactly been on board like Gus had thought she would. In fact, she’d had some pretty compelling arguments as to why this wasn’t a good idea—lying to his family being the biggest. But in the end, she had agreed to help them.

“We should get out there. Your bride is waiting.”

The moment those words left her mouth, his chest tightened. My bride?

As they walked along the hallway, a surge of panic shot through his body, and his forehead broke out in a sweat as the reality sank in. They were about to get married. Were they insane for doing this? He looked down the hallway toward the exit. It wasn’t too late. He could still back out.

But then he turned and caught sight of Merritt. She was wearing a simple cream-colored lace dress that fell just below her knees. Her hair was twisted loosely at the nape of her neck with a white flower tucked in the middle, and in her hands was a small bouquet of the same flowers. Her eyes met his, and his heart stuttered in his chest. She was breathtaking. And suddenly his nerves calmed and he was ready to marry this girl. Even if it wasn't real.

At that moment, he half-wished that it was.

He shook off the thought and stopped a couple of feet from her. "You look beautiful."

She gave him a shy grin and a once over. "Thanks, you clean up nice too."

It might have been the first nice thing either of them had ever said to each other.

They made their way into the courtroom where another couple was finishing up with the Justice of the Peace.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride."

The nerves were back. Kiss the bride? The thought of kissing her sent a thrill through him, but he knew it was just for show. He glanced over at Merritt, who was now at his side, and she looked surprisingly calm. Either that or she was a very good actress. He couldn't believe how his nerves had amped up in the past two minutes.

This was definitely not how he envisioned his wedding, not that he'd really thought about it much. Getting married had never been one of his life goals. But now that they were here, about to face the justice, about to vow to love each other in sickness and in health, things felt strangely real. And he had to keep reminding himself that they weren't.

“Schultz Wedding,” a woman said as she directed them to the judge’s bench.

“Here we go,” Gus said as he took Merritt’s hand in his.

TEN

The Justice of the Peace was a stout, balding man with glasses and a warm smile. He greeted each of them and their witnesses in front of the judge’s bench, and Merritt felt perfectly fine ... until he began the ceremony.

“Augustus and Merritt, today you have chosen to celebrate the beauty of love as you join together in the vows of marriage.”

Merritt’s hand shook involuntarily, and Gus gave it a squeeze. She gripped his hand tightly, needing to hold onto something to combat her sudden nerves.

In her periphery, she saw him glance at her, but she stared straight ahead at the justice. If she looked at Gus, she was certain she would crack and be a mess of tears. So much for trying to appear calm and collected.

Her gaze moved past Gus to Adelia, who was giving her a sympathetic smile. She looked lovely in a navy blue belted-waist sheath dress, perhaps more appropriate for a courtroom appearance than a wedding, but they were in a courthouse. Giovanni was photographing the ceremony for them, while Whitney stood to Adelia’s side, looking as stunning as always in a long pale blue gauzy maxi dress. But rather than pay attention to the ceremony, Whitney was watching Giovanni with moony eyes, like she wished it was the two of them getting married instead. At this moment, Merritt wished the same thing.

The justice then asked them to face each other for the vows. She swallowed the lump in her throat as she turned to face him. If ever there was a time to back out, this was

it.

“Augustus Paul Schultz, do you take Merritt Elaine Christianson to be your wife? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and protect her, forsaking all others, as long as you both shall live?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Gus looked into her eyes. “I do.” He looked calm and certain of his answer.

She felt anything but, though the surety in his words had taken her fear down a notch.

He gave her a reassuring smile, and she gave a weak smile in return as the justice addressed her.

“Merritt, do you take Augustus to be your husband? Do you promise to love, honor, cherish, and protect him, forsaking all others, as long as you both shall live?”

Her chest rose then fell as she took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. Her eyes flickered to his for an instant before staring at his tie. “I do,” she finally said.

“The wedding ring is a symbol of unity, a circle unbroken, no beginning and no end. The exchange of these rings today is a demonstration of your unity as a couple, your love whole and unbroken, and a love without end.”

The lump in her throat was back again.

“Augustus, please place the ring on Merritt’s finger and repeat after me.”

Adelia handed him the ring, and he took hold of Merritt’s hand, sliding the ring onto her finger. As she glanced down, she couldn’t help but think that it looked good there.

Gus repeated after the justice. “This ring is a symbol of my love and faithfulness.”

Merritt did the same, taking the ring from Adelia, sliding it onto Gus’s finger. “This

ring is a symbol of my love and faithfulness.”

She didn’t look him in the eye when she said it. Instead, she held his hand in hers, rubbing her thumb over the ring. Tears burned her eyes, fighting to escape. Had she really gone through with this?

“Augustus and Merritt, in so much as the two of you have agreed to live together in matrimony, have promised your love for each other by these vows, I now declare you to be husband and wife. Congratulations! You may kiss your bride.”

Oh my gosh! This is it. Gus reached out and lifted her chin until she looked at him. He brushed away a lone tear that had escaped from her eye and focused on her lips. It was him swallowing hard this time as he leaned closer and pressed his mouth to hers.

His lips were soft and gentle as he kissed her with the perfect amount of pressure to get the blood pumping through her veins. She unintentionally moved closer, resting her palm on his chest, tilting her head as she returned his kiss. And when he pulled away, she was disappointed his lips hadn’t lingered on hers a bit longer.

His gaze remained fixed on her mouth as he leaned closer again, like he might go in for another kiss, but she came to her senses and stepped back just in time.

“Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Schultz.”

Merritt tried not to cringe at that, but she couldn’t help it.

They all signed the marriage license to make it official, and the two of them walked toward the exit of the building as husband and wife.

The moment the doors opened, cameras flashed, and the small gathering of paparazzi threw out questions left and right.

“Gus, is it true you’re married?”

“Where did you two meet?”

“Will you live here or in Michigan?”

Merritt had gone places with Adelia plenty of times, so she was no stranger to how this usually went, but she’d never been the one the cameras were focused on.

Gus wound his fingers through hers and squeezed.

“Give us a little privacy, will you?” Gus asked politely. “It’s an important day, and we’d like to enjoy it. So, take a few pictures and then be on your way.” He was firm and levelheaded, like he’d dealt with them plenty of times before.

Gus stopped halfway down the steps and slid his arm around behind her, drawing her into his side, and put on a smile that looked sincere. Merritt tried to smile in the same way, but she wasn’t sure she pulled it off.

Giovanni walked past them then with Adelia on one arm and Whitney on the other.

“Adelia! How do you feel about Gus’s marriage?”

“Fans will be disappointed that it wasn’t the two of you getting hitched.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Adelia didn't respond, and Merritt wondered what was behind that. Had Adelia and Gus been an item in the past?

But before she could dwell on that for too long, Gus turned her to face him and leaned in, pressing his lips softly against hers. Unexpected chills ran down her spine at the contact.

He pulled away and leaned close to her ear, turning so nobody could see his lips move. "Just giving them something to put on the cover of their magazines."

She turned so her mouth was next to his ear. "You could've warned me."

He shrugged his shoulders and took her hand, leading her to the black Cadillac Escalade waiting for them. The drive to her apartment was quiet. She spent the entire time either staring out the window or admiring the bouquet of white orchids and plumeria in her hands.

When Gus pulled up to her apartment building, she quickly climbed out without giving him a chance to get out and open the door for her. "Give me three hours. You can come back and get me then." Gus had agreed to take her home after the wedding so she could have some time to herself and start packing for the move to Malibu.

"Okay." He nodded, and she shut the door and walked toward the building entrance.

As he drove away, she couldn't stop thinking what a strange wedding day this was. She was alone at her place in Santa Monica while he went to Adelia's to wait.

Definitely not the wedding day she imagined she would one day have.

After changing out of her dress, Merritt pulled out her suitcases and a couple of plastic tubs and began packing the things she knew she'd need right away. She caught sight of herself in the mirror and stopped. Her hair was still twisted back with the orchid tucked inside, which looked too fancy for the tank top and khaki shorts she was now sporting. And the gigantic diamond on her ring finger definitely looked extravagant with her ensemble.

She was now a wife. Gus Schultz's wife! Just the idea of it made her want to laugh and then cry. But she had to remember that this was about getting her company where she wanted it to be.

After Merritt had gathered her things and stacked them near the door, she grabbed her phone. She hadn't spoken to her parents in a month, but this definitely warranted a phone call.

"You never told us you were dating someone," her mom said at the news.

"It was kind of a whirlwind romance." She wasn't sure what else to say. Per their agreement, she wasn't allowed to tell anyone that their marriage wasn't real. The only people who knew were Adelia and Giovanni, who had both signed an NDA. Not even Whitney knew, but she was too wrapped up in the romanticism of it all to notice the reality of the situation anyway.

"Tell me about your husband," Mom said.

Merritt shook her head as she reclined on a chair on her balcony. Her husband. That sounded so weird. She held up her hand, admiring the ring as it sparkled in the sun. "His name is Gus. We met through Adelia Allen."

“It’s still hard to believe you’re friends with someone famous.”

“Actually, my new husband is pretty well known too.”

“Is that so?”

“His family owns SchultZ Chocolate.”

Her mom coughed on the other end of the phone like she was choking on something.

“Are you okay, Mom?”

“Yeah, sorry. My drink went down the wrong tube.” She cleared her throat. “Did you say SchultZ Chocolate? As in my favorite, Granny’s Truffles?”

“The very one.”

“Oh my goodness. When do we get to meet him?”

“I’m not sure. We have to go to his brother’s wedding next month. I’ll have to let you know.”

“Well, SchultZ Chocolate is based in Grand Rapids, right? That isn’t too far away from us. Next time you come to town, you’ll have to drive down to Kalamazoo for the day and introduce us. Your dad will be thrilled to meet him.”

Merritt rolled her eyes, thankful that her mom couldn’t see her. She knew the only thing Dad would be interested in was hearing about how much money Gus’s family had, and she hoped he wouldn’t say anything embarrassing.

Ruth Christianson had rose-colored glasses when it came to her husband, Ned. Most

of the time, she thought he could do no wrong. But Ruth was truly the good one in the relationship. It had been Ruth who first decided to take in foster children over the years and Ruth who wanted to adopt Merritt when she was a year old. If it hadn't been for her, Merritt might have stayed in the system her whole life. She owed a lot to her mom, but she gave little credit to Ned for her upbringing. A lifelong factory worker, mostly working third shift, he slept during the day and worked at night, so she barely saw him. He had been the provider, working hard to keep a roof over their heads, constantly worried about the money. Merritt wished she had a close relationship with her dad, that he would've been there for more of the milestones of her life, but that wasn't how things were in their family.

Merritt used to feel sad when she thought about her start in life—left at a hospital when she was a baby, found wrapped in a blanket in a box by the door to the ER. But over the years, she had come to believe in her heart that her mother must've had a very good reason for abandoning her. When she imagined her biological mother, she pictured a scared teenager with no way of taking care of a baby, and she understood and didn't begrudge her anything. She'd had a good life, people who took care of her, at least one loving parent, and she'd gone on to make something of herself. Many children in her situation weren't so lucky, and she knew how blessed she was to have been adopted.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

When she and her mom hung up, Merritt went inside and looked around her apartment. She had lived there for five years, and it was her haven, her sanctuary. She and Gus hadn't discussed what to do with her place, but she didn't want to give it up. Maybe she could rent it out for the year since she wasn't going to be living there. That thought saddened her.

It's only a year. You can do this.

A sudden knock on the door made her jump, and she took her time answering it because she knew it was him. But when she opened the door, Gus wasn't the only one on the other side. Adelia and Giovanni were there with champagne and glasses in hand.

They took turns hugging, kissing cheeks, and giving their congratulations. Even though it wasn't a real marriage, they would use any excuse to celebrate.

Merritt welcomed them all in, not making eye contact with her new husband.

Adelia went onto the balcony and everyone followed. She poured champagne and raised her glass. "Congratulations to a beautiful couple on a happy—" She started laughing. "I can't say it with a straight face."

"Nobody asked you to give us a toast," Gus told her with a smirk.

She cleared her throat. "On a happy marriage."

"Thanks, Deals—"

Adelia held up her hand. “I’m not finished.”

Gus and Merritt both groaned at the same time and laughed when they caught each other’s eye.

“May this be the best year of your lives.”

“To one year.” Gus raised the water bottle in his hand and looked at Merritt.

“One year,” she repeated as she raised her glass.

Merritt’s nerves kicked up a notch as she turned into the drive of the Schultz’s Malibu home. It was similar in size to Adelia’s—one-story with probably five or six bedrooms. She couldn’t tell from the outside. She’d insisted on driving her BMW there rather than riding in the Escalade with Gus and the others. No matter how much he hated her car, she wasn’t leaving it at her apartment, undriven for a year. She loved this car. She’d worked hard to earn the money to buy it on her own, drove it across the country, and had taken good care of it with regular maintenance and repairs, which lately seemed to be more frequent.

She got out of her car, grabbed her purse and a small bag containing her makeup and toiletries, and walked hesitantly across the drive as Gus and their friends grabbed the rest of Merritt’s belongings from the back of the SUV.

“Here!” Gus tossed a set of keys at her.

“What are these?”

He nodded to the shiny white Mercedes convertible parked on the other side of the driveway. “They’re yours.”

“What?”

“I told you I’d buy you a new car.”

“And I told you I love my car.”

He shrugged. “Drive it. Don’t drive it. I don’t care. But it’s yours.”

She stared at him, dumbfounded.

“Happy wedding day.”

She turned to look at the vehicle and moved closer, her gaze traveling along the sleek curves to the white leather seats within. She had never owned a brand new car before.

The driveway behind her grew quiet, and she realized everyone had gone inside.

She took a deep breath and followed. Everyone was talking and goofing around as if this was any normal day, as if she and Gus hadn’t just vowed to love each other forever and weren’t about to shack up after knowing each other for two weeks.

“Your room is down here,” Gus said over his shoulder as he led everyone along a hallway on the north side of the house with suitcases and plastic tubs in hand. He opened a door and stood to the side to let them enter, smiling at Merritt as she passed by.

The moment she stepped into the room, she instantly fell in love with the view. She had always loved that her apartment was so close to the ocean and the Santa Monica pier, but the view from atop the canyon was breathtaking. And it was so quiet and peaceful here. She could definitely handle this for a while.

Page 23

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Once the others had left her things and headed back toward the living room, Merritt moved closer to the windows to get a better look.

“Do you like it?”

She startled and looked back to see Gus standing in the doorway. “I do.”

“Good.” He looked like he wanted to say something else, but he didn’t. “I’ll let you get settled in then.”

She was relieved to be left alone. This whole situation was beyond awkward.

As she began unpacking, Adelia came in and closed the door behind her.

“How ya doin’?” she asked.

“I’m fine.” Merritt opened the closet door and went about hanging up her clothing.

“Do you want some help?” Adelia grabbed a few of the shirts without waiting for a reply.

“Thanks, but I don’t have that much to put away. The movers are bringing the rest of my things over next week.” She took the shirts from Adelia and placed them next to the others.

“Hey, you know if you need to talk or just get away from here, I am right down the road.”

“I know.” She kept doing what she was doing.

“Merritt.”

She stopped moving and looked over at her friend.

“Look, I wasn’t exactly on board with this when you guys told me, but I think you’re doing the right thing.”

Merritt’s brow furrowed. “Am I? Because I’m pretty sure I’ve lost my mind.”

“You’re helping out a really good guy and making a good business decision in the process.”

“This is by far the craziest thing I have ever done, and I’m still not sure how I let myself get talked into this.”

“Gus can be very convincing when he wants something.” Adelia had a little twinkle in her eye, which piqued Merritt’s curiosity.

She paused with an empty hanger in hand. “Were you and Gus ever involved?”

Adelia laughed hysterically. “Never.”

“Did you want to be?”

“Not for a second. The tabloids like to make up stories about us, but none of it’s true. He’s like a brother to me. That would just be ...” She shivered as she screwed up her face.

“Sorry. I was just curious. You two are obviously close.”

“We are. He’s important to me. You married one of the best guys I know.”

A sound of disgust escaped from Merritt’s throat.

“And I’ve heard he’s a really good kisser, so that’s a plus for you.”

“What? Why would I care if he’s a good kisser or not?” Merritt’s cheeks warmed.

“If you have to be fake married to a guy and pretend to be in love in front of his family, you might as well enjoy yourself.”

Merritt groaned. “I hadn’t thought of that. We’re going to have to kiss again, aren’t we?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Mhmm.” Adelia’s eyebrows bounced up and down playfully.

Merritt’s shoulders sagged. “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Don’t overthink it, Merritt. Before you know it, the new year will be here again, and you’ll be in a much better place with your business than you are now.”

“Can you keep reminding me of that?”

“Of course, I will.”

She smiled at Adelia. “Thank you.” Her thoughts turned to future plans. “I cannot wait to get going on the new ad campaign. Thank you for agreeing to be the face of my company. You are a very good friend.”

“Well, I believe in you and your products, and I’m happy to do this for you.”

That familiar excitement began to build when she thought about her business. “I love what I do, but having you be a part of this, along with Giovanni’s photographs, just makes it all so much better.”

Adelia’s phone rang then, and she groaned.

“Who is it?”

“Mother,” she answered as she rolled her eyes in Merritt’s direction.

Merritt watched Adelia's very animated facial expressions as her mother spoke.

"I already told him I'm not doing that movie," Adelia replied. "The script was crap. I hated everything about it. I want to work on stories that inspire me. That one made me want to take a blow torch to it, but I only had a lighter, so I used that instead."

Merritt chuckled quietly as Adelia pulled the phone away from her ear due to the increasing volume of her mother's voice.

"I'm not a little girl anymore. I make my own choices when it comes to my work now. You can't force me into roles. I'm a grown woman." There was a pause. "I don't care if you don't like that indie movie I did. I don't care how it reflects back on you. What I care about is my own career, apart from you and Dad. How many times are we going to have this conversation? Seriously, Mom, you're like a broken record these days." Another pause and more eye-rolling from Adelia. "Goodbye, Mother." She hung up and tossed the phone onto the bed as she let out a loud cry.

The sound of rapid footfalls in the hallway grew louder, and Gus flung the door open.

"What's wrong?" His eyes shot between the two women.

Merritt nodded toward Adelia.

"What is it, Deals?" Gus approached her with open arms, and she wrapped her arms around his waist and rested her head on his chest as he rubbed up and down her back.

"I'm twenty-nine years old. I've been an adult for a while now. I just don't understand why my parents can't stay out of my business and out of my career. I get that they're important in this business. I wasn't raised under a rock. But whether I choose to do a big-budget drama or a small-budget indie should be my choice. Not theirs."

“It’ll be all right,” Gus told her. “Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

“I think you’ve made some amazing choices so far in your career,” Merritt said.

“Absolutely,” Giovanni agreed. “You have to be allowed to be Adelia Allen, not just the daughter of Hugh Allen and Cora Roberts.”

Adelia straightened and wiggled her body as if she was shaking off all the negativity. “You’re right. I am Adelia Allen, and I’m going to show the world that I’m more than just their daughter.”

“You go, girl,” Giovanni said, teasingly.

“Anybody want a drink?” Gus offered.

“I need one after dealing with Cora,” Adelia replied with a laugh.

Merritt felt bad for her friend, but it made her thankful that she hadn’t been raised by an overcontrolling mother. Her dad’s archaic views on women’s roles were bad enough.

The four of them moved into the living room then, talking until the sun went down. Merritt wished their friends would stay longer, but they soon said their goodbyes and departed.

And then it was just the two of them.

Husband and wife.

Alone.

ELEVEN

Do you want dinner?” Gus wandered into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. “We could order something? There’s not much in here right now.” He hadn’t thought to stock the kitchen before Merritt moved in. At Adelia’s, there had never been a lack of food.

Merritt stood on the other side of the kitchen island, twirling a loose piece of her hair around her finger. “I’m not very hungry.”

“If you change your mind, there are some really good restaurants around here that deliver.”

She nodded and wandered out of the house onto the back patio. The moon was bright and reflected across the pool, silhouetting Merritt in a halo of light.

Gus wasn’t sure if he should follow her out there or give her some time alone, but he chose to join her.

She took a seat on the end of one of the chaise lounges, and he sat on the one beside her and flipped his feet up, lying back to relax. She glanced over at him then quickly away.

“This is awkward, isn’t it?” he asked.

“I expected it to be.” She turned her gaze up at the night sky.

“It will take a little getting used to.”

“Yeah.”

“Not exactly a typical wedding night, huh?”

Her eyes shot to his at that comment.

“I didn’t mean ... I wasn’t suggesting—”

“No, this isn’t a typical wedding night, because it’s not a real marriage.”

“I’m well aware,” he replied.

“And just so you know, I am fully aware we will have to pretend to be in love when we see your family, but I have ground rules.”

“Of course you do.” He was not surprised by this in the least.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You may hold my hand and put your arm around me, but no wandering hands. Also, you can kiss me if absolutely necessary, but no more than three seconds. And no tongue.”

Gus smirked, a small huff of air escaping his nose.

“I’m serious, Augustus.”

He chuckled. “You totally sound like an angry wife right now, using my full name.”

“You think I’m joking, but if I so much as feel your tongue brush my lip, I’ll bite it off.”

He burst out laughing.

“This isn’t funny.” Her expression was so serious that it made him laugh harder. “I’m being serious.”

“Oh, I know you are.”

She stood and stared down at him. “You are exhausting. I’m going to bed.”

He pressed his lips together to stop the laughter as she marched into the house.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Did we just have our first fight, honey?” he called after her.

Her loud groan carried from inside the house.

He lay his head back and closed his eyes with a smile on his face. Gosh, he enjoyed pushing her buttons. There was something about her that made him want to do everything in his power to get her all riled up. This was going to be fun.

His phone buzzed in his pocket, and when he pulled it out and saw Skylar’s name on the screen, he knew she must’ve seen the pictures the paparazzi had taken.

“Hey, Sky.”

“You’re married?” she asked in a loud, high-pitched tone.

“Paps didn’t waste any time, did they?”

“How did this happen? I mean, when did you ... who is this girl you married? How did you meet? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“That’s too many questions all at once.” He laughed.

“Okay, start at the beginning.”

“Her name is Merritt. Adelia introduced us, and it was love at first sight.”

Skylar’s laugh was close to a cackle, and he almost laughed right along with her

because what he'd just said definitely didn't sound like him. He didn't fall in love. Ever.

"When did you meet?" she asked.

"When I came back here in October." He lied.

"Why is this the first I'm hearing about her?"

"I wasn't sure how serious she was about me, and I didn't want to jinx it."

The other end of the line was quiet.

"Sky? Say something."

"I'm just in shock, I guess. I never thought you'd be the first one of us to get married."

"Neither did I, but when you know, you know. That's what people say, right?"

"People do say that."

There was more silence on Skylar's end, and Gus waited for her to speak again.

"Does she make you happy?" Skylar asked.

He paused. The only thing Merritt made him was annoyed and frustrated. "Yeah, she does. She's smart and beautiful, and for some reason, she loves me." He bit the inside of his cheek at that outright lie.

"So, what will you do now? Will you stay there in California?"

“Yeah, we’ll stay at the house in Malibu for now. She runs her own business here in LA.”

“Really? What kind of business?”

“A cosmetics company.”

“Wait, Merritt? You don’t mean Merritt Cosmetics, do you?”

“Yeah, that’s the one. You’ve heard of it?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Oh my gosh! Adelia sent me some of her products, and they are amazing. She is going to be huge.”

“We hope so.” He was surprised by the truth in his words, but he wanted her to succeed. Especially since it was his investment that was going to help make it happen.

“I’m happy for you, Gus. I really am.”

“Thank you.”

He heard her let out a sigh. “I can’t say I’m not disappointed that you didn’t let us be there for your wedding, though.”

“We wanted quick and simple. Neither of us wanted a big wedding. We just couldn’t wait to make it official.” It sounded good coming out of his mouth, like something a person in love and ready to commit would say.

“I can’t wait to meet her at Bash’s wedding.”

Nerves made his stomach clench. “We’ll be coming to Michigan before that, so I can introduce her to Mom and Dad.”

“Let me know when. I want to be there to meet my new sister-in-law.”

“I will.” He smiled to himself. “Thanks, Sky.”

“See you soon.”

After they hung up, Gus made himself a sandwich with what little was left in the fridge and plopped down in his chair by the pool again to eat it. As he reached for his food, he caught a glimpse of the ring on his left hand. He was married. It had all happened so fast. He was still surprised she had agreed to go through with it.

Bringing Merritt to Michigan would be the real test. He wanted his family to like her and see that he was capable of committing to a great girl like her. She was so far from the type of women he usually spent time with, and he hoped that would make a difference and they would see that he was making good decisions in his life.

He stared down at the ring. It looked good there, and it was going to fix everything for him. He was sure of it.

As he ate, his mind replayed the events of the day and his thoughts stuck on their first kiss. He hadn't expected her to kiss him back the way she had, like she wanted to keep kissing him, especially considering how much they usually disliked each other. And he'd almost given in and kissed her again before she had stepped away. He'd enjoyed the kiss, but that was just his hormones talking. He had to keep his head on straight and remember this was only an arrangement. There was nothing romantic between them. They'd be lucky if they made it through an entire week without fighting.

TWELVE

Merritt woke with a start, glancing around the room in confusion. Through her bleary morning eyes, she caught a glimpse of the diamond on her finger and it all came back to her in a rush. Oh, right. Married.

She grabbed her laptop as she sat up, reclined against the headboard, and checked her

messages. Her fingers typed away with responses to a few urgent ones, and then she logged into her bank account to make sure Gus had followed through. Sure enough, the first installment of “wedding money” was in her account.

Whoa! That’s a lot of zeros.

Last night, she’d begun second-guessing this whole thing, but seeing her bank balance somehow put everything into perspective. There was a reason for all of this.

She logged off and ducked into her private bathroom to shower and get ready for the day. Part of her still wished she hadn’t agreed to live with Gus. Although, this house was incredible.

There was far too much space for the two of them, but she wasn’t complaining. She loved the open layout between the kitchen, dining room, and living room. The patio and pool and ocean view beyond put her little apartment balcony to shame. And the bathrooms were enormous. The shower she was currently standing in was the size of her apartment bathroom, and she lingered there, taking advantage of the massage spray jets along the wall and enjoying the longest shower she’d ever taken. Hey, it wasn’t her utility bill.

When she came out into the living space, she found Gus pouring a mug of coffee. Shirtless. There was no use denying it. Augustus Schultz was an incredibly attractive man. But when she thought about his rude and abrasive personality, any attraction she might have felt for him fizzled away.

“Morning, wifey,” he teased.

She stopped across the kitchen island from him, crossed her arms, and glared.

“Would you rather I call you sweetie or honey or baby?”

“None of the above.”

He chuckled. “Fine. But you can call me hubby if you want. I kind of like the sound of it.”

“You would.”

He took a sip of his coffee. “What does that mean?”

Page 28

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“It means that I can tell you’re loving this. You get some kind of sick pleasure out of torturing me.”

“It is kind of fun seeing your face turn all red like that.”

“My face is a perfectly normal color. Your words have no effect on me whatsoever.”

He rounded the island and came to stand directly in front of her. “Challenge accepted.”

“That wasn’t a challenge.”

He leaned in close as he whispered in her ear, “You affect me, Merritt.”

She tried not to shiver at his tone or his warm breath against her neck. “What are you doing?”

“Whenever you’re near, I feel ...”

She stepped back and eyed him.

“Annoyed, repulsed, irritated. Take your pick.” He was teasing again.

Her eyes rolled as she stepped around him and made her way to the coffee maker and poured a cup, still trying to shake off the effect his nearness had actually had on her. She was disgusted with herself for feeling anything at all. Her hormones were stinking traitors.

“What’s your day look like?” he asked.

“Work, work, and more work.”

“What’s the first thing you’ll do with the money?”

“Hire a team.” She took a sip from her mug, enjoying the most deliciously rich coffee she’d ever tasted. “What is this coffee?”

“It’s special from Panama. Good, huh?”

“This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted.”

“It better be for how much it cost me.”

Her eyes met his. “How much did it cost you?”

“Two-hundred.”

She nearly spit the coffee out. “Dollars?”

“No, doubloons.”

She gave him a look of disapproval. “You could feed a family for a week with that much money. Why can’t you just buy regular priced coffee like normal people?”

“Because I’m not normal.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Ha. Ha. You’re hilarious, you know that?”

“I’m not kidding. People are struggling to put food on their tables, and you pay that much for a pound of coffee.”

He shook his head. “Not a pound.”

“What?”

“That was half a pound.”

“Oh my gosh. I can’t drink this.”

“Why are you so worked up over this?”

She paused, not sure how much of her life she wanted to divulge, but wanting him to understand where she was coming from. “I didn’t grow up with much. And when I see someone who has so much buy ridiculously overpriced coffee, it just makes me sad.”

He looked at her but didn’t respond.

“You said before that you wanted to do something better with your money, that you wanted to help me. There are so many wonderful charities out there that feed and clothe those less fortunate than you. That’s where you should be putting your money.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Yes. A portion of all the money I make from my cosmetics goes to charities like that. I know what it feels like to go without, and I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I’d kept all the money I’ve made these past few years and never given back.”

He was silent again, still staring at her.

“What?”

“That just surprises me.”

“Why? You thought I was a miser like you?”

“I wouldn’t have pegged someone like you as some big philanthropist.”

“Someone like me?”

“You’re one of those girls who’s into superficial things like makeup and looks and appearance.”

Her mouth fell open. “Do you even think about what you’re saying before you let these words spew from your mouth?”

“It’s not untrue.”

“It may seem superficial to you, but it goes way deeper than that. I care about my cosmetics because they make women feel beautiful. It gives them self-confidence and allows them to express themselves. Just because I put on makeup every day doesn’t mean I don’t have a heart. It doesn’t make me blind to the people who are less fortunate than I am.”

“I didn’t—”

“Maybe you should try helping others sometime. It might do you some good.”

“I’m helping you, aren’t I?”

“Not without getting something out of it for yourself.”

“It’s a step in the right direction, right?”

“Maybe take another.”

“You’re bossy.” He finished off his coffee and set the mug in the sink.

“Get used to it.”

He groaned as he walked out of the room, and she was glad he was gone so she didn’t have to take his teasing and insults anymore. And so she wouldn’t have to fight to keep her gaze from traveling down his broad, muscular chest.

THIRTEEN

Nearly a week had passed since they’d said “I do,” and for the most part, Gus had left Merritt alone. He continuously called her wifey and honey, but she found if she ignored him, he usually went away.

Merritt had been hard at work the past week, making a plan for how best to use the money. There was so much to be done, and she had lined up meetings with the appropriate people to discuss expansion. The work excited her. It always had. And now that she had the opportunity to get safe cosmetics to more people and to increase the amount given to charity, she looked forward to going to work even more.

When she arrived home after an exciting day at work, she was hit with a wonderful smell as soon as she walked inside. She dropped her bag next to the table by the door and followed the aroma into the kitchen.

“Is that chocolate I smell?”

Gus looked up at her as he held a bowl and stirred. “It is. Want to help?”

Curious, she moved closer. “What are you making?”

“Truffles.”

Her eyes widened. “Like your family’s truffles?”

He nodded.

She watched in fascination as he continued stirring whatever was in the bowl until it looked smooth and creamy. “What can I do?”

“Grab that block of chocolate and the grater and grate it into that bowl.”

She did as he said, but kept her eyes on him as he transferred the smooth substance into a pastry bag and squeezed small rounds onto a pan. He looked so focused, with his bottom lip between his teeth and his eyes narrowed.

He glanced over at her when he had finished, and she quickly returned to grating chocolate while he placed the pan in the fridge to cool.

Gus turned on the stove burner, placed a pot of water over the flame, and leaned against the counter. Merritt could feel his eyes on her as she continued with the task at hand. She felt his body heat as he came up beside her.

“Is this enough?” she asked.

“Keep going.”

She looked over at him. “Am I doing it right?”

He nodded, and she smiled.

When the water was boiling, he took the metal bowl from her and placed it over the water to melt the chocolate. Merritt was fascinated by this process. She’d never seen truffles made before. Once the chocolate was melted to the proper temperature—tempered, as Gus explained—he removed the pan from the fridge and showed her how to form them into balls and properly coat them in the chocolate.

“Oh my gosh, I’m horrible at this,” she said with a laugh after her first attempt came out looking nothing like his.

“It takes some practice.” He expertly submerged a truffle into the melted chocolate, producing a perfectly smooth coating.

“Okay, I can do that.” She tried again, improving a little.

He chuckled.

“Hey, at least I tried.”

“You’re doing fine for being a truffle virgin.”

She playfully smacked his arm.

“Here.” He grabbed a new truffle with the dipping tool and handed it to her before

moving behind her and taking hold of her hand with his. He guided her hand to dip the truffle just so.

His body heat and warm breath against her neck sent unexpected goosebumps over her skin, and she looked over at him. His lip was back between his teeth again as he concentrated.

Then his eyes met hers for several pulse-increasing moments, and there was a sudden plop as the truffle dropped into the chocolate.

“Oops!” he said with a chuckle as he let go of her hand and fished it out.

They laughed at the mess it had become and went on to finish the rest.

When all was said and done, they had several shiny, perfectly coated Schultz Chocolate truffles and a few not-so-pretty ones.

“Here.” He handed her a truffle. “Try your masterpiece.”

“It’s a disaster,” she said.

“Still tastes the same.”

She chuckled and took a bite. The smooth, creamy center melted in her mouth. “Oh my gosh. That’s so good.”

Gus smiled proudly.

“What made you decide to make truffles today?” she asked as she took another bite.

“We can’t go home to my parents’ without bringing a gift.”

Her jaw dropped, and she quickly snapped it closed since she had a mouthful of chocolate. “Your parents?” she mumbled.

“Oh, did I forget to mention we’re going to Michigan this weekend?”

“This is the first I’m hearing about it.”

He shrugged. “Sorry.”

“And if I refuse to go?”

“You can’t. It’s in the contract that you travel with me to make my family believe this is real.”

“But you can’t just spring this on me with three days’ notice.”

“I just did.”

“Is this how it’s going to be, Augustus?”

He quirked his eyebrow at her. “I like it when you call me by my full name. It’s sexy.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’m not flirting. I’m furious.”

“Well, get un-furious.”

“Gah, just when I think you might actually be a decent guy, you pull this. I have a job and commitments. What if I already have plans?”

“Cancel them.”

“I don’t know how I’m going to get through a year of being married to you.” She groaned as she turned on her heel, grabbed her bag from where she’d left it by the door, and marched through the house to her room. Slamming the door felt good. So did letting out a frustrated cry.

Gus rapped on her door. “Everything okay in there?”

“Go away!” She waited for him to reply, but there was only silence and then the sound of his departing footsteps.

A few minutes later, her phone rang, and she rolled her eyes at Gus’s name on the screen. She tapped the button to decline the call.

It rang again, and she did the same.

But she couldn't ignore his text.

Gus: I'm sorry. Will you go to Michigan with me this weekend?

She stared at the message and waited to reply. He deserved to sweat over this.

Gus: I'll be better at communicating the schedule from now on. I promise.

Merritt: Fine. I'll go.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Gus: Thank you, honey.

Merritt: Don't call me that.

Gus: Sorry. Thank you, wifey.

She rolled her eyes and tossed her phone onto the bed as she lay back against her pillow. Michigan. This weekend. She was going to meet the Schultzes, and she felt a mixture of panic and excitement.

Though she had given Gus a hard time about this trip, she was looking forward to meeting the people behind the Schultz Chocolate company. She had read about Gus's father, Ephraim, who had taken over the company when his father passed away and had turned a failing business into a successful enterprise.

She sat up, grabbed her phone again, and dialed Adelia, who answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Mrs. Schultz."

Merritt groaned.

"What can I do for you tonight?"

"Gus and I are going to Michigan this weekend."

"Oh, you'll love his family. They're wonderful people."

“I’m nervous. What do I need to know?”

“Just be you, Merritt. They’re going to love you.”

“But is there anything I should be aware of. Like family issues. I know there’s kind of a rift between Gus and his family.”

“You’ll meet his parents, Ephraim and Harriet, and probably his sister, Skylar. And trust me when I tell you that they are the most down-to-earth people you will ever meet. As far as family issues, this is the whole point of your marriage. Gus has gotten into a lot of trouble in the past, and they don’t trust him to run the company, so they gave it to Skylar when their brother, Sebastian, left last fall to move to Montana with his fiancée.”

Merritt quietly listened.

“He was also sued last summer by this creep, Milton, who claimed assault and battery. They were able to settle, but that’s another reason his dad gave the President position to Skylar and not him, even though she’s the youngest.”

“I see. Did he actually assault the guy?”

“I mean, he pushed him in a bar, but the guy is a loser. He used to date Skylar and wasn’t a very nice guy, and Gus only got in his face because of some things he said about Sky.”

“Sounds like a mess.”

“It was. So, anything you can do to help his parents see that Gus is a good guy would be great.”

“I don’t know how good of a guy he is.”

“I know you don’t see it yet, but he is. He’s got a good heart, even if he doesn’t come across that way.”

“I guess I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“Also, Skylar loves Merritt Cosmetics, so if you bring her some free product, that will butter her up.”

Merritt laughed. “I can do that.”

“When do you leave?”

“No idea. He didn’t tell me about it until tonight.”

Adelia snorted. “Sounds like Gus.”

“He did let me help him make truffles.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Are you serious?” Adelia’s tone revealed her surprise.

“Yeah, why?”

“I’ve tried to get him to teach me for years. He always says it’s a family secret.”

“Well, I walked in on him making them, so it wasn’t like he could hide what he was doing. And he had already made the filling before I got here. I basically shaved some chocolate and helped coat them.”

“You two are such cute little newlyweds, making truffles together. Did you feed them to each other?”

Merritt let out a loud laugh. “You’re hilarious.”

“I can picture it now.”

“I should go,” Merritt said.

“Don’t be like that.”

“No, I really do need to pack.”

“All right. Have a great trip. Tell me all about it.”

“You know I will.”

They hung up, and Merritt lay back and stared at the ceiling, mulling over all the things Adelia had told her about Gus and the Schultzes. She still wasn't sure if this scam of a marriage was the biggest mistake of her life or the best decision she'd ever made, but a part of her was looking forward to getting to know more about the Schultz family.

FOURTEEN

What did you tell your family?" Merritt asked as she settled into the soft leather seat in first class and took a sip of champagne. She didn't travel often, and never flew first class when she did, so this was a luxury to her.

"Don't worry. I didn't tell them you hit me with your car." Gus winked, and Merritt nearly spit out her drink. "I've only spoken to Sky, and I told her we met after I came back to California in October and that we hit it off right away."

She rolled her eyes as she took another sip. "What was it I liked about you?"

He looked over at her and gestured down at his body with a cocky grin on his face.

"Oh my gosh. You think that's all it takes to make a woman fall in love with you?"

He smirked. "I mean, it doesn't hurt."

"Anyway, besides ... that, what am I supposed to say drew me in? It certainly wasn't your charm."

"Hey, my charm is one of my greatest assets." He leaned a little closer. "You don't think I'm charming?" He gave her puppy dog eyes.

She thought about the night in the kitchen, making truffles together. He'd been so

different than his usual cocky self. Like maybe the real Gus, the one Adelia assured her existed, was showing through. And she liked that guy. “I suppose you have your moments.”

“Ha!” He pointed at her. “I knew it. You find me charming.”

She scowled. “Not when you act like this.”

He sat back, looking pleased with himself.

“How did we meet?” Merritt asked. “We need a backstory.”

“Adelia introduced us, which is true.”

“Where were we?”

“Her place. You came over to visit after I moved into her pool house. I came to the main house, introductions were made, and the rest is history.”

“Just like that.”

“You don’t like it?”

“There’s not much to it.”

“All right, you do better.”

Merritt glanced out the window at the puffy clouds and blue sky. “Maybe Whit and Giovanni were there too. Maybe we started talking over dinner and were still deep in conversation when they were ready to leave, but we wanted to keep talking, so we walked down to the ocean and talked and talked all night. We’d been holding hands and sitting close the whole time, and when the sun was coming up, you finally took my face in your hands and leaned close, gazing into my eyes, and you kissed me for the first time.”

She turned back to Gus, surprised to find him leaning into her space, which caused her to jerk back a few inches.

“Then what?”

“What?”

“What happened after the kiss? Did we go back to my place?”

She pushed him away. “You sure know how to ruin a romantic moment.”

“I assure you, going back to my place would’ve been very romantic.”

She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks were on fire.

“I think you should come up with the rest of the story,” he told her. “You’re good at this.”

“I don’t feel like it. You’ll just ruin it with your perverted version.”

“I’m not perverted.”

“Well, I’m not that kind of girl.”

“What? The kind that spends the night with a guy she’s falling for?”

“Exactly. I wouldn’t sleep with a guy on the first date.”

“But you’d marry one you hardly know.”

“Hey!”

He lay his hand on her knee. “I’m teasing, honey.”

She gritted her teeth. “Stop calling me that.”

He chuckled and removed his hand, but not before little goosebumps had traveled their way up her leg from that brief touch.

“Tell me what happens next,” he said.

She sighed. “We exchanged numbers, and you didn’t even wait a day to call and tell

me what a great time you had and how you wanted to see me again. We've been inseparable since."

"I like it."

"It's not enough, though. I think there will be plenty of things we still don't know about each other after only three months, so we can probably fake our way through some conversations, but we should know more than we do right now."

"Like what?"

"What's your favorite color?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You think knowing my favorite color will prove our marriage is legit?"

She shrugged. “You never know.”

“Fine. Brown.”

Merritt wrinkled up her nose. “Brown?”

“Yeah.” He leaned close and gazed at her. “The exact shade of your eyes.”

She laughed. “Does that usually work with the women you date?”

“What do you think?”

Her eyes rolled for what felt like the hundredth time during that flight.

“And I don’t really date,” he said.

“Whatever.”

“I’m serious. I’ve never even had a steady girlfriend.”

“Never?”

He shook his head. “Never.”

“Then why in the world would you think we could pull this off?”

“Motivation. The point of all this is to convince my family that I’m capable of

settling down and committing. I want my family to let me back in, to give me more responsibilities at the company, to see that I'm good at what I do and won't let them down again."

Whenever he talked about proving himself to his family, she could feel his desperation.

"I heard about your lawsuit," she told him.

His eyebrows raised. "Are you stalking me online?"

"Adelia told me."

"Ah."

"I'm sorry you went through that."

"I'd do it all again if I had the chance."

"But it's the reason your family gave the company to your sister, right? You'd still make the same choice, even after that?"

"I would defend my sister's honor any day of the week, even if I lost everything. And it was all bogus anyway. I barely touched that guy. But after all he put me through, I wish I had. He deserved so much more than he got. And the fact that he walked away with a chunk of my family's money really gets me."

Merritt was touched by Gus's loyalty to his sister. She hated to think of him assaulting anyone, though.

"So, I should probably know more about you too, right?" He obviously wanted to

change the subject. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Aquamarine.”

“That’s very specific.”

“I love the color of the water in Lake Superior. It’s been my favorite color since I was little.”

Gus’s eyes widened. “Are you from Michigan?”

She nodded.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“What? That’s crazy. You never said anything. Is your family still there?”

This was why she hadn’t mentioned it, and she hated that she’d let that detail about the lake slip. “Yeah.”

“Where do they live?”

“Kalamazoo.”

“Do you want to see them while we’re there?”

“Maybe. But you don’t have to come.”

His forehead scrunched with confusion. “Why would I not come?”

She shrugged.

“Do they know about us?”

Her head tilted toward the window again, remembering how excited Mom was to find out who she had married. “I told them.”

“Everything?”

“I didn’t break the contract.”

“You can tell them if you want to.”

“No, it’s fine.”

“It’s decided then. A visit with the in-laws before we head home.”

She gave a weak smile, unsure of how that visit would go. “What should I know about your family?”

Gus’s lips spread into a smile and there was a twinkle in his eyes. “You’ll love my mom. She is the sweetest woman on the planet.” He looked over at her. “And she’ll love you.”

Merritt pressed her lips together. She had been thinking a lot about how she would get along with his family, and she worried about getting too close to them and what they would think when she and Gus parted ways.

“I think you’ll get along really well with my dad. You have a lot in common when it comes to business.”

“I read all about how he built the company after his father died. I’m already very intimidated.”

He laughed. “Of my dad? You won’t be when you meet him. He’s easy to talk to, and trust me, as soon as he hears what you’ve done with your company, you won’t be able to get him to leave you alone about it. He’ll want to know everything. He loves hearing about small businesses expanding, and he likes talking about it even more.”

“Okay, I’m kind of excited to meet him now.” She smiled. “And your sister?”

“Skylar. She’s very kind and lovable, and she’ll no doubt welcome you with open arms like she did Genevieve.”

“Is that Sebastian’s fiancée?”

“Yes.”

“And they’re in Montana?”

“Yeah, Genevieve works at a horse rescue there, and Sebastian left his position at the company to move there with her. Sky says he still flies in occasionally for meetings and sometimes works remotely, but she pretty much took over for him.”

“And they asked you to step away from the company?”

He hung his head. “Dad asked me to distance myself while we went through Milton’s stupid lawsuit. I could’ve stayed on as VP when Sebastian left, but it felt like a slap in the face to give president to Sky, so I walked away.”

“I see.” She felt bad for him, but it seemed like it was his own decision that had taken him away from the company, not his family’s choice.

“Do you?” He eyed her.

“I mean, I don’t know your family or you, really, so I can’t speak to this situation.”

“But you’re thinking something. I can tell.”

“I just wonder ... if you hadn’t walked away, would you be closer to proving yourself to your family? I mean, what if this plan of yours doesn’t work? What if they wish us well and that’s it and you don’t get what you want out of this?”

He frowned.

“What do you want from this, Gus?”

“I guess I want to at least share the leadership role with Skylar. And I want ...”

She watched him as he trailed off and went somewhere deep inside his head. Without a thought, her hand moved atop his.

His eyes met hers. “Sorry. I just want to be respected, that’s all.”

“I’m sure your family respects you.”

“I don’t know about that.”

Merritt removed her hand as the flight attendant passed, and Gus asked for water. She was surprised he wasn’t drinking the free champagne or other drinks available. In

fact, she hadn't seen him drink at all. Not at Adelia's Christmas party or New Year's Eve or after their wedding.

"You don't have to answer this if it's too personal, but do you not drink alcohol?" she asked.

"Not anymore. It's gotten me into trouble too many times."

She nodded. "I see. Good for you."

"It has been good."

"Honestly, that day you came to see me at my office, I thought you must have been drunk to come up with such a ridiculous plan."

He laughed loudly, which made her laugh too.

"I assure you, I was completely sober."

When their laughter died down, he changed the subject again. "So, what's your favorite truffle flavor? My family might ask that."

She smiled. "The chocolate kind you taught me to make the other night."

"Granny's original recipe," he replied. "I like the dark chocolate best, and we also make a chocolate mint that's a close runner up."

"Dark chocolate and chocolate mint. Got it."

"I'll take you on a tour of the factory if you want."

“Do I get free samples?”

“Babe, you’re a member of the family now. You can have truffles for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if you want.”

Merritt laughed at that. And it also surprised her how much she liked the thought of being a part of the Schultz family. From everything she’d heard about them from Gus and Adelia, they were the kind of family anyone would dream of being part of.

FIFTEEN

As they pulled up to his parents’ house, a nervous sensation grew in the pit of Gus’s stomach. He hadn’t been home in three months, and he hadn’t exactly left on the best of terms. But being here now, he realized how much he had missed them, and he was excited to be home.

He glanced over at the lovely woman by his side. It was still so crazy to wrap his head around the fact that he had a wife. Not that it was a real marriage. But it meant something to him that she was giving him a year of her life to help him get what he wanted in his family’s company.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Your parents’ home is lovely.” A blast of cold air rushed through the door as Merritt stepped out of the vehicle and onto the cobblestone driveway.

“Thanks.” He rounded the car and took her hand, sliding his fingers between hers.

She looked up at him and let out a breath. “Here we go.”

“Here we go.” He squeezed her hand and led her to the door, which opened before they even reached it.

“Good afternoon, Mr. and Mrs. Schultz,” Gerard said as he held the door for them.

Gus heard Merritt’s breath catch at his greeting. “Hey, Gerard. Good to see ya.”

“And you, sir,” he replied.

“This is my beautiful wife, Merritt.” He looked at her. “This is our butler, Gerard.”

Merritt smiled and held her hand out to him. “It’s nice to meet you, Gerard.”

“And you as well.” Gerard gave a courteous handshake then proceeded to take their coats and scarves.

“Augustus? Is that you?” Mom came rushing through the foyer toward them. “My boy, you’re home.”

Being in his mother’s arms again made his throat tighten with emotion. He wanted to

curl up in her lap like he had when he was a child and let all the worries of the world fall away.

“Hi, Mom.”

“I missed you,” she whispered.

His eyes stung with unshed tears, but he didn’t let them fall. Releasing everything he’d held inside all these months would probably do him good, but he didn’t want Merritt to see him cry.

He cleared his throat as he pulled back. Leaving a kiss on his mother’s cheek, he turned and motioned to Merritt. “Mom, this is Merritt.”

Mom moved in her direction and hugged her. “Oh, Merritt, it’s so nice to meet you.” When she let go, she reached for Merritt’s hand to look at her wedding ring. “How lovely.” She looked back at Gus. “Nice choice.”

He grinned. “No ring comes close to the beauty I married.”

Mom beamed, and Merritt gave him a sarcastic look behind Mom’s back.

He winked at her.

“This is for you.” Merritt held out a small box containing the truffles they had made.

Mom took it and opened the top.

“Gus and I made them together.”

“Well, now you’re really part of the family,” Mom said with a smile. “Come on in,

you two.” She walked ahead to the kitchen, and they followed.

Gus took Merritt’s hand again. “Where are Dad and Sky?”

“They’ll be here in a little while.” She looked away for a moment. “Meeting today.”

A jealous knot formed in his stomach. “Oh. Okay.”

“Why don’t you two get settled. I have a few things to take care of before dinner.”

“All right.” Gus was disappointed, but he shook it off and headed down the hallway to his room.

Merritt dropped his hand the second they were out of Mom’s view, and he missed the warmth of her palm against his.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

He opened the door to his bedroom. “This is our room for the weekend.” Gerard had already placed their things inside.

Merritt ambled around the room, looking at his belongings—photographs of him with family and friends, his model sailboat collection, trophies from sailing races.

“Sailing, huh?”

“I love being out on the water. Sailing, skiing, surfing. I love it all.”

Her gaze traveled around and landed on his queen-size bed. “Uh.” Her eyes turned to him. “How’s this going to work?”

“Well, first ...” He stepped closer until he was in her personal space. “We’ll take off our clothes ...” He loved the way her mouth fell open at that. “Then ... we’ll put on pajamas, climb under the covers, put our heads on the pillows, and fall asleep. That’s how a bed works.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You know what I mean.”

“We have to keep up appearances, and I’m not sleeping on the floor.”

Every time she rolled her eyes at him, he found her more adorable than before.

“Fine, but you stay on your side, and I’ll stay on mine. I don’t want any wandering hands. And there will be no spooning happening. Got it?”

He laughed.

“I’m serious, Augustus.”

“Got it.” He held his hand up and gave her the Boy Scout salute.

“Were you a Boy Scout?”

“No.”

“Then you can’t use their salute.”

He shook his head. “Do you feel like a nap before dinner?”

“I don’t take naps. Plus, my body is on California time. It’s the middle of the day there.”

He plopped down on the bed. “Well, I need a nap.”

“You aren’t going to show me around the house?”

He patted the mattress next to him. “Come on. We can practice not spooning.”

She stared at him, clearly not amused.

He rolled off the bed and stood. “Fine. A tour.”

He led her through the house, showed her the other seven bedrooms, the adjoining baths, the dining room, and the expansive kitchen with breakfast room that led out onto the pool deck and patio. Merritt seemed in awe with every new space he showed her, and he was proud to share with her the home he grew up in.

“Your mom has great decorating taste,” she said.

“Yeah, she does.” He liked that she said that. The house was large, but Mom had always made it feel cozy and warm.

They finished their tour in the family room, and Merritt took a seat on the sofa.

Gus couldn’t help but remember the last time he’d been in that room with his family—the night Sebastian had told them he was stepping down and moving away with Genevieve. He tensed up, remembering Dad announcing Skylar as president.

“What’s wrong?” Merritt asked.

“Nothing.”

“You have a look on your face.”

He shook it off. “I’m fine.” He walked to the sofa and took a seat close to her.

She scooted a few inches away, but he closed the distance again, laying his arm along the back of the sofa behind her. She eyed him.

He leaned close and nuzzled her ear then whispered, “If anyone comes in, we have to look like newlyweds, like we’re madly in love and can’t stay away from each other.”

She shivered as he rubbed his nose against her neck, and his lips brushed softly against the skin there.

“Gus,” she warned.

He chuckled and pulled away. There was a mix of annoyance, anger, and something he couldn’t read in her eyes, and he enjoyed the deep pink color he’d brought to her cheeks.

“At least hold my hand,” he whispered.

She did as he asked, but he pushed his luck by running the fingers of his opposite hand up and down the back of her hand, his thumb brushing the inside of her wrist.

“Nobody’s watching,” she said through gritted teeth.

“We need to practice our PDA.”

“I think we’ve got the handholding down.”

He leaned closer, angling into her, and her eyes widened.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t you think we should practice kissing?”

“No. We can just say I’m not comfortable with public displays of affection.”

He kissed her on the cheek. “Prude.”

“Cad.”

His eyebrow raised. “I’m not a cad anymore. I’m a respectable married man, remember?”

“If you say so.”

The sound of the door opening caught his attention, and Skylar rushed through the house and into the family room, leaving a trail of winter garments in her wake.

“You’re here!” She dropped her things onto the nearest chair and rounded the sofa to get to her brother.

Gus jumped up and gave her a bear hug.

“I’ve missed you so much,” she said.

“Same,” Gus replied.

Skylar's long chestnut hair made a crackling sound from the static as she pulled her knit hat off, and she attempted to smooth the flyaways. "I wanted to be here when you arrived, but I couldn't get away from the office." Her eyes turned to the woman seated on the sofa. "You must be Merritt."

Merritt stood. "It's so nice to meet you, Skylar." She extended a hand, but Skylar was having none of that and hugged her instead.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you," Skylar said. "We were all quite surprised to hear about the wedding."

"I know it was sort of sudden." Merritt's eyes met Gus's, and she wound her arm through his. "But we couldn't wait to be married."

He turned, moving her arm around behind his waist, as he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. She tensed up for a second before settling into him, and he held her like that while they talked with Skylar.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“I wish you had at least told me, Gus. You know I would’ve flown out to be there for the ceremony.”

“It was a simple ceremony with the Justice of the Peace,” Gus said. “Adelia was there.”

“I know. She told me. And I saw the pictures online.” Skylar looked at Merritt. “You looked beautiful, by the way.”

“Thanks. You’re sweet.”

“Is Dad coming home soon?” Gus asked.

“He should be, but when I left, he was talking to Otto, and you know how they get to talking.”

Gus rolled his eyes. Otto was on the board and was an old friend of Dad’s. It could be a while before Dad showed up at the house.

“Will you excuse me for a minute,” Merritt said as she stepped out of Gus’s arms.

“Of course,” Skylar replied.

Gus watched Merritt walk out of the room and down the hallway toward their bedroom, his gaze fixed on the sway of her hips as she moved. He felt guilty for staring but realized he probably should be staring at his wife’s body. For appearances, of course.

“She’s cute, Gus. Shorter than I thought she would be.”

“Why does it matter how tall she is?”

“It doesn’t. I’ve always pictured you with someone tall, like Adelia, though. I guess because you’ve always gone out with tall girls. But you look good together. Like a perfect fit.”

“Thanks. I think so.”

Skylar looked him over. “You’ve obviously been making the most of your time in California. Getting plenty of sun, I see.”

“Better than all this snow and clouds for months.”

“You miss it here and you know it.”

He snorted just as Merritt returned to the room, carrying a gift bag.

“This is for you.” She handed the bag to Skylar. “Just some product I thought you might like.”

Skylar took it and looked inside. Her mouth fell open and her eyes darted back and forth between Merritt and the contents of the bag. “Are you kidding me? This is amazing.” She grabbed Merritt and pulled her into another hug. “Thank you. You are the best sister-in-law ever.”

Merritt smiled. “You’re welcome.”

She returned to Gus’s side when Skylar released her, and Gus put his arm around behind her waist.

Mom showed up in the doorway then. “Your father called to tell me he’ll be late and to start without him.”

Gus was annoyed. He had been gone for three months and had brought his new wife home to meet them, and Dad couldn’t even bother to get there in time for dinner. He knew his father had responsibilities, but he also knew that if it had been Sebastian, he would have done everything in his power to be there to welcome him home.

Being the least favorite child sucked.

SIXTEEN

Gus seemed on edge. Merritt knew the issues with his family were no doubt the reason for that strange look on his face earlier. But ever since he found out his dad would be late for dinner, she could feel the tension rolling off of him. She held onto his hand tightly, hoping maybe that would help.

A week ago, she couldn’t have cared less about his feelings, but now, it bothered her that he was upset. How had that happened?

“I’d love to hear how you two met,” Gus’s mother said.

Harriet Schultz was a lovely woman with the same sandy brown hair and hazel eyes as Gus. And she truly was the sweetest woman, going out of her way to make sure Merritt felt welcomed from the moment she walked through the door.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Merritt was about to reply when Gus said, “Adelia introduced us.”

His mother looked at him blankly. “And?”

“And we liked each other.”

Merritt softly elbowed him, and he looked over at her. He obviously hadn’t remembered what they talked about on the plane.

“Oh ... we started talking and hit it off.”

Merritt squeezed Gus’s hand as if to say he should leave it to her. “Adelia made dinner for us and our friends, Whitney and Giovanni, and we got to talking, and when everyone went home, we took a walk down to the beach and sat there talking all night.” She looked into his eyes, doing her best to pretend the moments in this story were actually real. “When the sun came up, he kissed me for the first time, and we’ve been together ever since.”

Gus stared at her, a hint of surprise in his eyes.

She turned her attention back to Harriet and Skylar, both holding a hand over their heart.

“You guys!” Skylar fanned her face with her hands to hold back tears. “That’s so sweet. It really was love at first sight.”

Merritt almost laughed at that but held it in. Not even close to love at first sight. But

they didn't need to know that.

"It was for me," Gus said. "She sort of came out of nowhere."

She shot him a look, knowing exactly what he was referring to.

He softly pressed his lips to her cheek before whispering a thank you into her ear. She didn't want it to affect her in any way, but her skin tingled when he pulled away.

"Good evening, family." Ephraim Schultz entered the room then, walking straight over to his wife to greet her with a kiss.

Merritt could immediately see the family resemblances. Gus and Skylar both shared many of their father's facial features, while Skylar appeared the most like him with her dark hair and deep brown eyes.

"Sorry I'm so late." He took his seat at the head of the table and looked over at Merritt then Gus. "Welcome home, Augustus."

"Hey, Dad." Gus put his arm around her. "I'd like you to meet my wife, Merritt."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Merritt. I'm sorry I wasn't here to welcome you."

"Oh, that's all right. It's nice to meet you too. I'm looking forward to getting to know you all better." She could feel Gus's tension again. It was almost tangible.

"I understand you own your own business," Ephraim said.

She nodded. "Yes, I started an organic cosmetics company."

"Skylar says you've made quite a name for yourself."

“I’ve done pretty well so far.” Merritt smiled at Skylar, who was beaming with pride. Adelia hadn’t been kidding about Skylar being a fan of her products. “I’m getting ready to expand in the coming year.”

His face lit up. “That’s very exciting. The cosmetics industry is a booming market. May I ask about your sales projections?”

“Perhaps we should save all this business talk for another time, Ephraim,” Harriet said.

He nodded. “You’re right.” He looked at Merritt. “I get very excited when it comes to numbers.”

She smiled. “So do I.”

He winked and took a bite of his dinner.

“Speaking of numbers, I’ve been keeping up on the company’s financials while I’ve been away,” Gus said, despite his mother’s request not to talk business.

“Have you?” His father’s brow lifted.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

“Yes. And now that all the business with Milton is behind us, I’d like to come back.”

Ephraim looked up at him. “Just like that?”

“I’m a part of this family, a part of this company.”

“You walked away without a word, Augustus. I could only assume you wanted no part of this.”

“I never said that,” Gus snapped.

Merritt could feel waves of anger rolling off of him, and she lay a hand on his knee. His eyes turned to hers, and she raised her eyebrows.

This seemed to calm him, and he gave her an apologetic look before addressing his dad again. “I didn’t mean to snap at you, Dad.” He looked down for a moment then back at Ephraim. “I guess I needed to get away for a little while to clear my head, and then I met this beautiful woman right here, and she changed my life.” He tightened his arm around her. “I’m a better man for knowing her, and I’ve changed. I really have. And I hope you’ll start to see that.” He paused, getting a little choked up. “I hope I can repair the damage I’ve already done.”

Merritt watched him as he spoke. He was nothing like the charming, cocky guy she had married. Instead, she saw a hurt young boy, longing for the approval of his father.

“We love you, son. I hope you know that.” Ephraim took his wife’s hand. “And we couldn’t be happier that you’ve found someone special to spend your life with.”

Gus gave a weak smile. “Thank you.”

“As for the rest, time will tell.”

Merritt could feel Gus’s shoulders drop in disappointment, and her heart broke for him. The desire to comfort him was strong and unexpected. She was beginning to understand why he needed her help, and she hoped he would get everything he wanted most out of their year together.

After dinner, they all settled in the family room. Gus visited with his mom and Skylar, while Merritt chatted with Ephraim, happily sharing her successes with him. She had immense respect and admiration for this man and hoped that he might become something of a mentor to her as she went global with her company.

They all sat and talked for hours, and when Skylar finally headed home and Gus’s parents retired for the evening, Merritt and Gus walked together to their room. She didn’t know why she suddenly had butterflies in her stomach. Probably just the awkwardness of sleeping in the same bed with a man she barely knew.

“You want the bathroom first?” he asked.

“Sure. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

He threw himself back on the bed. “Take your time.”

She took her pajamas into the bathroom with her to change in privacy. After washing the day off her face and brushing her teeth, she returned to find Gus asleep in the center of the bed. Her lips twisted to the side. How was she going to move him? He’d had such an emotional evening, she hated to wake him. She stood still beside the bed, taking the opportunity to really look at him.

His head was tilted to the right, lips slightly parted, his breaths coming soft and even. She tried not to stare at his lips for too long, remembering how they felt against hers on their wedding day. One of his hands rested across his stomach, the other by his head. His legs were spread, calves hanging off the end of the bed. He really was very tall. And handsome. She shoved that thought away immediately.

“Like what you see?” Gus’s intense hazel eyes stared up at her.

Her cheeks warmed. “I was trying to figure out how not to disturb you. I thought you were asleep.”

“I drifted off for a minute, but I could feel you watching me.”

She shook away her embarrassment and pointed to the door. “Bathroom’s free.”

“I’m good.” He continued to stare.

She fidgeted where she stood. “Aren’t you going to move over?”

He scooted to one side, making room for her, but remained atop the comforter as she slid underneath.

“Won’t you be cold on top of the blankets?”

He rolled to face her, bringing himself closer. “I thought you didn’t want to spoon.”

“I’m not offering that. I was asking out of genuine concern.”

“Since when are you genuinely concerned about me?”

“I ... I’m not. Never mind.”

“Good night, wifey,” he whispered.

Her eyes narrowed, and he let out a laugh before rolling away from her.

Merritt lay still for a while, unable to sleep, listening to Gus’s breathing even out again. She couldn’t stop thinking about the sadness in his voice at dinner, and she was determined to help him get back in his family’s good graces.

SEVENTEEN

The Schultz family often gathered for Saturday morning breakfasts together. Over the years, Gus had been the one to miss them more often than not. But not today. Walking into the kitchen to see an abundance of delicious breakfast foods spread out on the table and Dad seated alone, sipping coffee and reading a newspaper, was a welcome sight. It was a rare occurrence to have his father all to himself, and Gus wanted to make the most of it.

“Merritt is quite a girl.” Dad looked over the top of his newspaper as Gus took a seat and began to fill his plate.

“So, you like her?”

Dad nodded. “I do. Very much.”

“Me too.”

“I would hope so since you married her.”

Gus chuckled as he took a bite of omelet. “I guess it seems kind of sudden.”

“Yes, it does.”

“I want you to know it’s not some crazy decision we made. Yeah, it all happened fast, but we talked about it a lot before we went through with it. She’s very special, and I knew she would make me a better man the moment I met her.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” Dad took a sip of his coffee. “I can see she makes you happy.”

His brow creased. “How can you tell?”

“The way you look at each other. It reminds me of the way your mother used to look at me.” Dad smiled. “Well, the way she looked at me after she stopped hating the sight of me.”

Gus shook his head. “I still can’t believe Mom didn’t like you at first.”

“Thank God I wore her down.”

He thought about what Dad had said. Did Merritt really look at him like he made her happy? She did have a certain look in her eye when he’d caught her watching him last night. Nah. She was just a good actress. Adelia must have given her some tips on staying in character.

Merritt arrived at the breakfast table then, all made up for the day. He much preferred her clean-faced and natural, like he’d gotten a glimpse of last night before bed, but makeup was a part of her image and her brand. He wondered if she ever went

anywhere without it.

“Good morning.” She took a seat next to Gus, leaning in to press a soft kiss to his cheek.

“Morning.” Her fresh citrus scent—like oranges fresh from the orchard—had him fighting the sudden urge to turn his head and capture her lips with his to see if she tasted as good as she smelled.

“Good morning,” Dad replied.

“This looks amazing.” Merritt grabbed a muffin from the plate before her. “Blueberry. My favorite.” She gave Gus a cute smile.

Gus reached for the orange juice pitcher. “Want some?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

He filled her glass as Dad asked, “What are your plans for the day?”

“I thought I’d take her downtown and give her a tour of the factory.”

Dad perked up at that. “Might I tag along?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:18 am

Gus shrugged to hide his surprise. “Sure. If you want.”

“You wouldn’t mind, would you, Merritt?” Dad asked.

“I would love it.”

Mom came into the room then, holding her phone. “Yes, dear. We will be there on the sixteenth. We can’t wait to see you both.” She sat down as Gus poured her a glass of orange juice. “Love you too.” She hung up.

“Where are you going on the sixteenth?” Gus asked.

“To your brother and Genevieve’s new house,” Mom replied.

“Oh, they bought a place?”

“Yes, a beautiful cabin at the base of a mountain with plenty of acreage for her horses.”

“Sounds nice,” he replied, trying not to sound cold.

“You’re going to the wedding, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Of course, we are.”

“Because Genevieve said you haven’t RSVP’d yet.”

“Does family have to RSVP?”

“Of course we’re going to RSVP,” Merritt cut in. “I meant to send it sooner, but it slipped my mind with our wedding and everything.”

“That’s all right, dear,” Mom said. “Are you coming on the sixteenth?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it,” Gus replied.

“I’m sure they’re going to call you.”

“I doubt it,” he said under his breath.

“We’re arriving on Sunday to be together as a family and help get things ready for the wedding.”

Gus frowned. He was still ticked that Sebastian hadn’t reached out to him in all the months since he’d been gone. Maybe he’d pushed his brother past his limit. Sebastian probably deserved to be cut a little slack about his wedding, but Gus couldn’t help but feel perturbed. He didn’t like being excluded. From his brother’s life or the family business.

“There will be some events throughout the week leading up to the wedding, some bonding time, horse riding in the mountains, decorating.” She looked at Merritt. “Genevieve’s final dress fitting and a spa day for the girls.”

Merritt’s face lit up. “That all sounds wonderful.”

“If we’re invited,” Gus muttered.

Mom gave him a disapproving look. “Of course you are. You’re family.”

It sure doesn't feel like it. He almost said the words aloud, but he knew it would not help his cause.

The rich, chocolaty aroma of the Schultz Chocolate factory was one of Gus's favorite things in the world. It was a scent that instantly transported him back to his childhood, to following his father around the building, to the first time he helped Granny make truffles. It was a part of him, following him into his adult life, reminding him of the role he'd had in the company and how badly he'd messed up.

Merritt seemed enamored by everything she saw along the tour. And Gus found her adorable, wearing a plastic cap, hard hat, and practically swimming in the white jacket that was probably two sizes too big for her.

Gus's plan to impress them—mostly his father—with how much he knew about the process was foiled when Dad began to tell Merritt about the beginnings of the company, how he took over when his father got cancer, and some of the steps he had taken in the beginning to expand. She hung on his every word.

They moved through the factory from the roasting ovens to the machines that spun the beans and separated the nibs from the shells. Merritt asked question after question, which Dad was more than happy to answer, so Gus held back, disappointed that things weren't going as he hoped.

Merritt was making a wonderful impression on Dad, though. Gus knew his father would like her. He only hoped that Dad would see the marriage as a positive and mature decision.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Gus talks about Schultz Chocolate all the time,” Gus heard Merritt say. “He’s very proud of the family legacy he’s a part of.”

“Is he?” Dad glanced over his shoulder at Gus.

“He is. I’ve never known anyone so excited to talk about their family business before. I was really impressed to hear all about the Schultz Foundation too. I’d love to one day be able to give from my company on a large scale the way you do.”

“Thank you, Merritt. We’re very proud of the work at the foundation. And I can tell with your drive and determination you’ll get there one day too.”

“Thank you, Mr. Schultz.”

“Please, call me Ephraim.”

Merritt smiled and nodded. She looked like she was trying to hide how giddy she was to receive such a compliment from his dad.

Gus had to admit ... she was good. He hadn’t told her a thing about the company, aside from how he’d been passed over for the president position, and he’d never brought up the foundation. She had obviously done her research, and he was very grateful to her for that.

After the factory tour, they parted ways with Dad and walked over to the main entrance of the headquarters. Gus paused at the door. He hadn’t stepped foot inside in months.

“What’s wrong?” Merritt shivered from the cold winter wind. “Do you not want to go inside?”

“We can go in if you want.”

“If it will make you uncomfortable—”

“No. I want to go in. I just haven’t been back here in a while.”

“I understand.” She wound her fingers through his, and his eyes darted to hers.

“Nobody’s watching. You don’t have to pretend with me.”

“I know. I thought you could use a little moral support.” She squeezed. “And I’m trying to keep my hand warm.”

He smiled as he looked down into eyes the color of warm, rich chocolate blended with shades of caramel. “Thanks for all that with my dad before.”

She grinned. “You’re welcome.”

“He likes you.”

“I like him too. I loved listening to him talk about the business. That stuff fascinates me.”

“You looked like a bit of a fangirl at times.”

She playfully smacked his shoulder. “I was trying to soak up all he was telling me. I’ve learned a lot in my own business over the past few years, but there’s so much more I want to know. He’s an amazing source of knowledge about business and

marketing, and I'm going to take advantage of having him as my father-in-law for as long as I can." She pressed her lips together like maybe she regretted bringing up the inevitable end of their fake marriage.

"As you should," he replied. "I'm aware of how brilliant my father is. I just hope he realizes I'm pretty smart about this company too."

"So, are we going in or no?" She shivered as she used her free hand to squeeze the collar of her coat together around her neck.

"Sure. I'll show you my office." He moved to the entrance and let go of her hand to hold the door for her. "If it's still there."

"They wouldn't give your office away."

He tilted his head. "Or would they?"

They took the executive elevator to his floor. It was Saturday afternoon and very few people, other than workaholics, janitorial staff, and security, were in the building. He was thankful for the quiet and that he didn't have to talk to anyone or field questions about why he hadn't been there. He was sure there were plenty of rumors floating around about the reason, most likely all to do with Milton Hanley.

He opened the door to his office and found it exactly as he had left it. The decor was sparse and manly—leather chair, a substantial oak desk in the center of the room, desktop computer, built-in bookshelves on one side of the room, and a door leading to a private bathroom on the other. Two low-back leather chairs sat across the desk from his, and there was a plant in the corner that he was surprised to see was still alive. Thank God for the cleaning staff.

He removed his coat and hung it on the hook next to the door, and Merritt shrugged

out of hers and let him take it from her when he offered.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

She circled the space, taking everything in, as she had in his bedroom at home.

“These are amazing.” Merritt pointed to three black and white beach photographs, hanging on the wall.

“Skylar took those at our beach house in Holland.” One was a view of the beach along Lake Michigan looking northward from the bottom of the steps to their place. Another was a shot of a log that had washed up onto the beach. The last was a wave rolling over onto the smooth sand, flattened by the water.

“Wow! She is really talented.”

“Just a side hobby that she enjoys.”

“She has an amazing eye.”

He came to stand beside her, seeing them with fresh eyes. “She really does.”

Merritt shifted her stance, and her arm pressed against his.

He couldn't help the way his skin tingled at their point of contact, even from the connection of her sweater against his.

She seemed to sense his reaction and moved to sit behind his desk, laying her hands flat on the surface. “Tell me, Mr. Schultz, what was a typical workday like for you here?”

He sat in the chair across from her and grinned. “Well, Mrs. Schultz ...”

She smirked.

“I would roll into the office late, defer all of my tasks to Sebastian or Skylar, go to the bar for lunch, and come back hours later. Sometimes I’d nap at my desk. Sometimes I’d play games or scroll Facebook. Then I’d go home and do it all over again the next day.”

This didn’t seem to amuse her. “I don’t believe that’s all you ever did.”

“Why not?”

“Because the guy you’re describing wouldn’t go to the lengths you’ve gone to just to come back here and play Candy Crush all day. Am I right?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t do that. Don’t blow this off. I know you care. I know you want back in and you want it bad. Otherwise, what are we doing?” She motioned between the two of them.

“Yes, I want it.” He stood with gusto and moved in a circle around the desk. “I want to be taken seriously for once. I want them all to know that, yeah, I did goof off for a while, but I’ve struggled and worked hard to change.”

“You have. I can see that.”

“They think I haven’t been paying attention, but I have. I know this job inside and out. I’ve kept up to date on everything to do with this company. I’m a Schultz, for goodness sake. Who better to run this company than me?”

“No one! Why do you want this so bad?” She urged him on.

“I want to carry on the family legacy. I want to help grow the company and start new companies.” He gestured enthusiastically as he spoke.

“Awesome! I know you can do that. What else?”

“I want to make a difference and impact people’s lives.”

“Yes.” Her head bobbed up and down in agreement. “What else?”

“I want my dad to look at me with pride like he does Sebastian and Skylar.” He stopped walking and stared over at Merritt.

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears.

He shook his head in surprise. What just happened? How did she get him to admit that? His gaze narrowed at her. “Do you have some kind of secret powers I should be aware of?”

“I don’t know what you mean. I simply asked you questions.” She brushed at a rogue tear. “Why don’t you believe your dad’s proud of you?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He pointed at her with a smile on his face. “Oh, no. I’m not falling for that again. I think I’ve spilled my guts enough for today.”

She failed at holding back a smile. “I’m just trying to help.”

“Come on.” He angled his head toward the door. “There’s something else I want to show you.”

After spinning around in his chair a few times, she joined him by the door, and he slid her coat back onto her petite form. She turned to face him, and he gripped her lapels and smiled down at her.

“What?” She stared up at him, and once again, he wanted to sink into the depths of her warm brown eyes.

He shook away his thoughts, surprised by how she affected him. “Nothing. Let’s go.”

He hadn’t expected her to be so attuned to him and his feelings about his family and this company. And while she seemed to understand things about him, he knew very little about her as a person, about her family, about her business. She had quickly become a mystery he wanted to solve.

EIGHTEEN

Merritt tightened her coat around her neck as they stepped from within the elevator to the rooftop terrace. Everything was covered in a blanket of snow—the outdoor seating area furniture, the large white pergola wrapped in vines in the center of the

space, and the bushes that lined the outer edge of the building.

“What a great space. I bet it gets used a lot in the warmer months.”

“It does. Skylar likes to escape up here when she’s stressed or needs to think.”

Merritt walked along the pathway toward the edge of the building, taking in the view of the city. She liked Grand Rapids. It had been a while since she’d been there with her family, but she had always enjoyed the close-knit feel of this city.

“Nice view.” The Grand River stretched before them, flowing through the downtown area, with several bridges spanning its width—some for vehicles, some for pedestrians. “It’s cool to see the city from up here.”

Gus came to stand next to her. “I keep forgetting you’re from Michigan. Did you spend much time here in GR?”

“Not a lot, but I can remember going to the Ford Museum and John Ball Zoo when I was little, and I went to a concert at VanAndel when I was in high school.”

“Who’d you see?”

“Matchbox 20, Maroon 5, and Sugar Ray.”

He gave her a curious look. “No way!”

“What?”

He appeared deep in thought. “I think I was there too.”

Her brow creased. “No, you weren’t.”

“I was! I’m not even kidding. My brother took me for my fifteenth birthday. You can ask him.”

Her eyes widened. “That’s crazy.”

“I know.” He shook his head. “It was a great show, wasn’t it?”

“It was awesome.” She smiled, remembering that night spent with two of her best childhood friends, Harley and Nicole. They had left the arena barely able to talk after singing and screaming for hours. It was one of her fondest memories.

Her teeth chattered. “As much as I like the view up here, I’m losing all sensation in my fingers and toes.”

Gus chuckled. “Sorry. We can go.”

“This is one thing I do not miss about Michigan.”

He pressed his hand against her lower back as they walked, and the warmth of his arm radiated through her coat. The moment the doors slid open, warm air hit their faces, and the chill began to subside.

“I like it here,” she told him as the elevator doors closed. “It feels like your family.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“How does my family feel?” He stood closer than necessary.

“Warm, friendly, down-to-earth.” She liked the smile she had brought to Gus’s face.

“I think they’d say the same about you.”

Her cheeks warmed. Was that a compliment?

“How about your family? What are they like?”

Merritt tensed at his question. “They’re nice.” She dreaded taking him to meet her parents.

“What do they do?” he asked.

“Dad’s third shift supervisor at a local factory, and Mom stayed home and took care of me and the house.” She glanced over at him and then at the number on the screen telling them what floor they were on. “They adopted me when I was a baby.” She didn’t know what had made her tell him that. “I don’t talk about it much. I just felt like you should know.”

His gloved hand wound around hers. “I’m glad you told me.”

She gave him a slight closed-mouth smile as they reached the first floor and walked out of the elevator.

“We’re married. We shouldn’t have secrets from each other,” he said.

When she looked over at him again, he was grinning, and she shook her head. “Oh, like you’ve told me all there is to know about you.”

“What do you want to know? I’m an open book.”

Her lips twisted to one side as she thought about that. “Favorite Sugar Ray song?”

He laughed. “That’s the first thing you want to know?”

She nodded, waiting for him to answer.

He thought for a few moments. “‘Someday.’”

“I expected it to be ‘Every Morning.’”

“Also good.”

He took her hand again as they walked through the lobby toward the exit, and she looked over at him and down at their hands.

“Keeping up appearances,” he said.

She didn’t fight him on it. “Do you work out?”

“Why? Have you been checking me out?” he asked.

“You said you were an open book.”

“Right. Of course, I work out.”

“How many days a week?”

“Five.”

“Five? I feel accomplished if I take a walk twice a week.”

“I know an excellent exercise we can do together.” He wagged his eyebrows at her.

“Gus!”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

One of his eyebrows raised, and he feigned shock. “I meant kickboxing. Where’s your mind right now, Mrs. Schultz?”

Her cheeks felt as if they were on fire. “I was ... never mind.”

“You’re very cute when you’re flustered.”

“I’m not flustered.”

He reached up with his free hand and brushed the tips of his fingers against her pink cheek. “I beg to differ.”

She groaned and pulled her hand from his as they arrived at the car, circling to her side to wait for him to unlock the doors. How had her simple questions turned around on her so quickly?

The drive back to the Schultz home was quiet, and Merritt didn’t like it. “Do you follow any specific diets when you’re working out?”

He glanced over at her. “Not really. I try to steer clear of sugar and eat plenty of protein and veggies. But I always allow myself some cheat days. How else would I enjoy Granny’s truffles?”

She smiled.

“I miss Granny. I think she would’ve liked you.”

“When did she pass away?”

“A couple years ago. She lived a good long life, over a hundred years.”

“Oh, wow.”

“I can still remember her teaching me how to make truffles. Even now, when I make them, I can hear her saying, ‘Take your time, Augustus. Don’t rush perfection.’” He smiled. “She was the best.”

“She sounds very special. I wish I had met her.”

“I wish you had too.”

Her heart fluttered at the sincere look in his eyes, but she ignored it. “So, besides the truffles, what’s your favorite indulgence?”

He raised his eyebrows up and down. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

“Food, Gus! I’m talking about food.” This man was impossible.

Gus wore a crooked smile. “Maybe I was thinking about cheesecake.”

“Yeah, if that cheesecake was being fed to you by a beautiful woman.”

His laughter filled the car, and she liked the sound more than she wanted to admit.

“Have you ever been in love?” Merritt asked.

“No. You?”

“I thought I loved my college boyfriend, but when we broke up, I wasn’t all that sad about it, so I know that’s not what I was feeling.” She shrugged. “Do you want to fall in love?”

“I’d like to find what my parents have, what Bash and Genevieve found. I’d like someone to share my life with. So, yeah, someday I want that.” He looked over at her.

“Me too.”

They were quiet for the last few minutes of the drive and pulled in just after another car. Gus parked and walked around to open Merritt’s door as Skylar and a man got out of the car in front of theirs.

“Hey, newlyweds,” the man said.

“Franky,” Gus greeted him. “How are you, man?”

Page 51

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

They shook hands, and Gus pulled him in for a hug and patted his back. He turned to Merritt. “Franky, this is my wife, Merritt.”

“Hello,” Franky said.

“Franky’s an old friend of Sebastian’s and pretty much family around here.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said.

“Likewise.” He greeted her with a tight hug, and she let out a sharp breath and a laugh at the same time.

“What did you two do today?” Skylar asked.

“Toured the factory with Dad and showed her the office,” Gus replied as he slid his arm around Merritt’s waist.

She settled into his side as they followed Skylar and Franky toward the door.

“Dad went on the tour with you? How long did he talk your ear off?”

Merritt laughed. “Not long. But honestly, I could’ve listened to him all day.”

“Well, God bless you. I’m sure you just made his whole year.”

They all laughed as they entered the house, arriving just in time for dinner. Ephraim, Harriet, and a man and woman were already seated, and Merritt was introduced to

Franky's parents, Wayne and Glenda Middlebury.

Merritt ate quietly and observed the dynamic. The Middleburys were obviously close friends of the family. The women chatted happily, while Ephraim and Wayne mostly talked business. Gus and Franky listened to the older men talk and joined the conversation every once in a while. Skylar sometimes looked as if she wanted to add something as well, but she talked with the ladies or asked Merritt about her cosmetics business instead.

"I tried some of the products you brought me, and I love them all so much already." She pointed to her cheeks. "I'm wearing the blush right now."

"It looks great on you," she said.

"It feels so weightless, like I have no makeup on."

"That was my goal when creating this line. I'm so glad you love it."

"I do, and I have to admit, I'm a little starstruck right now, having you as my sister-in-law."

She smiled. "You're sweet."

"Oh, Sky," Franky cut in. "I might not be able to travel out to Montana with you after all."

"Why not?"

"I met someone," he declared.

Merritt noticed the juxtaposition of their expressions—her sheer disappointment and

his mile-wide smile.

“You met someone?” Skylar’s voice caught a little.

“All right!” Gus high-fived him. “Where’d you meet?”

“I went out for drinks with some work colleagues, and she was there. Turns out, she’s one of the new corporate attorneys at the firm.” His eyes lit up as he spoke. “We started talking and ended up totally closing the place down.”

“Sounds like you really got along.” Merritt was acutely aware of her sister-in-law’s dismay.

Gus put his arm around Merritt. “Yeah, sounds a lot like us. We talked all night when we first met.”

“Yeah, it was definitely one of those kinds of nights. Her name’s Ivy, and she’s awesome.” He smiled over at Skylar, who hadn’t said a word. “I’m inviting her to the wedding.”

Franky turned away when his father asked him a question. If he hadn’t, he would have seen the devastation on Skylar’s face.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

Merritt looked at Gus, who also seemed oblivious.

“Will you excuse me?” Skylar pushed back her chair and headed off down the hallway.

“I’ll be right back,” Merritt whispered to Gus.

He nodded, and she stood and followed Skylar, catching up to her before she disappeared into the bathroom.

“Sky,” she whispered.

Skylar wiped at her cheeks. “It’s stupid. I don’t even know why I’m crying.”

“Because you like Franky. It’s obvious.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced down the hallway. “Please, don’t say anything.”

Merritt took her arm and led her into the bathroom for privacy. “Talk to me.”

Skylar blew out a breath and rested her back against the bathroom door. “I’ve had a huge crush on Franky since I was thirteen. He and Bash went to private school together, and he always saw me as his friend’s little sister. But since he came back to town last summer, we’ve gotten really close. He’s become my best friend, and it felt like things were changing between us.” She covered her face with her hands and groaned.

“Hey, maybe it won’t work out with this Ivy person.”

Skylar let her arms drop to her sides. “I don’t know. How am I going to get through the wedding seeing him with another girl?”

Merritt reached out and touched her arm. “I’ll be there if you need to talk or hide out, whatever you need.”

Skylar hugged her. “Thank you, Merritt. It’s nice to have someone to talk to about this. My brothers would tease me if they knew. I’m so happy to have a sister.”

Merritt’s chest tightened. She hated lying to Gus’s family. They were wonderful people, and she was beginning to realize that developing close relationships with them was going to make the divorce a lot more complicated.

After dinner, Ephraim, Harriet, and the Middleburys moved into the family room to continue their visit, while the rest of them stayed at the table.

Franky shook his head as he looked at Gus. “I gotta say, you’re not the Schultz I expected to get hitched first.”

Gus shrugged his shoulders. “Sometimes you meet someone and you just know she’s the one you want to make truffles with forever.” He winked at Merritt, and even though she knew he was teasing, it tugged at something deep inside her heart.

The guys talked for a while. Well, Franky did most of the talking. He had a funny, jovial personality, and Merritt could see why Skylar liked him so much. But Skylar wasn’t laughing at Franky’s stories like the rest of them were, and it was clear that Franky’s news was still weighing heavily on her.

Merritt wished she could help, but the only thing she could think of was to find a way

to end their evening early so Sky and Franky could be alone to talk.

She faked a yawn. "I'm a little tired," Merritt spoke quietly to Gus. "I think I'm gonna go to bed."

"Okay," Gus replied.

She stood. "Sorry to duck out early. Long day."

"No problem," Franky said. "Nice meeting you."

"You too." Merritt gave Skylar an understanding smile.

Skylar smiled back.

Merritt leaned close to Gus's ear and spoke just above a whisper. "Don't be too long."

His eyes darted to hers, and she realized how that must have sounded, but she had only said it to give Sky and Franky alone time.

"Good night."

"Night," they all said.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

She went to the room, changed into her pajamas, completed her nightly routine, and climbed onto the bed.

Gus was in their bedroom in ten minutes flat. He closed the door and leaned back against it, leveling her with a heated stare.

Her stomach flipped. She should have chosen her words a little more carefully.

“What was that?” He moved slowly toward where she was lying on her side on the bed with her head propped up on her hand. “Were you propositioning me?”

She scowled. “I said it for their benefit.” She had, but not in the way he obviously took it.

“I don’t think they heard you, but I sure did.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it, Augustus.”

He stopped at the side of the bed. “You know how I feel about you calling me Augustus.” His voice was practically a growl.

She moved her hand and let her head drop back against the pillow. “And you know that nothing physical is going to happen between us. I only said it so Sky and Franky would think I wanted my husband to come to bed with me. For appearances, right?”

He ran his fingers through his hair and grumbled something under his breath as he disappeared into the bathroom.

She heard the water running, and she felt bad that she'd accidentally gotten him all worked up. It hadn't been her intention, but he was a man, and she knew she needed to be careful about the things she said and did. She didn't want to give him the wrong impression. This was a business deal only, per their agreement, and neither one of them could afford to confuse things by adding a physical relationship into the mix.

NINETEEN

Gus could tell something was bothering Merritt as they drove south toward Kalamazoo, but he didn't press. She was quieter than usual, and she pulled out her phone five minutes into the trip and seemed lost in it. She scrolled and tapped on her screen for a while, and he heard the familiar sounds of texts being sent and the chimes when she received replies.

Forty minutes later, Gus turned on the road that led to her parents' house in a residential area of the city. He noticed Merritt's hand tightly gripping her phone as she looked out the window.

"Maybe we should just go see my friend, Nicole, instead of my parents."

He gave her a quizzical look.

"I haven't seen her in years, and she texted to let me know she's still living in town, and she's not busy today."

Gus gave her a look. "Why don't you want to see your parents?"

She sighed. "It's not that I don't want to see them. I just don't know how they really feel about all this." She waved between the two of them.

The vehicle navigation directed him to turn into the next driveway. "Well, I guess

we'll find out."

He got out of the car and walked around to open the door for her.

She climbed out and straightened her posture as if she was gearing up for what was ahead. He'd never seen her so tense, and he wrapped an arm around behind her, pulling her into his side.

"Hey, it'll be fine. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Ask me that again in about an hour."

Something about her nervousness filled him with a dread of his own. He usually liked meeting new people, but this was a different kind of situation.

The door of the modest home opened before they reached the front steps.

"Merritt!" her mom cried. She came through the door with arms stretched out for her daughter.

"Hi, Mom." Merritt gave a small smile as she hugged her then let go and turned toward Gus. "Augustus Schultz, meet my mom, Ruth Christianson."

Ruth was short and petite, with straight brown hair like Merritt's, though Ruth's had some grey showing through. They both had brown eyes and similarly shaped small, straight noses. If Merritt hadn't told him she was adopted, he never would've known they weren't biologically related.

"Ohhh." Ruth opened her arms to him. "I'm so happy to meet you, Augustus."

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

Gus moved into Ruth's bear hug. "Likewise." He smiled at her when he pulled away. "And please, call me Gus."

"All right, Gus." She smiled. "Come on in."

As they entered the house, Gus took hold of Merritt's hand. He could feel the tension coming off of her and gave her hand a supportive squeeze.

"They're here!" Ruth called out.

A grumble came from somewhere within the house and a hulk of a man came into view. Gus wasn't short, but this thick and brawny man with a bald head and scruffy beard towered over him.

"This the husband?" the man asked.

"This is Gus, Dad," Merritt replied.

Gus stepped forward and held his hand out. "Hello, sir. Gus Schultz."

The man shook his hand. "Ned Christianson."

Ruth stepped past them. "Come on in, you two. I made treats."

They all moved into the small living room at the back of the house. Ruth hadn't been kidding. There were several plates laid out on the coffee table filled with cookies, brownies, and eclairs.

“Wow, Ruth, these look amazing.” Gus pointed to the cookies. “May I?”

“Of course.” She picked up the plate and held it out to him, looking pleased as punch that he wanted to sample her creations. “They’re nothing compared to the treats your family makes.”

Gus took a cookie and sunk his teeth into the soft, flavorful treat, the chocolate chips melting on his tongue. He shook his head. “Best chocolate chip cookies I’ve had in a long time.”

Ruth’s cheeks turned rosy as she smiled shyly.

“So, you’re rich,” Ned said.

Merritt choked on the cookie she had just taken a bite of.

Gus laid a hand on her back and gave her a few gentle pats, but she shook her head and waved him away. The apologetic look on her face said everything.

“My family has done very well financially, yes,” Gus said.

Ned sniggered. “So, Merritt here will be taken care of?”

“Of course.”

“Then she doesn’t need to worry about trying to start her little company.”

“Her company?” He glanced over at Merritt then back at Ned. “She’s already—”

“Gus takes good care of me, Dad,” Merritt interrupted.

“Good,” he said with a nod.

Gus looked over at his wife. What was that all about? Why didn’t she want to talk to them about her business?

“How’s work going, Dad?” Merritt asked, clearly changing the subject.

“Since when do you care about my job?” He stared at her blankly.

She shrugged her shoulders. “I care about what you and Mom do.”

“It didn’t feel like it when you left home at eighteen and moved across the country from us.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Ned,” Ruth whispered, “we have company.”

“The boy’s family now. He needs to know what kind of girl he married.” He looked at Gus. “I bet you never walked out on your family to follow some silly dream.”

“Actually, I’ve walked out on my family more times than I can count, and I’m a huge disappointment to them. So much that my father gave the position of president to my little sister instead of me after I narrowly avoided drunk and disorderly charges and was sued for assault and battery.”

The room was dead silent, except for the hum of the furnace blowing warmed air into the house.

It was probably not the kind of thing he should’ve told his new in-laws, especially if he wanted to impress them at all. But he didn’t much care for the way Ned was speaking about Merritt, and he wanted to get the negative attention off of her and onto himself.

Ned’s eyes were on Merritt now. “Did you know this before you married him?”

“Yes,” she replied as she slid her arm around his and leaned into his side.

He rested his other hand on her knee and felt her tense a little at his touch. “Your daughter knows I’ve changed my ways. She doesn’t judge people for their past mistakes. You’ve raised a pretty amazing woman.” He turned his head and caught sight of Merritt’s pink cheeks just before she turned her head away to hide them.

“What if this doesn’t work out?” Ned motioned to the two of them. “You gonna leave her high and dry?”

Gus noticed Ruth lower her head and stare down at her lap. She was obviously embarrassed by her husband’s attitude, and Gus was becoming more than a little offended by this man’s questions.

“With all due respect, sir, I came here to meet my wife’s parents. I wanted to get to know the people who adopted and raised this woman as their own. But I didn’t come here to be insulted by a man who doesn’t even know me, and who clearly has no faith in his own daughter.”

Ned stared at him with mouth hanging open.

Gus stood and looked at Ruth. “Ruth, thank you for the cookies. I’m sorry, but I think we’ll be going now.” He took Merritt’s hand, and she stood and followed him toward the door.

“Wait,” Ned called after them.

Gus turned and met Merritt’s apologetic gaze.

Ned walked toward them. “I meant no insult. I just want to know that Merritt will be taken care of, no matter what happens.” He rubbed his palm over his beard. “You’re right, I don’t know you. I only know of your family name. But I also know that rich people aren’t always good people. And from what you said, you’ve had your share of problems.”

“And I’ve learned from them,” Gus said.

“I’m glad to hear that, but I’m still concerned.”

“About?”

“I’m afraid you rushed into things without knowing each other well enough. That our girl will end up divorced and alone.”

Gus’s heart sank to his stomach. He didn’t like lying to her parents, and when he looked at Merritt again, he knew she was thinking the same thing.

“I can assure you, sir, that if this whole thing falls apart, she will receive alimony.”

“Gus.” Merritt shook her head. “That’s not necessary.”

He pulled her into his side. “If this gives your family peace of mind, then it’s the least I can do.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “But I don’t plan to let you go, Mer.”

She let out a nervous laugh.

“And I have to say,” he addressed her parents again, “your daughter wouldn’t need my alimony if we did part ways. She’s made quite a name for herself.”

“She has?” Ned asked, confusion creasing his brow.

Merritt’s elbow pressed into Gus’s ribs, and he eyed her.

“I’m doing okay,” she answered before he could.

“I was raised to believe that a man takes care of his family,” Ned said, “and I’ve worked hard my whole life to take care of these two.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“A woman can earn a living, too, Dad,” Merritt said.

He waved her off and looked at Gus again. “What if your family’s business goes under?”

“You really are a pessimist, aren’t you?” Gus said with a laugh.

“I wouldn’t say that. I just think about all the things that could possibly happen and try to be prepared. What would you do if you didn’t have your family’s money? Because when you’re born into wealth, you don’t know what it’s like to have to work hard to survive.”

“Yes, I was born into money,” Gus replied, “but my dad taught us the value of hard work. He worked his butt off to build our company from nothing, and my Grandpa would’ve rolled over in his grave if my dad had raised spoiled lazy brats.”

Ned chuckled at that.

“Don’t worry. Merritt and I are going to be okay.”

“Are you going to ask me again?” Merritt said when they were in the car on the way back to Grand Rapids.

“Ask you what?”

“What’s the worst that can happen?” She frowned.

“I think it went just fine.”

Her laughter filled the vehicle. “You’re a funny guy, Augustus Schultz.”

“There were a few hiccups, but I think after we all said our piece, we made it through unscathed.”

“Speak for yourself,” she muttered.

“Can I ask you why you haven’t told them about your company?”

“No.”

His eyes widened. “No? I just humiliated myself in front of your parents about my lawsuit and you won’t tell me this?”

“I didn’t ask you to do that.”

His lip lifted in a snarl. “I didn’t like the way your dad was talking to you.”

“Yeah, well, there’s the reason right there.”

“Your dad?”

“You heard him about following my silly dream. He doesn’t believe a woman should pursue something like that. He wanted me to stay in Michigan, go to a state university, find a job close to home, meet a nice boy, and settle down.”

“I’m a nice boy.”

She snorted. “He meant someone like him—a blue-collar worker. And then I could

stay home and keep house while my husband provided for me.”

Gus grinned. “You can stay home and keep house for me if you want.”

She shot him a look.

“So, you kept your success from them because of that? I don’t understand. Don’t you want him to know that your company is doing well?”

“It’s not where I want it to be yet. I’ve had a couple good years, but I want it to be global and thriving. I want to walk into my parents’ house and hand my dad a big fat check to pay him back for all the money he spent on me over the years.”

His brow furrowed. “Your dad doesn’t want a check, Merritt.”

“How do you know?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Because he’s clearly a proud man with very traditional views. He’s obviously worked hard for all the money he’s ever had. He isn’t going to want you to pay him back for the money he spent raising you. That’s not how a man like that works. In fact, I don’t think most parents would want that.”

She frowned. “All these years, he made it very clear that he begrudged every cent he spent on me for school, clothing, extracurriculars, food. You name it, he probably grumbled about how much it was going to cost him.”

Gus had no experience with this. Growing up, he’d never wanted for anything.

“All I ever wanted was to prove to him that I could take care of myself. So, I left after graduation, moved to LA, worked my way through college, and started my business. I didn’t know it was going to take ten years to get to where I am today. It was a slow start, trying to get going after college, and only in the past few years have I seen the kind of growth I’ve been longing for. And all these years, whenever I’ve mentioned my business, I’ve gotten a lecture about how hard it is to start a business and how often they fail and how they don’t want me to end up homeless and penniless so far away from home. So I stopped bringing it up, and when they asked, I would just shrug and say it was doing okay.”

“I’m sorry you haven’t felt very supported in this, but I think you’ve done amazingly well. And I know my dad was super impressed with you too.”

“You think so?”

“He was.”

She smiled. “See, I wish my dad would be as impressed as yours.”

“Maybe he would if he knew the kind of success you’ve had.”

“Not yet.” She shook her head. “When I make my first billion, then I’ll tell him.”

A huge grin spread on his face. “Big goals. I love it.” He reached over and took her hand in his, pressing a soft kiss to her knuckles. “I believe you’ll get there.”

The beautiful smile she gave him was the only reply he needed.

TWENTY

After a nice, yet cold weekend in Michigan, it was back to the daily grind, and Merritt couldn’t have been happier. With each day that passed and each decision she made, she was one step closer to her dreams coming true, and she knew it wouldn’t be happening if not for Gus.

When he’d first told her the reasons behind his plan, she hadn’t fully comprehended the depth of his feelings about the situation. But seeing him with his family, specifically his father, had shed so much light on things, and she felt like she understood him so much better now.

After a wonderful day at work, Merritt returned to the house, surprised to find Gus exactly where she’d left him that morning, seated at the table with his laptop.

She eyed him as she set her bags by the door. “Have you moved from that spot today?”

He rubbed his eyes as he looked up at her. “Sorry, what?”

She searched for any sign that he'd fed himself. "Have you eaten?"

His gaze returned to the screen as if he hadn't heard her question.

She made her way into the kitchen, looking in the sink and dishwasher for dirty dishes, but both were empty.

Gus's brow furrowed as he stared at his screen and clicked the trackpad.

"Gus." When he didn't reply, she walked over to the table, noticing what was open on his screen—company financials, quarterly reports, and an article with a headline that read "Schultz Chocolate Heiress Thrives in New Role."

Her heart went out to him. She knew how much he longed to be respected by his family, but reading articles like this wouldn't help him. She reached over and pressed the screen closed.

"Hey!" His eyes shot to hers.

"I was talking to you," she said.

"Well, I'm working." He yanked the screen open again.

"More like obsessing."

He glared up at her. "It's really not your business what I do with my time. Don't you have a business of your own to run?"

"I've been at work all day while you've been, what, reading articles about your sister's success and wallowing in self-pity?"

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“So what if I am.” He closed the laptop once more. “What if I want to wallow?”

She gave him a disapproving look. “You’re better than that.”

“Am I, though?”

“I believe you are.”

“I don’t know where this sudden faith in me comes from, but it’s more than I have in myself right now.”

She sat down in the chair across from him. “Why?”

“I don’t know. As much as I love being with my family, I always leave feeling inferior.”

“Because of your dad?”

“Him, but also my siblings.” He let out a breath. “They’re both perfect at everything they do.”

“I’m sure that’s not true. Nobody’s perfect.”

“And then there’s me. The biggest screwup there ever was.”

This caused Merritt to laugh loudly.

He gave her a blank stare. "I'm glad I'm amusing you."

"Gus, you are not the biggest screwup ever. You've made the same kinds of mistakes many men in your situation have. But you're taking positive steps to better yourself, and that makes you smarter than the rest of them."

He seemed to relax, his mood shifting, his gaze softening when he looked at her. "I was wrong about you, Mer."

She was beginning to like his nickname for her. "How so?"

"You are a very kind person."

She smiled. "Well, thanks."

"I didn't know I'd get a free life coach when I married you."

Her head tilted and her lips scrunched to the side in disapproval.

"I meant that as a compliment. I might even call you ... a friend." He feigned shock.

A smile spread across her face. She felt the same way. It meant a lot that he had stood up for her with her father. And despite their rocky beginnings, she didn't hate being around him as much as she thought she would when she'd agreed to this insanity.

He eyed her. "So, that's it?"

"What?"

"I just said all those sweet things and called you my friend, and you're gonna leave me hanging?"

“A real friend doesn’t give out compliments and expect the same in return.”

“That’s not why I said it ... but compliments are always nice to hear.”

“Hey, I think I’ve already said some pretty nice things about you today.”

“You have, but not the one I want to hear.”

“Which is?”

“That I’m your new bestie.”

A combination laugh and snort escaped her as she stood and headed for the kitchen, needing to escape the sincerity in his eyes. “Besties, huh?”

He stood and followed. At least she’d distracted him away from that darn laptop.

“Come on,” he said.

“What do you want from me?” She opened the fridge, searching for something easy to prepare for dinner. Gus seemed a little loopy with all his friend talk. Probably from his lack of food.

He stepped up behind her and leaned close to her ear. “Say it.”

She closed the door, finding nothing appealing, and moved around him on her way to the pantry.

Once again, he followed her, stopping in the doorway with a smile on his face. “I don’t usually have girls that are friends, except Adelia. You should feel special.”

There it was. That cockiness that had irritated her from the beginning. “I’ve simply been polite, Gus, because we have to be able to get along if we’re going to make it through a year together.” She glanced over and saw a flash of something cross his face, but then his cocky smile returned.

It flustered her, and though she was looking at the shelves of ingredients, she couldn’t

seem to focus on what she was seeing. She stepped forward to leave, but he didn't move to the side to let her by.

"Move, please."

"I know what you're doing," he told her.

She looked up at him then. "What's that?"

"Lying."

"About?"

"We're friends now, whether you admit it or not."

She shifted her eyes to a package of pasta on one of the shelves.

"Would it be such a bad thing, Mer?" he asked.

She sighed at his use of the nickname again. "Fine. We're friends. Now move."

"Yes!" He raised his arms in the air in victory.

She rolled her eyes just before the oxygen was squeezed from her lungs when Gus wrapped those thick, muscular arms of his around her back, pulling her into a hard hug.

"Man, you caved much quicker than I thought you would."

Pulling away, she gave his bicep a whack, trying not to think about how good it had felt to be in his arms.

“Want to order pizza and watch a movie?” he asked. “That’s what friends do, right?”

“Sure.”

His stomach growled loudly, and they laughed. “I guess I should’ve eaten something today.”

“You think?”

Gus ordered the pizza and headed to his room to shower since he had pretty much rolled out of bed before sitting in front of his laptop all day.

Merritt puttered around the house and straightened up. As she was getting out plates, glasses, and napkins, her phone rang. She didn’t recognize the number but answered anyway.

“Hello, this is Merritt.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Hi, Merritt. This is Genevieve Willis. I’m Sebastian Schultz’s fiancée, which I guess makes me your soon-to-be sister-in-law.”

“Oh, right. Hello.”

“I’ve been meaning to call to wish you and Gus our congratulations, but things have been crazy around here with work and all the wedding planning.”

“Thank you. Congratulations to you too.”

“Thanks.”

“You work at a horse rescue, right?” Merritt asked.

“I do.”

“So, are all the horses injured?”

“Injured, abandoned, mistreated. People can be so cruel, and it’s such rewarding work, taking care of these beautiful creatures.”

“Sounds like you really love your job.”

“I do. So much.” Merritt could almost hear the smile in Genevieve’s voice. “I hear you own your own cosmetics company.”

“That’s right.”

“I bet Ephraim loves you already. He has huge respect for young entrepreneurs.”

“I gathered that when he asked about my financials within the first five minutes of meeting me.”

Genevieve laughed. “Sounds like him.”

“He was wonderful to talk to, though. I didn’t mind sharing business details with him. I know I can learn so much from his experience.”

“He’s definitely a plethora of knowledge.”

She nodded, even though Genevieve couldn’t see her.

“Harriet says you’re planning to send your RSVP this week.”

“I’m so sorry it hasn’t been sent already.”

“That’s all right. I just wanted to make sure to officially invite you to come early to our place on the sixteenth for a week of pre-wedding activities and family bonding, which I think is so needed right now.”

“Yes, Harriet did mention that to us. I hope you don’t mind me saying this, because I’m new to the family and still learning about all of you, but I was under the impression that maybe Sebastian might not want Gus there.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Gus said it was the first he’d heard of it, and something about his tone made me think there might be some bad blood there.”

“That couldn’t be further from the truth. They’re really close, and Sebastian wants his brother here to celebrate with us.” She paused for a moment. “I think he might be a little hurt that you and Gus tied the knot without him knowing about it, though.”

“Oh.”

“He hasn’t said as much. It’s just a feeling I get. Maybe don’t mention it to Gus, though. They can talk when you guys get here. That is if you’re coming.”

“We’d love to,” she answered as Gus emerged down the hallway in a T-shirt and athletic shorts.

His eyes narrowed. “Who?” he whispered.

“Wonderful,” Genevieve replied. “We’ll see you then.”

“Okay.”

“It was really nice talking with you.”

“You too. See you soon.”

Merritt hung up and set her phone down. “That was Genevieve, asking us to come to Montana on the sixteenth.”

“Did you tell her no?”

Her brow furrowed. “Why would I do that?”

“Tell me you didn’t say yes.”

“Of course, I did. It’s your brother’s wedding.”

Gus groaned. “Whatever. If he wanted me to come, he should’ve called and asked me himself.”

“I thought you were happy about your brother getting married.”

“I am. Genevieve is great. She’s perfect for him.”

“Then what’s the problem?”

“He hasn’t spoken to me since I left Michigan in October.”

Her eyes widened. “Really?”

The doorbell rang, and he went to answer and pay for the pizza.

Perhaps there was more to Sebastian’s silent treatment than Genevieve suspected. If Sebastian had cut off communication with Gus in October, then this was about more than him being unhappy that Gus had married without telling him.

TWENTY-ONE

Gus’s arms sliced through the smooth, cool water as he kicked hard, propelling himself forward across the pool. Swimming had become Gus’s de-stressor lately as the wedding week neared. Merritt kept telling him to swallow his pride and call Sebastian to find out what was behind his silent treatment and make things right, but Gus didn’t like being told what to do. He was stubborn, and he knew it.

The one bright spot in his life was Merritt. The past month with her had been the most fun Gus had ever had with a woman who was only his friend. When he’d come up with this marriage idea, he hadn’t been sure they wouldn’t kill each other before the year was through. But he had never expected her friendship to become so important to him.

Each day, he found himself excited to see her when she came home from work. They spent their evenings together, sometimes ordering in and watching a movie or television show, other times checking out a new eatery in LA with Adelia, Giovanni, and Whitney. They had fun together, which had been surprising yet wonderful.

Occasionally, he found himself staring at her when she wasn’t looking, and sometimes, he caught her looking at him too. There was definitely an attraction between them, but they both knew that’s all it was. They were friends now, and he needed that more.

He was still in the pool, floating on his back, gazing up at the clouds, when Merritt emerged from the house that evening.

“Hey, Mer! Ready to have your butt kicked?” They had taken to swimming laps a few nights a week in a friendly competition to see who got dishwasher duty.

She plopped down on the chaise beside the pool, appearing tired and defeated. She was wearing a strapless sundress and looked radiant despite the scowl on her face.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s been a day. Can we just relax tonight?”

“Of course.” He slowly swam across the pool toward the stairs and turned back just in time to see her whip the sundress over her head, revealing the bikini beneath. He swallowed hard as she tossed the dress aside.

“Sucker!” She dove smoothly into the water and swam the length of the pool.

“Hey!” He swam straight at her, grabbing her leg to prevent her from getting further ahead of him.

She thrashed and came up, violently coughing water.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He swam closer, taking hold of her arms. “Are you okay?”

“No, you idiot.” She splashed him as she coughed. “You scared me.” Cough. “And I took in a bunch of water.” Cough.

“I’m so sorry, Mer.” He absentmindedly smoothed her hair back from her face over and over, waiting for the coughing to subside. The feeling that he’d hurt her in any way made him sick to his stomach.

When she calmed, he pulled her close. “Better?”

“Mhmm.” Her small hands rested on his bare chest.

He kissed her forehead. “I think I’m on dishwasher duty tonight.”

She let out a giggle. “That’s right, you are.”

He smiled. “Lay back in the water with me.” He proceeded to lean back and let his feet and arms float until he was flat on his back again. “It’s relaxing.”

She did as he asked, and he reached over and took her hand.

“Did you ever look for shapes in the clouds when you were younger?”

“Sometimes.”

They floated in comfortable silence, staring up at the sky.

“That one looks like a turtle,” Gus said.

“Which one?”

“See that big oval cloud?”

“I think so.”

“There’s a smaller round cloud sticking off the right of it for the head and four little ones off the sides, like legs.”

“That’s not a turtle. It’s a teddy bear.”

“Pfft. How is it a teddy bear?”

“See on the head, there are a couple of bumps sticking off the top, like ears.”

“No way, the head is round. It’s ...” The cloud morphed as he spoke. “Oh, man, I see it.”

They laughed and floated there for a while, and Gus felt happier than he had in a long time.

“What happened at work?” he asked.

“Nothing major, really. Just some small fires I had to put out. Mostly, I was messing with you so I could win.”

He let go and splashed at her once, which led to her sinking in the water and splashing him full force. He had no choice but to reciprocate until they were laughing so hard they had to stop to catch their breaths.

“Are you hungry?” Gus asked on an exhale.

“Famished.”

“Want to go out?”

She smiled. “Sure.”

Gus pulled up in front of On the Shore, a popular LA eatery, and walked around to open the door for Merritt. He handed his keys to the valet, and in an instant, the paparazzi were in their faces.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He nodded politely, but he could tell Merritt was freaked out, just as she had been on their wedding day and the times they'd been out with Adelia. "You okay?" He wrapped his arm around behind her, pulling her into his side.

"Yeah." She didn't sound very convincing.

When they entered, he felt Merritt relax. The hostess greeted them and led them to a seat. He wished it wasn't out in the middle, where the photographers could see them through the window, but it was quite busy, and they were lucky to have gotten a spot at all.

"Maybe we should've gone through the drive-thru at In 'n Out," she said with a nervous smile.

"We can go if you want."

She shook her head. "It's fine. It's just weird when the cameras are on me."

He reached over and touched her cheek. "I know. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. This is a part of your life, and I knew what I was signing up for."

He scooted his chair closer to hers, lay his arm across the back of her chair, and leaned close to her ear. "Maybe if we give them what they want, they'll go away."

"And what is it they want?"

He pulled back to look her in the eye. “The money shot.”

“Isn’t a picture of us together enough?”

“We haven’t been out on the town much since we got married. If we sit across the table from each other, they’re going to think there’s trouble in paradise.” He grinned.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Lean closer,” he whispered.

She rolled her eyes.

“I won’t bite.” His crooked grin was quickly wiped from his face when she leaned close, her shoulder pressing into his side, her soft floral scent overwhelming him.

“I might.” She winked.

He knew she was teasing, but his mouth went dry as a desert.

“Now what?” she whispered.

“Turn into me and lay your hand on my chest.” His pulse picked up pace as she did as he asked.

“Now what?” Her voice sounded shaky.

“Move your hand up to my neck.” He heard the rasp in his own voice, and he felt light-headed as her fingertips slid slowly up his chest, tickling across the skin of his neck on their way to the nape. He swallowed hard as she played with the hair there.

Her warm breath caressed his face as she looked up at him, inches separating them.
“Now what?”

He looked her straight in the eye. “Kiss your husband.”

She was the one to swallow hard this time. Hesitation crossed her face for an instant before she leaned in and pressed her lips to his. It was soft and gentle, but it sent the blood racing through his veins. She pulled back and smiled up at him.

“Again,” he told her.

Her eyebrows raised.

He lifted his hand, his thumb brushing over her cheek then traveling slowly across her bottom lip. “Kiss me, Merritt.”

“Gus.” She seemed unsure.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Kiss me like you mean it.” He angled his head toward the paparazzi outside the window.

She let out a resigned breath.

He moved his lips to her ear. “Sorry kissing me is such a hardship.”

A hint of a smile played across her lips, and she grabbed the fabric of his shirt and tugged him to her, planting her lips hard against his.

He was taken aback as her lips moved, momentarily stealing his breath before he became an active participant in the kiss. Her mouth was heaven, and she was a really good kisser. Just the right amount of pressure, perfect give and take. Their wedding kiss had been nice but chaste. This was different in the very best way.

Someone cleared their throat, and they pulled apart.

Merritt covered her mouth with her hand as she looked up at the waitress. Flushed cheeks looked beautiful on her.

“Sorry to interrupt.”

“No apologies necessary,” Gus replied.

“Still in the honeymoon phase. That’s nice.” The waitress smiled at them and took their drink order.

Gus watched the paparazzi outside, wondering where the pictures of them would end up. For some reason, he wanted to see them. He wanted to see how she looked when she was kissing him. Because even though it was just for show, it hadn't felt pretend at all.

TWENTY-TWO

Merritt couldn't seem to form a coherent thought after the waitress left the table. Her stomach was still a mess of butterflies, and her face felt like it was on fire. That kiss was nothing like the kiss on their wedding day. She hadn't meant to let it go so far. She only wanted the paparazzi to leave them alone, but now as she sat there watching them out the window, she knew that wasn't going to happen.

Gus kept his chair close to hers, his arm still around her. "You okay?"

"They're still out there." Her eyes were on the men with cameras, loitering outside the place.

"They're harmless."

"Are they going to watch us eat?"

"Probably."

"I feel like an unflattering picture of me with food hanging out of my mouth is going to show up somewhere."

Gus pushed back on his chair, stood, and held his hand out to her.

"What are you doing?"

He pulled her up from sitting and moved her chair to the opposite side of the table with the back facing the window then did the same for his chair.

She sat down and smiled up at him. “Thank you. That’s better, actually.”

“They already got enough of a show.”

Her cheeks colored again. “Right.”

Gus sat down just as the waitress returned with their drinks. He appeared calm and unruffled, which was the exact opposite of how she felt at the moment. And she wondered how many more times they would have to fake affection because it was having more of an effect on her than she expected it to.

They had grown closer over the past few weeks to the point where she enjoyed his company. Being around each other’s families, confiding in each other, and hanging out together every night had bonded them in a way she hadn’t known was possible with him. They had moved past disliking one another and somehow maneuvered comfortably into friendship. And if they were going to keep it that way when this was all over, they were going to have to tread carefully when it came to physical affection.

After a quiet dinner, they headed home, mostly avoiding the paparazzi, who were photographing another celebrity arriving at the restaurant. They always seemed to be looking for someone better to focus their cameras on, and in this instance, Merritt was thankful for that.

“Dinner was nice,” she said when they walked through the door.

“Yeah, it was. Do you want to watch a movie?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“I’m kind of tired. Do you mind if I just call it a night?”

He looked down at the floor for a moment before replying, “I don’t mind.”

“Good night then.”

“Night, Mer.”

She walked down the hallway to her room, feeling his eyes on her. She wanted to look back at him, but she kept moving. She just needed some alone time to clear her head, to work, to get her mind on anything other than his lips against hers.

In the morning, Merritt rushed out to work before Gus awoke. The sun was barely up, but better to get some work out of the way than lie there awake, dwelling on what had happened at the restaurant.

The office was empty except for her on this early Saturday morning. A few weekend employees would soon arrive to man the counter at her little boutique off the lobby, but for now, it was quiet. There were last minute things to take care of before she was whisked off to wintry Montana for the week of wedding festivities. Mostly preparations for a work trip to London the day after they were scheduled to return.

That wasn’t really why she had come there early, though. The kiss had made her nervous. So much that she had considered bowing out of part of the trip and meeting up with Gus later. But their agreement stated that she accompany him to family events to make the marriage appear legitimate, so she knew that wasn’t an option.

She wondered if Gus had thought much about their kiss. He had seemed so cool about the whole thing. But then, he had kissed a lot of girls in the past, so it probably meant nothing to him. It was pretend, after all.

If she was going to get through this year, she would have to learn to detach from the situation. Because she was certain that once they reached Montana, their lips were going to have to touch again several times. And the more it happened, the more she would want it to happen and that would only confuse things.

Her experience with guys was limited. She'd dated a couple of guys in high school and had one boyfriend in college, but none had ever been serious. And she hadn't gotten very physical with any of them. Her focus had been on classes rather than a social life. It's how she got where she was today—focus, determination, and drive.

But there was a part of her that regretted closing herself off and not taking a little time out of her college years for fun. Sometimes, she was lonely and longed for someone in her life. It wasn't something she felt often, but it was there. That desire to be with someone, to do life with them.

Lately, that desire seemed to be met by her friendship with Gus. It was an unexpected side effect of spending time together in their fake marriage. She actually felt closer to him than she had any of her ex-boyfriends. Any of her friends, really. It was a little unnerving. Especially when other feelings were starting to creep their way in.

She straightened up and turned her attention to her computer. There could be no real relationship with Gus. That's not what all this was about. He was going to get back into his family's business, and she was going to take Merritt Cosmetics worldwide.

She'd already taken the first steps toward getting her products approved for sale in other countries. There was a lot of testing and red tape that had to be sifted through when it came to international business, but she'd hired savvy people to help her

through it all. And this trip to meet with her new London team had her giddy.

Around lunchtime, her phone signaled a text from Gus.

Are you working all day?

She texted back that she'd be a couple more hours, and he replied with a thumbs-up emoji.

Thirty minutes later, there was a knock on her office door, and she glanced up to see Gus's smiling face.

"Hey, who let you in here?" she teased.

"I flashed my wedding ring."

She laughed.

He pulled a bag out from behind his back then, revealing the lunch he had brought for her.

Her heart warmed. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know." He went about pulling the food from within and arranging it on the corner of her desk. "I didn't know what you were in the mood for, so I got you a veggie wrap ..." He held it out, and she wrinkled her nose. "And a burger and fries."

Her face lit up. "Yes, please."

She hadn't realized how hungry she was, and her mouth watered at the sight. She'd left the apartment so quickly, she hadn't taken time to eat a proper breakfast, and the

coffee she'd picked up on her way in was definitely not cutting it anymore.

Gus stood beside her desk, and she glanced up at him as she unwrapped the burger.

“Did you get yourself something or are you just going to watch me eat?”

“I ate at home.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Oh. Can you sit with me for a while?” She nodded toward the chair across the desk from her.

He smiled. “Sure.” He reached over and snatched a fry as he took a seat.

“Hey!”

He chuckled as he chewed it up. “You left early.”

Her pulse stuttered because of the real reason. “I wanted to get some things done before we leave for Montana. What time is our flight out tomorrow?”

“Seven a.m.”

“And a layover in Denver, right?”

“For a couple hours, yeah.” He stole another fry, and she smacked at his hand, missing it at the last second. “We’ll get to Kalispell before two. I forwarded the itinerary to Bash, but he never replied. I hope we won’t be stuck at the airport with no ride to their place.”

“I sent it to Genevieve too, and she said someone will be there to pick us up.”

He was silent for a moment. “Good.”

“Can I talk to you about ... last night?” She really didn’t want to bring this up, but something was telling her they needed to clear the air.

“What about it?”

“When we get to your brother’s place, I think we should keep the kissing to a minimum. I know we’re newlyweds and everything, so I get that we have to show affection, but I would prefer if the kisses were a little ... shorter and more ...”

“Boring,” he said with a wink.

She tilted her head and raised an eyebrow. “Maybe don’t go at me like you’re going to stick your tongue down my throat.”

He laughed. “You’re no fun.”

“I’m serious, Gus. I felt a little uncomfortable after the kiss last night.”

His expression turned from playful to concerned. “You did?”

She nodded, not wanting to elaborate.

“I’m sorry.” He looked wounded. “I never wanted to make you feel that way.”

“I know. And I know you were just trying to get rid of the paparazzi.”

“I was.” He took her hand in his. “And I promise, I won’t suggest anything like that again. And when we’re at the wedding, we’ll keep the PDA to a minimum.”

“Thank you.” She felt a flash of disappointment that he’d said that, but it was best if she nipped this in the bud before they got further into this charade.

If she had elaborated, she would’ve had to admit that their kiss had stirred up unexpected feelings within her, and the last thing she wanted was to fall for her fake

husband.

“I’m gonna let you get back to work.” Gus stood and walked toward the door.

She glanced up when she noticed he had stopped.

He reached into his jacket pocket as he returned to her desk, laying an envelope on the surface.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a week late, but happy one month anniversary.”

She looked up at his smiling face. “You got me something? I didn’t know gifts for one month of marriage were a thing.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“They’re not. I just wanted to.”

She wasn’t sure if she was supposed to open it now or wait until he left.

“You can wait until I’m gone if you want.”

She eyed him as she took the envelope and opened it. “Gus.” Her mouth fell open as she found two VIP tickets to a Maroon 5 concert in New York City.

“It’s not Sugar Ray,” he said with a crooked smile, “but Adam’s a friend, and he hooked me up.”

Her eyes widened. “You know Adam Levine?”

He nodded.

She jumped up and circled the desk, stepping into his waiting arms, and hugging him tightly. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He kissed her temple, and his lips lingered there.

This man was the sweetest, and it was going to be harder than she thought to keep from blurring the line between real and fake.

TWENTY-THREE

Sebastian was the last person Gus expected to see when they entered the Glacier Park

International Airport baggage claim area. He had honestly expected his dad or Skylar after the silent treatment his brother had been giving him. But there he stood, wearing a grey parka, his dark hair sticking out from under a black knit cap.

Sebastian held his hand out in greeting to his new sister-in-law. “Hi, I’m Sebastian. You must be Merritt.”

“I am.” She shook his hand politely. “It’s so nice to meet you.”

“You too. Welcome to Montana.”

“Thanks.”

The brothers made eye contact, and Sebastian hesitantly opened his arms. Gus hugged him, and they patted each other on the back, but it seemed stiff and forced. Sebastian wasn’t his usual cheerful self, and Gus didn’t like it one bit.

When they had retrieved their luggage and loaded it into Sebastian’s car, they headed down the road with Merritt in the front seat and Gus seated behind his brother. Merritt oohed and aahed over the beauty of the snow on the mountains and chatted with Sebastian about Kalispell and their new home.

Gus’s eyes were trained on the passing landscape as he got lost in his thoughts. Here he was in Montana, finally back with his brother, but it felt like they were miles apart. Would the whole week be this awkward?

“Gus.” Merritt’s voice broke through. “Sebastian asked you a question.”

“Sorry, what?” He looked in the rearview mirror at his brother’s reflection.

“I asked what you’ve been up to.”

“Surfing and partying. Isn’t that what everyone assumes I’m doing?”

Merritt turned her head and gave him a pointed stare.

“You’ve got your hands full with this one,” Sebastian told her.

“Screw you, Bash,” Gus snapped.

“What is your problem?”

“What is my problem? You’ve been radio silent for months.”

“We’re not getting into this right now.” Sebastian glanced to the side. “Sorry, Merritt.”

She waved him off, continuing to stare at Gus over the seat.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

Sebastian drove in silence, and Gus decided not to push. Maybe they'd have time to talk when they got to the house.

Merritt kept watching Gus and making subtle head tilts and eyebrow raises in Sebastian's direction. Surprisingly, he understood what she was trying to say. Whatever the problem might be, he needed to make things right with his brother.

He gave her an answering nod as Sebastian turned into a driveway and pulled up next to a keypad. He entered his code, and the heavy wooden gate before them swung open to reveal a long tree-lined drive, splitting through an immense pasture. They traveled along between the fences until the road curved and wound around and over a hill or two, opening into a clearing to reveal a gorgeous log home at the base of a snow-covered mountain.

Genevieve had to be in heaven here with the large stable and acres upon acres of land for horses. It was breathtaking, and if Gus hadn't been annoyed with his brother, he would've complimented the place.

"This is beautiful, Sebastian," Merritt said.

Gus loved the sound of awe in her voice and the enraptured look on her face.

"Thank you." Sebastian shifted into park and got out, circling the vehicle to open Merritt's door.

Gus rolled his eyes. Always the gentleman. The good brother. The golden child.

Genevieve rushed out of the house then and nearly tackled Merritt with a hug. “It’s so wonderful to meet you. I’m so happy to have another sister.” Her eyes flitted to Sebastian’s, and he gave her a huge smile. Anyone could see how in love they were from the way they looked at each other.

Genevieve turned to Gus next. “Gus, it’s good to see you again.”

He gave her a hug. “Good to see you too.”

“How are you?” she asked. “We were all worried about you.”

“There was no need. I’m fine.” He reached for Merritt and pulled her into his side. “Especially now that I found this girl.” He pressed a soft kiss to her temple.

Merritt looked up at him with a smile that appeared genuine. Probably because he hadn’t gone straight for a kiss on the mouth. He hated that their kiss the other night had made her uncomfortable. It was the last thing he wanted. And he could understand how she felt because it had definitely left him feeling disconcerted. The kiss itself had felt comfortable—maybe too comfortable—and he had found himself insanely attracted to her. But he didn’t want things to turn awkward between them and ruin their friendship, so he needed to be much more careful.

Skylar came from the house then and joined them, grabbing hold of Merritt’s hands and pulling her from Gus’s arms. “You can’t keep her all to yourself, Gus.” She and Genevieve ushered Merritt into the house, leaving the brothers alone.

They grabbed the bags in silence and brought them into the house. Sebastian led him down a hallway and into one of the guest rooms. “You’ll be in here.” He rolled their suitcases next to the dresser, and Gus stopped and tossed one of Merritt’s bags onto the bed.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable.” Sebastian made his way to the door.

“Bash, come on.”

Sebastian turned to look at him.

“Why are you shutting me out?”

“What did you expect? I tell you I’m engaged and instead of staying to celebrate with us, you take off. As usual.”

“I didn’t leave because you got engaged. It was all about Dad dissing me. You know that.”

“He wasn’t dissing you. He was making the decision he thought was best for the company for now.”

“Whatever.”

“Try to see it from his perspective. You were being sued, which doesn’t look good for the company, Gus.”

“I know that.”

“Do you think it was easy for Dad to make that decision?”

Gus shrugged. “Didn’t seem too hard for him.”

“So, your answer was to run to California again instead of facing the problem.”

“I wasn’t going to grovel.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Maybe you should have. At least Dad would’ve known how much you wanted a real chance to prove yourself.”

Gus rolled his eyes.

“Then all of a sudden you’re married and the first we all hear of it is in the tabloids.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about Merritt sooner. Things happened really fast.”

“Yeah, well, it didn’t feel good to be shut out of your life. And it wasn’t the first time.”

“I know that, and I’m sorry. Is that why you shut me out of your life for all these months?”

“Partly. But most of all, I was tired of you not sticking around and standing up for yourself. If you want Dad to believe you’ve changed, then stop running away when things get tough.”

“I’m not running anymore.”

“I hope you won’t.”

“I don’t plan to do anything that will mess up my future ever again.”

The expression on Sebastian’s face said he wasn’t so sure.

“I know I’ve let you down in the past. Many times. And I’m sorry that you were always the one to clean up my messes, but I’m done with all that, Bash. Things are different now. I’m different. I hope you’ll believe me.”

“I want to. I really do.”

"I know we haven’t talked lately, but I am stoked to be here for your big day, Bash. I really am. Genevieve is the perfect girl for you and for this family.”

“Merritt seems sweet, Gus.”

“She is. She’s great. And this might sound cliché ... but she’s my best friend.”

“I feel the same way about Gen.”

“It’s weird to be friends with a woman.”

“Adelia’s your friend.”

“That’s different. She’s like a sister. I’ve never had this kind of friendship with any of the women I’ve dated.”

Sebastian snorted. “Since when have you ever dated anyone?”

Gus laughed. “True. But it’s different with her. She’s amazing and brilliant and funny and so feisty. Sometimes I can’t take my eyes off of her, she’s so dang beautiful.”

Bash shook his head in disbelief.

“What?”

“I’ve never seen you in love before. It’s a good look on you.”

“I ... uh, yeah, thanks,” Gus stammered. He wasn’t in love with Merritt, but for the sake of their marriage agreement, it was a good thing his brother was convinced that he was.

After they had cleared the air and hugged it out, they went to join the family. Gus took in the house as they walked along the hallway. It was much like he expected a log cabin to be, with its exposed log walls and rustic fixtures and decor throughout.

The three sisters-in-law and Mom were in the kitchen, which opened into the dining area with the great room beyond. They were talking and laughing while they made dinner, and Merritt seemed to fit in like she’d known them for years, which warmed Gus’s heart.

Sebastian walked up behind his bride and put an arm around her waist, nuzzling his nose into her long blonde hair.

“Hey, you.” She rested her head against his. “I’m stirring.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He lifted his head and touched his lips to the tip of her nose. “Stir away.” He gave her a tight squeeze and kissed her lips before releasing her. Gus had never seen his brother more content.

Merritt glanced up from her place at the counter and smiled at Gus.

His stomach flipped, which caught him off guard.

What was that?

The conversation at the dinner table mostly revolved around their plans for the week and the possibility of forecasted snow affecting those plans.

It was good to be together again, and Gus felt so much lighter since his conversation with Sebastian. He hadn’t realized how much that situation had been weighing on him, and it was as if a giant burden had been lifted.

After dinner, the family settled in the great room with its floor-to-ceiling windows. During the day, they featured a spectacular view of the mountains and acres beyond, but it was almost completely dark outside now as they neared the end of twilight.

Gus sat on a love seat by the window and motioned for Merritt to join him. When she neared, he grabbed hold of her wrist, tugging her into his lap. She tumbled, not so gracefully, landing hard, and catching herself with her hands against his chest.

He laughed as he wrapped his arms around her back. “Sorry.”

“You caught me off guard there.” She laughed nervously and settled into his lap, leaning her head in the crook of his neck and tucking her arms between their bodies.

Holding her in his arms felt nice, and she relaxed into him more when he softly caressed up and down her back with his fingertips.

“You two are so darn cute,” Genevieve said. “I want to know your whole story. Start at the beginning. How did you meet?”

“She hit me with her car,” Gus replied.

Merritt sat upright, staring at him with mouth hanging open. “For the last time, I did not hit you with my car.”

He couldn’t keep from smiling.

She looked around the room, clearly flustered, then back at Gus. “I thought we weren’t going to tell anyone about that,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Well, honey, it’s part of our story. I thought they’d like to know the truth.”

Her eyes narrowed, and she angled closer and whispered, “The whole truth?”

“Okay, maybe she almost hit me with her car.” He altered his story, even though he could almost still feel her mirror rub against his arm.

“Not even close,” she told them.

Everyone laughed as he leaned in and whispered, “I love seeing you get all worked up like that.”

“I thought you met at Adelia’s,” Skylar said.

“We did. But first, we ran into each other—”

“You mean, you ran into me,” Gus teased.

She smacked him on the chest. “Stop!”

Gus looked at Sky. “We may have had a bit of a ... disagreement at first—”

“That’s putting it mildly,” Merritt cut in.

“But then we saw each other again at Adelia’s and started talking ... and my charm won her over.”

Merritt rolled her eyes so only he could see.

“You two remind me of your father and I,” Mom said.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“How so?” Merritt asked.

“When we were in college, he would stand outside my dorm trying to sell his homemade truffles to all the girls.”

Dad chuckled to himself, and Mom smiled at him like they were sharing a little secret.

“I couldn’t stand the man.”

Merritt’s lips parted. “Really?”

“Not at first. But he eventually wore me down, and I agreed to go out with him. He was very convincing.”

“Oh my gosh.” Merritt looked at Gus again. “You are exactly like your dad.”

If only Dad would realize that.

“Are you asleep?” Gus whispered into the darkness.

“No. Are you?”

He chuckled. “What are you thinking about?”

“Your family.”

“They’re a lot, I know.”

“No, they’re not. They’re wonderful. I can feel the love you all have for each other. It’s so different from my family.”

Gus rolled from his back to his side, facing Merritt. The faint light of the moon through the windows illuminated her face. “Every family is different.”

“I know. But you were there with my parents. That intensity my dad has about work and money and the future. That’s how it’s always been. We never sat around like we all did here tonight, just talking and laughing and enjoying ourselves. In my house, if there was a spare moment, you filled it with chores. You earned your keep. And when the day was done, we each went to our own parts of the house. We didn’t spend time together just for the sake of being together. You worked, you ate, you slept, then you did it all again the next day.”

He could hear the sadness in her voice. “Hey, your parents love you. I could tell in the way your dad talked about you. And that work ethic has made you the success you are today.”

She lay still and quiet as several minutes passed them by. Her breathing evened out as if she’d fallen asleep.

“Are you asleep?” he asked again.

“I never will be if you keep asking me that.”

He didn’t reply.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“How amazing you are.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’m serious. You agreed to my crazy plan. You’re rocking your business expansion. You’ve already done so much to help with my family. Every day, I think how lucky I am to have met you on that canyon road.”

“Gus.” Her voice was whisper soft.

“Notice that I didn’t mention a thing about you hitting me with your car.”

She giggled in the most adorable way.

“You are the best wife ever.”

“Fake wife.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“I don’t know what a real marriage is supposed to feel like, but we like hanging out, we have a mutual respect for each other, we care about and support each other. Sounds like marriage to me.” He paused. “Well ... almost.”

“I think you’re missing the biggest component of a true marriage.”

“Sex?” He could almost see her eyes roll at that.

“Love.”

The room was still with the L-word hanging in the air. Several long minutes passed until he was sure she had drifted off.

“Gus.”

“Yeah.”

“No matter what happens, I’m glad I met you.”

He smiled. “So am I.”

She rolled away from him, leaving him to think about her words. No matter what happens. He wished he could read her mind, so he would understand what brought that on. Maybe she was already thinking about what would happen ten months from now when they parted ways. And the thought of that made his heart ache.

TWENTY-FOUR

Was it possible to function on three hours of sleep? Because that was about all Merritt had gotten last night. And even then, she'd drifted in and out in a fitful state as she lay beside Gus, thinking about the months ahead, the events they would attend together, the time they would spend with his wonderful family. They really were salt of the earth. She'd thought so on their trip to Michigan, and she was more certain of it now that she'd been so fully welcomed in. She loved Harriet and Skylar and Genevieve, and to be a real member of their family would make her so happy. But there was this underlying twinge of sadness within her, knowing that she and Gus were lying about their marriage, and though their time together as a "family" was only beginning, it was already starting to eat at her. And it would only grow more difficult as time went on because she could easily see herself loving all of them.

Even Gus.

"It's right up ahead," Genevieve told Skylar, who was driving all the ladies to her final bridal gown fitting. Her mom, Ida, and sister, Rhonda, had arrived from Michigan that morning, and they were also joined by her bridesmaid, Marianne, who she worked with at the horse rescue.

From the outside, the little bridal boutique was not where she expected the bride of a Schultz to shop, but when they entered the building, Merritt was instantly charmed. The original brick walls and white tin ceiling combined with modern chandeliers and white brocade wallpaper made the space bright and lovely. And the gowns on display were by well-known designers, making this small town shop comparable to any high-end bridal boutique out there.

A sweet petite woman emerged from another room and greeted them warmly, leading them into a private space in the back.

Genevieve's dress was hanging on a hook beside a wall of mirrors, and she clapped her hands with excitement as she stepped toward it. The woman led her to a changing

room, and her mom and sister went with her while the rest of them took a seat and waited.

Skylar pulled a camera from within a black bag she'd been carrying and attached a lens.

"Gus showed me some of your pictures in his office," Merritt told her. "You have a great eye."

"Oh, thanks. It's something I've always loved to do."

"Did you ever shoot professionally?"

"I've assisted on some shoots for Schultz products from time to time, but I just do it for me."

"You have a gift, that's for sure."

"That's so nice of you to say."

Merritt gave her a little closed-mouth smile just as Genevieve stepped out of the changing room.

The room was still for a moment. Then the click of Skylar's camera filled the silence, Harriet sniffled, and the oohs and aahs began.

Genevieve looked like an angel in her long-sleeved lacy gown, perfect for a winter wedding. Her mother opened a garment bag they had brought along and pulled out her veil, placing it gently atop her head. Even Merritt got teary-eyed at the sight.

"Do you like it?" Genevieve asked the ladies.

They all agreed she looked resplendent.

After the shop owner pulled and tucked and pinned for the final adjustments, the ladies headed to a quaint restaurant for brunch. The conversation began about Genevieve and Sebastian's wedding events and plans for the week but somehow veered in the direction of Gus and Merritt.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“I still can’t believe Gus is married,” Skylar said, smiling at Merritt.

“It is a little shocking,” Genevieve’s sister, Rhonda, agreed. “From the way he acted last summer, I never would’ve thought he would settle down so quickly.”

A jolt of jealousy shot through Merritt at the little smile Rhonda had on her face, like she had a secret.

“So, you know Gus?” Merritt asked.

“We met once when I was out with Genevieve. He was a lot of fun, and definitely the most flirtatious man I have ever known.”

“Well, he’s put the single life behind him,” Merritt told her, suddenly feeling the urge to protect what was hers.

“That’s good.” Rhonda smiled at her and took a sip of her mimosa, turning her attention to the conversation her mom and sister were having about reception decorations.

Even though their relationship was strictly platonic, Merritt didn’t like to think about Gus with other women. And beautiful blonde Rhonda seemed to have been involved with him in some way in the past, which left her feeling annoyingly unsettled.

Back at the house, the guys were outside on snowmobiles, so Merritt took the opportunity to escape to their room for a nap. She was exhausted from no sleep, but she couldn’t shake her unease about Rhonda. At first, she tossed and turned, but

eventually sleep overtook her.

She wasn't sure how much time had passed when her eyelids eventually slid open. She rolled to the side to see the time on the clock beside the bed. 3:43 p.m. A couple hours of sleep was better than none.

Before she left the room, she brushed her hair, twisting it into a loose bun low on the back of her head, and touched up her makeup. She took a deep breath and walked down the hallway toward the sound of laughter. Some kind of game was going on, and her stomach dropped as she walked in and saw Gus and Rhonda high-five each other then hug.

Gus caught her eye. "Hey, Mer! Come play with us."

She managed a weak smile, unable to hide the disappointment on her face.

He bounded across the room to her and wrapped her up in his arms. "How was your nap?"

She soaked in the warmth of him. "Fine."

"Want to play Pictionary with us?"

"I've never played before."

His mouth fell open. "What? How is that possible?"

"We weren't much for games at my house."

"That changes now." He ushered her into the room. "Dad needs a partner. We were unevenly matched, so he sat out."

“Oh.” Her heart sank at not being partnered with Gus. “Okay.”

“All the clues are wedding themed or wedding movies.” Gus explained the rules of the game and gave her and Ephraim the next turn.

Ephraim took to the board with a clue card in hand. He looked very serious as he drew a large arrow pointing to himself.

“Arrow, direction, right,” Merritt guessed.

He shook his head and drew a woman wearing a veil.

“Veil?”

He drew two stick figures, one on either side of the woman and an arrow pointing to one.

“Parents.”

He traced over the arrow again then drew short hair on the figure. “Man, dad. Father.”

He enthusiastically shook his head as he circled the man and the woman with the veil.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Father, bride.” She clapped her hands together. “Father of the bride!”

“Yes!” Ephraim cried.

Merritt looked over at Gus, who was smiling at her. She stood to take her turn. The clue was honeymoon, and she took a deep breath until she was told to go. The first thing she drew was a bride and groom, which was Ephraim's first guess. She quickly scribbled a car with the bride and groom's heads in the back window and cans tied to the bumper.

“Limo?” he asked.

“Uber!” Skylar cried, causing everyone to laugh.

“You're not even on their team,” Gus said.

Merritt groaned. How was she supposed to draw this? She drew a squiggly line to show water and two figures wearing sunglasses, lying on rectangles, which were supposed to be towels, but she wasn't very artistic. Ephraim was stuck on beach wedding. She drew the couple again, this time with their hands held and their heads together in a kiss.

“You may kiss the bride!”

“Time!” Harriet cried.

Merritt stuck her bottom lip out. “It was honeymoon.”

Everyone groaned and laughed, some saying they figured it out with the people on the beach. But Merritt wasn't paying attention to any of that, because she saw Rhonda lean in to say something to Gus, who laughed loudly at whatever it was.

The next team readied for their turn, but Merritt didn't sit down to watch. She headed out of the room for the kitchen and got herself a glass of water.

"Hey, that was fun, right?" Gus was suddenly standing a few steps behind her.

"Mhmm." She took a sip of water as she turned to face him.

He eyed her. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

His mouth twisted to one side in disapproval. "Come on now. You have the same look in your eye you had the day we met."

"What look is that?"

"The one that says you can't stand me."

She shrugged.

He took a step closer, and she stepped back. "Seriously. Talk to me."

Merritt nodded toward the great room. "Rhonda's very pretty."

"I guess."

She gave him the same twisted mouth disapproval he had given her. "You two

seemed pretty close in there.”

“Not really.”

“What did she say about my drawing?”

“Oh.” He laughed. “She said you should’ve drawn a couple in bed because that’s pretty much the first thing people think about when you say honeymoon.”

“Right.” She pressed her lips together.

His expression suddenly changed, and one side of his mouth lifted as he sauntered closer. “Are you jealous?”

“No.” She shifted away again, taking one step back for every one he took toward her until she was backed into the corner of the countertop.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He placed his hands on the counter on either side of her hips and looked her in the eye. “Truth.”

“I’m not jealous, Augustus.”

He gave her a cocky grin.

“You agreed not to see other women during our marriage, and then I find out you and Rhonda have a history.”

“What?” His eyes widened. “We do not. I met her once at a bar with Genevieve. She was just getting out of a bad marriage, and all we did was have a drink and dance to one song.”

“It must’ve been pretty memorable for her, because she was talking about how she was shocked that you got married and what a flirt you were.”

“I am a flirt.” He grinned.

“Maybe she has a thing for you.”

“So what if she does.” He reached up and cupped her cheek. “You are my wife.”

Merritt’s stomach flipped.

“And I will not break our agreement. Have I given you any indication that I would?”

She shook her head.

“Trust me.” He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek, causing tingles to spread across her skin. “Come on. Let’s go finish the game.”

She took his hand and returned to the great room. She wanted to trust him, and while his words did comfort her a little, she still had an uneasy feeling. Gus was friendly and charismatic, not to mention extremely handsome. She wasn’t naive enough to think that there weren’t many women out there who would give anything to be with him. And whether or not Rhonda was one of them, she couldn’t stop thinking about another woman being in his arms when this whole arrangement was over.

TWENTY-FIVE

On Tuesday morning, the family took a horseback trail ride through the snow. Merritt had never ridden a horse before, so Gus stayed close to her. But she didn’t have to do much other than ride as her horse followed along behind the rest.

The ride was quiet except for the sound of the horse’s hooves crunching along the snowy path. With the mountains around them and the tall trees of the forest, it was like being in a winter wonderland with the most beautiful landscape she had ever seen. The cold was not her favorite thing, but she now understood the draw of living in a place like this. The views were breathtaking at every turn.

“You’re cute in your winter gear.” Gus pointed to her knit hat with the pom-pom on top.

She glanced over at his hat. “I like your pom-pom.”

“I like your pom-poms too.” He stared down at her chest.

“Augustus!”

He chuckled. “You make it so easy for me.”

“Oh my gosh! You are such a child.”

“Hey, I’m a guy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Not all guys are like that.”

“I beg to differ.”

“There are plenty of guys out there who keep their inappropriate thoughts to themselves.”

“Name one.”

“Sebastian. I don’t hear him saying things like that to his fiancée. Maybe you should take a page from his book.”

Gus stared over at her in shock, and her stomach sank as she realized her mistake.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“What the heck, Mer?” He breathed out in a huff.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to compare you to him.”

He made a sudden clicking noise with his mouth and gave his horse a little kick, moving quickly ahead to catch up with Skylar and his mom.

“Gus, wait up.” She didn’t dare try clicking or kicking out of fear that her horse might take off, so she kept riding slowly, falling behind the rest, feeling horrible for hurting his feelings when she knew how hard it had been for him to grow up in the shadow of his perfect brother.

When Merritt returned from the ride after everyone else, Sebastian was waiting at the stable to take care of the horse for her, but Gus was nowhere in sight. The fact that he’d ditched her was irritating, but she felt awful for what she’d said, so she decided to give him time to cool off and talk to him later.

She wandered to the house and spotted some of the family standing outside next to a newly arrived vehicle. Franky Middlebury stood there with a tall blonde beauty at his side. Merritt could only assume this was Ivy, the woman he had mentioned when they were in Michigan.

As Merritt approached, she noticed an unhappy Skylar and walked over to stand beside her. Putting an arm around her did little to turn her frown upside down.

Franky made his way around the group, greeting everyone with hugs.

“Nice to see you again, Merritt.”

“You too.”

“Keeping our boy in line, I hope.”

She laughed. “Of course.” She scanned the group, but Gus was not there.

Franky wrapped Skylar up in a bear hug next and lifted her off the ground. “Why didn’t you call me back?” Merritt heard him ask her quietly.

“Things were crazy at work.”

“Since when does that keep you from calling me?”

“Sorry.”

He turned back and held his hand out toward the blonde. “Skylar Schultz, this is Ivy Prescott. Ivy, this is Skylar.”

Ivy smiled sweetly. “It’s so nice to finally meet you. Francis has told me so much about you.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Skylar smiled politely, but Merritt could tell she was dying inside.

“Are you all right?” Merritt asked Skylar when Franky and Ivy were out of earshot.

Skylar pressed her lips together. “She’s so pretty.”

“So are you, Sky.”

She rolled her eyes and continued watching them. “I have to get over this before it ruins our friendship. He can already tell something’s up with me.”

“Don’t freak out. It’s only been a month, right? It probably won’t last.”

“Maybe. He doesn’t have a good track record for long term relationships.”

“See, there ya go.”

Skylar sighed. “I wish I knew what you did to get my brother to fall for you and become a one-woman man.”

Merritt chewed on the inside of her cheek. “I guess we came into each other’s lives at the right time.” She didn’t know what else to say since he hadn’t actually fallen for her.

“Well, I’ve been right here in Franky’s life for years, and it’s not working.”

“Don’t lose hope. You don’t know what might happen in the future.”

“Yeah.”

“In the meantime, be the best friend to him that you can be and show him what an amazing person you are. But also, don’t put your life on hold to wait around for him. Go out and meet people. Maybe you’ll meet someone else. You never know.”

Skylar groaned. “The idea of putting myself out there and trying to date sounds like a lot of work to me.”

“You don’t have to go out looking for guys or go on a dating app or anything, but just get out and have fun. Show Franky that you have a life outside of your friendship with him. Because you are a beautiful, strong woman, Sky. Any man would be lucky to be with you.”

“Keep talking.” Skylar smiled.

Merritt laughed.

“Thank you, Merritt.”

“You’re welcome.”

Skylar hugged her tightly. “I’m so happy to have you as my sister.”

“Me too.” Merritt’s heart ached because she meant it, and she hated the thought of losing Sky when all of this came to an end.

The snow fell softly from the dark sky outside as Merritt followed her new sisters across the deck toward the hot tub. Nervous flutters bombarded her stomach at the sight of Gus, who still hadn't said more than a few polite words to her since her blunder that morning.

Merritt took off her terry cloth robe, shivering as she tossed it over the railing, and climbed the steps behind Genevieve. Sinking into the steamy water was heavenly, and she took a seat across the hot tub from Gus, even though Genevieve went straight for Sebastian, and Skylar sat next to Franky.

"Where's Ivy?" Skylar asked Franky.

"She has a thing about bacteria in hot tubs and pools." He shrugged his shoulders.

Merritt could see how pleased Skylar was to have Franky all to herself.

"How come you didn't bring a date?" Franky bumped his shoulder against hers playfully.

"Well, my best friend was supposed to come with me, but he cancelled, so ..." She gave him a tight-lipped smile, and his expression turned sad.

"Sky, I'm so sorry. You should've said something."

She shook her head. "Don't worry about it."

"Look at that," Genevieve interrupted. Her eyes were focused on the sky as the heavy snow-filled clouds slid away, and everything around them became light and shadow as the bright moon revealed its face. "I see stars." She gazed over and smiled at Sebastian, who hadn't been looking at anything but her.

Merritt glanced over at Gus through the steam rising from the water. He was staring at the water bubbling in front of him, and she extended her leg across the space and tapped his leg with her toes.

He looked up at her, but his stare was completely devoid of emotion.

The others chatted for a while, and Skylar kept glancing between Merritt and Gus. “What’s wrong?” she mouthed to Merritt.

Merritt shrugged her shoulders.

“I have a great idea,” Genevieve said. “Who wants some hot chocolate? Made with Schultz Chocolate, of course.”

“Me!” Skylar said with a grin.

Merritt raised her hand out of the water.

“Can I help, babe?” Sebastian asked.

Genevieve nodded, and the two of them climbed out of the hot tub together. Sebastian sweetly wrapped a towel around her before he took one for himself, and they headed into the house.

“We’ll help too, won’t we, Franky?” Skylar smiled sweetly at him.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Sure.” He smiled as they followed the others into the house.

“That wasn’t subtle at all,” Gus said when they were gone.

“Yeah.” Merritt glanced back and forth across the width of the hot tub. “I guess this is a little too small for us to swim laps.” She thought that might get a chuckle out of him, but he gave her nothing.

“Can we please be done fighting now?” Merritt asked.

His eyes met hers, and she hated the coldness there.

“I didn’t mean to say it.”

“Maybe think before you speak, Merritt. Because I’ve shared a lot with you about my family issues, and you didn’t seem to give much of a thought before you threw it in my face.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m sure you are, but now I don’t know if you’re someone I can confide in or not, and that sucks.”

“I made one mistake, which I apologized for, and now our friendship is suddenly ruined?”

“Maybe.”

She instantly stood and climbed out of the hot tub, snatching the robe and roughly wrapping up in it as she marched across the deck. The water sloshed and the slap of wet footsteps followed her, but she kept moving into the house, past the hot cocoa preparation happening in the kitchen, and down the hallway to their room. She slammed the door and yanked off the slouching robe, throwing it across the room as the door whipped open behind her.

“You don’t get to stomp away mad,” Gus said.

“No? Because that’s pretty much what you did earlier, taking off on the horse, and leaving me to ride the trail all by myself. Thanks for that, by the way.” Sarcasm dripped from her words.

“Can you blame me after what you said?”

“Look, I get that you didn’t like growing up in your brother’s shadow. I’m sure it sucks to always be compared to him and feel like you’re not worthy. But there are worse things in the world, Augustus. At least you weren’t abandoned at a hospital at birth. At least you didn’t grow up poor and have to fight for every single thing you have.”

“Oh, boohoo. I’m pretty sure your dad would be crushed if he heard you say you grew up poor after how hard he worked to provide for you. You had two parents who loved you, a roof over your head, and food on your table. Poor Merritt.”

“Screw you!” She stepped forward and pushed against his chest. “You have an amazing family”—she pushed him again—“an awesome brother and sister you should appreciate more”—another push—“and a wife who wants you to forgive her for hurting your feelings.”

He grabbed her wrists, stopping her from pushing him again, and tugged her flush

against him. She felt the intensity of his gaze burning straight through her, sending chills from her head to her toes. Or maybe that was from standing there dripping wet from the hot tub.

And that's when she realized how close they were, the heat of skin against skin scorching every point where they touched, every butterfly in her stomach darting around chaotically. They breathed heavily, staring into each other's eyes, leaning closer. Her heart was thumping so loudly in her chest, she was sure he could hear it. His breath was warm against her mouth as his lips neared hers, and her eyelids slid closed in anticipation of what she was sure would be the hottest kiss of her life.

"I'm gonna take a shower." Gus dropped her wrists like hot potatoes and stepped away, disappearing quickly into the bathroom.

She let out an exasperated breath as she stood there alone, still breathing hard, heart racing, flutters in her stomach, completely frustrated from being left hanging. Her shoulders sank and her head fell forward as she realized how close they'd come to crossing the line she had been so adamant about drawing in the beginning.

She changed into her pajamas, crawled into bed, and when Gus came out of the bathroom half-an-hour later, she pretended to be asleep.

TWENTY-SIX

Gus awoke to the feeling of a warm, soft body wound around his. Merritt's breath was hot against his shoulder, which sent goosebumps over his skin. Her hand rested on his bare chest, and her legs were scissored between his. It was then that he realized his palm was on her hip, his thumb resting against the bare skin of her stomach that had been revealed by the shift of her tank top. Everything inside him wanted to touch her, to pull her closer, to give in to his longing to be near her. The same longing he had fought so hard last night.

Merritt let out a soft moan in her sleep, which had his body reacting and his mind going to places he didn't want it to go. They were married in name only. There could be no consummating of their fake vows, even though it had been a very long time since he was last with a woman, and the petite body pressing against his was doing things to him.

Just as he was about to roll away, her hand slid over his chest as she arched into him.

"Gus," she whispered as her velvety lips pressed against his shoulder, trailing gentle kisses toward his neck.

He softly groaned and closed his eyes. His thumb brushed back and forth against her smooth skin, but he gritted his teeth and stopped himself.

Nope. This is not happening.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He shifted away, removing his hand, and looked down into large brown eyes, staring up at him, wide with shock.

Merritt abruptly scrambled to her side of the bed. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Me?” He lazily sat up and stared at her. “This was all you, darling.”

“As if I would ever—”

“I’m pretty sure those were your hands and lips all over me.” He did his best to antagonize her, liking the blush on her cheeks and the fact that she was the one who did this. “Trying to take advantage of me in my sleep, wifey?”

She looked flustered. “I didn’t ... I never ... oh, shut up.”

“That’s all you’ve got? Shut up?” He couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

She bolted off the bed. Her hair was sticking up in every direction, her sleep shorts riding down on her hip, tank top strap falling off her right shoulder. She looked sexier than he’d ever seen her, like they had spent the night together for real.

“Stop looking at me like that!” she cried.

He turned his eyes down at the bed, feeling guilty for his perusal and for his body’s traitorous reaction.

“You’re sleeping on the floor tonight,” she snapped.

“Fine,” he snapped back.

“Fine!” She disappeared into the bathroom and turned on the shower.

He flopped onto his back and stared up at the ceiling, remembering her soft lips against his skin. He squeezed his eyes closed, trying to block out the thought of her, but other moments came back to him. Talking, laughing, racing each other across the pool, curled up on the couch watching movies, making truffles together. The adorable look of jealousy on her face over Rhonda. Her body pressed against his last night. The fake kiss they’d shared for the paparazzi.

He grabbed his phone from the nightstand and opened his camera roll. He knew he probably shouldn’t have, but he had saved a shot of their kiss from one of the tabloid websites to remember how real it had felt between them. He wanted to kiss her again. So badly. He’d wanted to kiss her last night and never stop. But he couldn’t.

He rolled over and buried his head in his pillow and groaned. He was attracted to his wife. There shouldn’t be anything wrong with that. But there was. Because of their friendship. Because of their agreement. This wasn’t a real marriage. And it had an expiration date.

Gus was seated at the breakfast table, sipping coffee with the family when Merritt joined them. Her hair was done, makeup on, ready for the day. He much preferred the way she had looked fresh out of bed that morning, but he pushed those thoughts aside.

“Good morning, wifey.”

“Morning.” She went to the coffee pot and helped herself to a mug, glancing at him over her shoulder. She didn’t join them at the table right away, instead leaning her hip against the counter, listening to talk of the day’s plans, which included decorating the

horse barn for the wedding.

“You could’ve had a coordinator and team flown in to put everything together,” Skylar told Genevieve.

“I know, but I wanted to hire someone local.” Her hair was separated into two braids on either side of her head, which made her look younger than her age, and she twisted the end of one around her finger as she spoke. “She has a small crew, but we’ll need some hands to help with moving tables and chairs and things like that so the schedule stays on track.”

“We’ll get it done, babe,” Sebastian said.

“Adelia will be here soon,” Gus interjected. “She can help.”

Skylar and Sebastian started laughing.

“I can’t really see Adelia cleaning a barn,” Skylar said.

“Adelia is a fabulous decorator,” Merritt told them. “Her parties are always lovely, and she does most of the decorating herself.”

“I agree,” Gus said. “And it’s not like she’ll be mucking the stalls.”

Sebastian and his bride exchanged glances.

Gus’s eyes widened. “We have to muck stalls?”

“Someone has to do it.” Sebastian shrugged.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Hey, I didn’t sign up for that. Don’t you have someone who does that for you?”

“I usually do it,” Genevieve replied. “Do you really want me to have to do that task right before my wedding?”

“I don’t ... I guess not.”

Sebastian and Genevieve looked at each other again and burst out laughing.

“We’re kidding,” Sebastian said.

Gus twisted his lips in disapproval. “Very funny. You two are the worst.”

They kept laughing as the sound of a car arriving caught their attention.

“That’s probably Adelia,” Merritt said.

All but Mom and Dad left the table. Gus and Sebastian went outside, while the girls stood in the doorway, attempting to stay warm on this frigid day.

The driver of the town car rounded the vehicle and opened the back door for Adelia, whose fur-trimmed hood made an appearance before she did.

“What a handsome welcome party I have.”

“Hey, Adelia.” Sebastian greeted her with a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Can I take your bag?”

She handed a small carry-on over to him and reached into the car, lifting her purse to rest over her shoulder.

“Traveling light, Deals?” Gus asked.

She let out a loud laugh as the driver popped the trunk, revealing two large suitcases and a garment bag. “Do you know me at all?”

He chuckled and opened his arms to her.

She hugged him tightly, then turned to face his brother. “Bash, you might want to look into getting some security up here for the wedding. I think I was spotted in town, and you never know who might want to make a buck and inform the paparazzi where we’re at.”

“It’s handled.”

“Oh? Do you have the local police in your pocket or something?” She winked.

“Something like that.”

“I’m impressed.”

“More like Genevieve charms everyone she comes into contact with, and the local authorities have put a couple officers on it for us.”

“Perfect.” She tipped the driver, who thanked her and drove away, and they headed into the house.

The girls’ faces lit up at the sight of their friend, and they pulled her into the warmth of the house and showered her with more hugs.

Gus entered just as Adelia and Merritt stepped apart.

Adelia glanced over at him then back at Merritt. "How's married life?"

"It's fine." Merritt didn't make eye contact with Gus. "How was your trip?"

"Uneventful."

"That's good."

Adelia went off with the girls while Gus and Sebastian moved her things to a guest room upstairs. When they returned, Genevieve's mom and Rhonda had arrived from their hotel to help for the day and Genevieve was making introductions.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Adelia, this is my mom, Ida, and my sister, Rhonda.”

“Hi, it’s nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Ida said.

“I’m a huge fan of your films,” Rhonda gushed.

“Thanks.”

Gus didn’t miss the look of annoyance in Merritt’s eye, and he liked that she was jealous.

“Genny, your hair looks so cute,” Rhonda told her sister. “Will you do mine later?”

“Sure.”

The doorbell rang then, and Genevieve went to answer it.

“Thea, you made it.” Genevieve ushered her inside. “Everyone, this is Thea Powell, the wedding coordinator. She’s the boss from now on, so you boys listen to her instructions very carefully.”

Thea laughed. “I have a few helpers with me too, and the supply trailers will be arriving shortly. We are going to transform your barn into the glamorous rustic wedding of your dreams.”

Genevieve clapped her hands together with pure glee.

Everyone grabbed their coats and headed out to the barn with Thea, who began doling out instructions.

Gus watched his brother and Genevieve, standing together just inside the barn. He had his arms around her lower back and her head was resting against his chest. She looked up at him with so much love in her eyes that it made Gus's heart ache. Sebastian gently tugged one of her braids before pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. Gus wanted that. He wanted what they had.

His gaze turned to Merritt, who stood across the room with his sister and Adelia. She was also watching the happy couple with a little smile on her face, and then she looked around the room until she saw him. Her eyes darted away the moment they made contact with his, but he didn't look away. He kept his eyes on her until she felt his stare and looked his way again.

Something was happening between them. Something he feared would ruin everything.

TWENTY-SEVEN

When Merritt first heard that the wedding would take place in the horse barn, she wasn't sure what to expect. But her breath rushed straight out of her lungs as soon as she stepped inside the immaculate building. It was clear that whoever had built this barn took the utmost care with its design. The roof was high with rafters and lofts above. The horse stalls had sturdy wooden doors with ornate black handles and hinges, and black lantern-style lights hung beside each, illuminating the wide, lengthy aisle that led to a sizable room at the end. Everything was in pristine condition, and their horses were darn lucky to have such a nice place to live.

With Thea in charge, the place quickly transformed into exactly what she'd said—the rustic wedding of Genevieve's dreams. Thousands upon thousands of twinkly lights were hung from the rafters. Chairs were brought into the room and a small stage was constructed for the ceremony. Tables and wooden benches were arranged along the length of the horse stall aisle, making one long dining table, with a little round table to one end for the bride and groom. Once the flowers and place settings were brought in on the wedding day, it was going to look truly incredible.

They worked throughout the day, finally stopping when a catering van arrived in the evening, bringing them BBQ from a restaurant in town. It was the best pulled pork Merritt had ever tasted.

Someone turned on the sound system that had been set up for the ceremony and started playing country music. The song "Boot Scootin' Boogie" came on, and Sebastian's laughter filled the room.

"Hey, honey, it's our song," he cried.

Genevieve cracked up laughing as he ran over and picked her up, spinning her around.

"Is this your first dance song?" Adelia asked teasingly.

"It's an inside joke," Genevieve explained when he put her down.

Genevieve and Rhonda took to the dance floor then and started teaching some line dancing moves. They looked like twins with their long blonde hair braided the same way and cowboy hats on their heads, but Rhonda was taller and less curvy than Genevieve.

Merritt's eyes searched the room for Gus to see if he was watching Rhonda, and she

was relieved to find that he was not. Stupid jealousy.

“Come on!” Skylar grabbed hold of her hands. “Let’s dance!”

Skylar dragged Merritt out there with her, and they were soon stomping, kicking, clapping, and twirling like they’d been doing it forever. It was a welcome finish to a hard day’s work.

The music turned slower, and everyone coupled up for a dance.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

Gus walked over to where Merritt still stood on the dance floor and held out his hand with a smile that made her weak in the knees. “Dance with me, wifey?”

She gave him a look of disapproval. “Only if you stop calling me that.”

“Not a chance.” He took hold of her hand and gently tugged her toward him.

Merritt’s nerves were frazzled after trying all day not to think about how she’d snuggled up to Gus that morning as a result of the dream she’d had—one where their almost kiss from last night had led to them kissing each other without reservation. When she’d opened her eyes and saw him looking down at her, a burst of happiness had rushed through her body for an instant before she realized it had only been a dream and that she had, in fact, thrown herself at him.

Hints of embarrassment and humiliation still lingered as Gus’s strong hands slid across her hips and around her waist, bringing her close. She settled into him, resting her hands against his chest as they swayed.

“So, what do you think?” He looked around the room.

“It’s going to be a beautiful wedding.”

Their eyes met briefly, and she looked away, watching Sebastian and Genevieve dancing in the center of the room, so in love with each other.

“I never asked how those two met,” she said.

Gus chuckled. “She worked at the Schultz Foundation and met him in the building on her first day, but she didn’t know who he was, so he pretended to be a guy from Public Relations.”

Her brow furrowed. “Why would he do that?”

“He liked her and wanted her to get to know him before the stigma of his wealth clouded her judgment. He had some bad relationships in the past that went south due to the money.”

“And he thought a lie was a good way to start a relationship?”

“Well, he didn’t really think that through very well.” He laughed. “But in the end, she forgave him.”

“Obviously.” She smiled, which quickly fell to a frown. “And now we’re the ones lying.”

His lips turned down too. “I know.”

“I hate lying to your family,” she spoke quietly so only he could hear. “It’s killing me. Every nice conversation I have with your parents makes me feel like a horrible person. Every time I start bonding with your sister and Genevieve, I feel like a total fraud. They’re all going to hate me.”

He squeezed her closer. “Nobody will hate you. It will all be on me.”

Franky suddenly began tapping a horseshoe against a metal stake, making a loud clinking sound as he pointed across the room at Sebastian and Genevieve. “Show us the love!”

“You’re supposed to clink glasses,” Skylar said.

“I improvised,” Franky said with a laugh. “Now, pucker up, you two!”

Sebastian dipped Genevieve back and planted a kiss on her lips, and everyone cheered.

He then left his bride’s arms and snatched the horseshoe from Franky, clinking it again, looking in the direction of Gus and Merritt.

Merritt’s stomach flipped, and she shook her head slowly back and forth.

Gus waved his brother away. “This is your wedding, Bash.”

“Hey! We didn’t get to do this for your wedding. Come on!” Sebastian said.

Everyone in the room chanted, “Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!”

Gus looked at Merritt and shrugged his shoulders. He let go of her and brought his hands to either side of her face, his eyes dropping to her lips. She licked her lips in preparation, and his fingers slid into her hair as he angled her head to one side and pressed his lips to hers.

The kiss was soft and gentle and quick, and all it got them was a room full of very loud booing.

Merritt giggled despite herself.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

Then Gus's eyes met hers again. This time, she saw determination along with a flash of the same look he'd given her last night, which sent a glorious warmth through her. And then his arms were around her, yanking her body against his, his mouth on hers in a matter of seconds.

She stood still at first, surprised by his intensity, but the perfect pressure of his lips against hers had her melting into him, her fingertips taking a journey from his solid chest, over his broad shoulders, and through the soft hair at the nape of his neck. The cheers and whistles in the room grew louder the longer their lips were touching and hit peak volume when Gus suddenly went for it and deepened the kiss.

She couldn't focus on anything but Gus kissing the heck out of her in front of everyone. And even as the applause died down and the sound of laughter and talking filled her ears, she was still lost in their kiss. She couldn't stop if she wanted to, and she didn't.

His arms loosened as his hands gently caressed her back, one sliding up the length of her spine, fingertips getting lost in her hair. She melted into him, lost in the sensation of his touch, his lips, everything about him.

Someone across the room cleared their throat, which finally put an end to their make-out session.

Merritt's cheeks were on fire as she glanced around the room. Nobody was really paying attention to them anymore. Except Adelia, whose eyes were wide and mouth hung open in shock.

She walked over to them with a smile on her face. “Nice show.”

“Thanks.” Gus looked proud, which filled Merritt with disappointment.

“It looked pretty real to me,” Adelia said quietly.

“Just good acting,” Merritt blurted.

Gus’s mouth opened as if he was going to say something, but he quickly closed it and walked away without a word. What was his problem?

TWENTY-EIGHT

Just good acting? What the heck?

Kissing her was unlike anything he’d ever felt before, and though it had started as a bit of a dare, he’d wanted to kiss her. He hadn’t meant to kiss her like that in front of everyone, but the more she kissed him back, the closer he wanted to get to her. He only took it deeper when he felt like she wanted him to. And he knew she did. That kind of passion couldn’t be faked. Just good acting my foot. There was an attraction there, no matter how much she wanted to deny it. She’d said his name in her sleep, after all. What was he supposed to make of that?

As the night wore on, Thea and her team departed, and the others headed into the house for the night. Gus watched Merritt walk out of the barn with Mom, but before he could follow, Adelia caught his arm and tugged him into an empty horse stall at the end of the barn.

Gus laughed as she peeked out of the stall, making sure the coast was clear.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

She faced him with arms crossed over her chest. “What is happening?”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “We’re standing in a horse stall in the barn where my brother’s getting married on Friday.”

She smacked his arm. “You know what I’m asking.”

He feigned ignorance. “I’m sorry. Could you be more specific?”

Her eyes narrowed.

“I guess you’ll have to spell it out for me.” He chuckled.

“I’m talking about you and Merritt.”

“What about us?”

“That kiss.”

He shrugged his shoulders coyly, which caused her mouth to spread in a giant smile.

“Augustus Schultz.” She gave his shoulder a playful tap. “You like her.”

“She’s okay.”

“Oh my word. You really like her. Just admit it.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“We’re friends, Deals. Married friends.”

“You’re friends now, huh?”

“We’ve gotten used to having each other around, that’s all.”

“You’re so full of crap.” She laughed. “I’ve never seen you like this with a girl before.”

“Like what?”

“Like in a real relationship.”

He pressed his hand over her mouth. “You take that back.”

She laughed into his palm. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of, Gus.”

“I’m not ashamed of something that isn’t true. Merritt and I are married in name only. You know this. And when the year is up, we’ll part ways, just like we planned.”

A gasp sounded behind them, and they looked over to see Skylar standing outside the stall.

“Sky,” Gus began, “I didn’t mean for—”

“Is that true?” Skylar’s eyes bounced back and forth between Gus and Adelia. “Your marriage isn’t real?”

Gus had no words, but he was sure the guilty expression on his face spoke for itself.

She shook her head disappointedly. “I can’t believe you would do this. What were you thinking?”

He let out a deep breath. “I was thinking I wanted to be taken seriously for once, that I wanted you all to see that I’m not the bad seed after all. Yes, I’ve made many mistakes, but I’ve changed, and I wanted a chance, but nobody would give me one. So, I found a way to clean up my image and show you all that I was capable of being a good guy.”

“By using Merritt?”

“She’s using me too.”

“How?”

“I’m helping her go global with her company.”

“So it’s all about the money.” She closed her eyes and shook her head back and forth sadly. “I was so excited for you two. You seemed so happy and in love. Do you even like each other or is it all for show?”

“Not at first. But I’ve come to really care for her. She’s one of my best friends, actually.”

Skylar looked somber, and her eyes filled with tears. “Nothing is ever the way we wish it was.”

“Sky, I’m sorry.” He took a step toward his sister, but Adelia stopped him with a touch to his arm.

“Come on, Sky. Let’s go talk.” Adelia took her by the arm, and they walked out of the barn together, leaving Gus feeling like he had once again let his sister down.

Gus made his way into the house and found Merritt in their en suite bathroom touching up her lipstick. The lipstick that he’d kissed away earlier. He got a goofy grin as he remembered, but wiped the look from his face before she saw him.

“Hey, you.”

She startled as she spotted his reflection in the mirror. “Hey.”

“Something’s happened.”

She snapped the cover onto the tube of lipstick and tucked it inside her cosmetics bag before turning to face him. “Is everyone okay?”

He took her hand and led her to sit next to him on the edge of the bed.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“What is it?” She eyed him hesitantly. “You’re scaring me.”

“Skylar overheard me talking to Adelia earlier.”

Her face remained straight, waiting for him to elaborate.

“She knows.”

Her lips parted. “She knows? About us? Our marriage?”

“Yes.”

Her hands clasped together tightly as she stared at the floor for long silent moments.

“So, what do we do?”

“Adelia’s talking to her now. I don’t know what we can do other than ask her to keep our secret.”

“What if she refuses? What if she tells the rest of your family? Then this was all for nothing.”

“Not all for nothing.” His eyes locked with hers.

“What happens then? Will I lose the rest of the funding for my expansion? Because it’s not my fault you opened your big mouth and she heard.”

Disappointment settled over him. “That’s all you care about? The money?”

Her head fell forward in defeat. “Not all I care about. But it’s a huge part of this for me.” She looked at him again. “And what about you? If they know, then there’s no point to this anymore. Right?”

“I guess not.” His stomach clenched at the thought of being apart from her, and he reached over and took her hand in his, winding his fingers through hers. “Let’s not freak out before we have a chance to talk to her. We can go to her together, plead our case.”

Merritt looked worried, and all he wanted was to comfort her. He let go of her hand and gently rubbed his hand up and down her back before pulling her into his side and pressing his lips to the top of her head.

“We’ll be fine. I think she’ll agree.”

“I don’t know. Your sister doesn’t seem like the kind of woman who plays games.” She paused. “We’ve gotten pretty close. She even told me—”

His brow furrowed, noticing the way she suddenly clammed up. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me, Mer.”

She sighed. “She confided something in me.”

“She did?”

Merritt nodded. “Something she doesn’t want people to know.”

His mind went crazy with all kinds of scenarios. “Is she okay?”

“Yes, it’s not her health or anything.”

“What is it?”

“I’m not telling you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “It’s going to drive me crazy now, wondering.”

“Too bad.”

“But a second ago, you were considering telling me.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“No, that was a slip up. I can’t believe I almost blabbed. I am a horrible friend.”

He searched her eyes. “Is it something that big? You have to tell me now.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t. It’s private, and I’m not going to betray her confidence.”

“Come on. Tell me.” He stuck out his bottom lip.

“Stop. That won’t work on me.”

He eyed her, and she pretended to zip her lips and throw away the key.

“Maybe I can get it out of you another way,” he said as he raised his hands, crooking his fingers just so.

“What are you—?”

Gus dug his fingers into her side. “Are you ticklish, Merritt?”

She pushed against his arms. “Are you crazy? What are you doing?”

“Tickle torture. It’s the only way.”

She screeched as she shoved at him and attempted to wiggle away, but he dove at her, pinning her to the bed, his fingertips digging into the spot below her ribs.

“Stop! Stop! Pleeese, Gus!” Her giggles were adorable.

The sound of the door squeaking open caused them to freeze in what appeared to be a compromising position. They looked over at Skylar and Adelia, standing in the doorway, amusement on their faces.

“Are we interrupting?” Adelia asked, grinning.

Gus rolled off of Merritt and let her up. She straightened her clothing and stood, while he remained seated on the bed.

“Are you sure this isn’t a real marriage?” Skylar asked, looking at them with uncertainty.

Merritt took a step toward her. The regret on her face was clear. “I’m so sorry, Skylar. I hated lying to you.”

“I’ve decided to keep your secret,” she announced.

“You have?” Gus stood then.

“Yes. We talked”—she nodded toward Adelia—“and while I think you’re both nuts for doing this, I understand your reasons. I won’t tell.”

Gus strode across the room and wrapped her up in a hug before she had a chance to move away. “Thank you,” he told her.

“You’re welcome.” She wrapped her arms around his back and gave him a tight hug. “You know I love you, right? And I want you back at the company with me.”

“I know. I love you too.”

When they let go, Skylar looked Gus in the eye. “Don’t make me regret this.”

“I won’t.”

She looked between Gus and Merritt. “I think you two care a lot about each other, and I hope that when this is over, we’ll still be able to have you in our lives, Merritt.”

Merritt brushed a tear from her cheek. “So do I.” Her expression said she wasn’t so sure.

Skylar went to her and gave her a reassuring hug.

Adelia joined in their hug, wrapping her arms around both girls, then giving Gus a hug. “I still think you’re crazy, but I love you both.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

When the three girls left the room, Gus stayed behind, making an excuse about using the bathroom. What he really needed was time to himself to process all that had happened. He should have been more careful talking about their agreement. He only hoped the truth wouldn't come out. So far, their plan was working like a charm. Merritt was winning them all over and showing everyone, especially his dad, that he was capable of change. But if Dad ever found out about this plan, he would surely see it as another of Gus's many screw ups, and he couldn't let that happen.

And the thought of losing Merritt was still hanging heavy over him. Imagining the house without her in it made his heart ache. He'd gotten used to having her close, inhabiting the same space, seeing her beautiful face each morning. He hated the idea of going back to living alone. She felt like family now, like that feeling people sometimes talk about—like coming home. There was comfort with her, but there was also chemistry.

What Adelia had said was right. That kiss had been real, for him anyway. He wanted to kiss her again. He wanted to be able to kiss her whenever he felt like it. Being close to her made him experience feelings he had never felt before. And the fact that they were friends first had ramped up the attraction in ways he had never expected. He'd never wanted someone and felt so close to them emotionally at the same time.

And then it hit him like a ton of bricks. It was more than friendship and more than physical attraction now. He was in love with his wife.

TWENTY-NINE

Something was up with Gus. He'd been acting strangely all last evening. He

should've been in a good mood after Skylar said she'd keep their secret, but when he emerged from their room, his expression had changed. He hadn't been his usual playful self. He had kept his distance, even going so far as to get up when she sat down beside him on the love seat. He'd said he needed a glass of water, but he didn't come back to sit by her after he got it. And at the end of the night, she'd gone to bed alone, while Gus had stayed up to talk with the guys.

And now, here Merritt lay in the early morning light, staring at his side of the bed. Empty. Bed still made. Pillow and blankets untouched.

She sat up and looked over his edge of the bed, wondering if he'd actually slept on the floor like she'd told him to, but he wasn't there.

She flipped her legs over her side as she sat up, wanting to find him to make sure he was okay. It was normal to want to comfort a friend, right? That's all this was.

After getting ready, she went to the kitchen to join those who were awake. She scanned the faces at the table and was disappointed that Gus was not among them.

"Morning," Adelia said as Merritt sat down beside her. "Did you just get back?"

"Back?" Merritt looked at her with confusion.

"From riding."

Her brow furrowed. "I didn't go riding."

Adelia's expression turned to confusion too. "I thought you went out with Gus."

"Why would you think that?"

She opened her mouth to speak but paused.

“What?”

“I saw somebody on the horse with him.”

“Who?”

Adelia shrugged. “I thought it was you.”

Based on Ida’s presence at the table, Merritt knew exactly who was on that horse, and a jolt of jealousy shot through her.

“I’ll be back.” She abandoned breakfast, deciding instead to find her husband.

She put on her coat and boots and walked toward the barn in time to see two horses coming up the hill. One carried Genevieve and the other Gus and Rhonda. Together. Her in front of him, leaning back into his chest. She was smiling and laughing, and Merritt suddenly wished she’d fall off and get trampled. Well, she didn’t actually wish her physical harm, but her mind quickly went to a bad place at the sight of her husband’s arms around another woman.

She mentally smacked herself because she had no claim on his affections. If he fell in love with Rhonda, she couldn’t fault him. The heart wants what the heart wants, as the saying goes. And she had known there was a possibility that one of them might meet someone during their fake union. But seeing him like that with Rhonda hurt more than she expected.

Merritt attempted to tamp down her jealousy because there was a more important issue to contend with. No matter how she was feeling and no matter what was going on with Gus and Rhonda, she needed to remind him of his agreement to remain

monogamous. A tabloid headline about an affair would humiliate her and do no good for his public image, not to mention the situation with his family.

As they neared, Gus avoided eye contact as he dismounted and helped Rhonda down from the saddle.

“Thanks for the ride.” Rhonda grinned at him then smiled politely at Merritt as she and Genevieve took the horses to the stable.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going riding?”

“It wasn’t planned. Gen’s mom and Rhonda came over from their hotel this morning. They were talking about going for a ride since they didn’t get to go with us the other day, and they invited me to go.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Why didn’t Rhonda take her own horse?”

“She hadn’t ridden in a while.”

Merritt rolled her eyes. “I don’t think you forget how to ride a horse.”

“Are you mad about this?”

“Do I look mad?” She knew she did, but she couldn’t help herself.

“We already talked about this. There’s nothing between me and Rhonda.”

“Maybe she wants there to be.”

“She doesn’t matter to me. You matter to me.”

The air between them was suddenly weighted with words unspoken.

“What if the paparazzi had been lurking out there and took a picture of the two of you together? It wouldn’t look good. For either of us.”

“Paparazzi in the middle of the forest?”

“You never know.”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that.”

“Just be careful, Augustus.”

His eyes met hers, and she wished she understood the look she saw there. She wished he would talk to her about whatever was troubling him.

“Why didn’t you come to bed last night?” she asked.

His throat moved as he swallowed hard. “You told me to sleep on the floor.”

“I didn’t mean it. I was just surprised by what happened.”

“You and me both.”

Their eyes locked again, and she nearly mentioned yesterday’s kiss. It had felt so real. Had he felt it too?

“Did you really sleep on the floor?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I didn’t sleep.”

“At all?” Her eyes widened.

“I couldn’t.”

Whenever something was weighing on him, like it obviously was now, a little crease formed in his forehead that she always had the urge to kiss away.

She instantly ignored that thought. “Why not?”

He ran a hand through his hair and nervously rubbed the back of his neck. “I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Did I do something?”

“You’re perfect, Mer.” The sweet sincerity in his tone made her heart ache. “That’s the problem.”

Merritt’s eyebrows wrinkled. “What do you mean?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

He was obviously holding something back.

“Gus?”

The crunching of car tires on the driveway drew their attention away.

“That’s my grandma,” he said.

“What were you going to say?” She needed to know.

Gus took her hand. “Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

Merritt reluctantly went with him, pushing aside her disappointment for now.

An elderly woman with bright smiling eyes climbed out and looked in their direction.

“Is that my sweet Augustus?”

“Hi, Grandma,” Gus replied as he walked into her open arms. “It’s wonderful to see you.”

She let go and gave him a once-over. “You look tired. Are you taking care of yourself?”

“Yes, Gram. I’m fine.”

“Hello, dear,” the woman said as she looked at Merritt.

“Hello.”

Gus took his grandma by the arm and held his hand out toward Merritt. “This is my wife, Merritt. Mer, this is Grandma Mabel.”

Merritt was taken aback at the strength in Grandma Mabel’s hug, given her petite frame. “It’s so wonderful to meet you.”

“My daughter has told me wonderful things about you.”

“She’s pretty wonderful herself.”

“It sounds like our Augustus here has finally found the right girl.”

The guilt over faking a smile and pretending happiness for this woman was strong. Gus hadn’t told Merritt much about his maternal grandmother, except that she was the only grandparent they had left on either side of the family and that she was a highly respected woman of great faith and integrity.

Merritt used to think of herself that way too. But now, she wasn’t so sure.

Was the success of her business really worth all the lying and deception? Here she was among the most wonderful people, who had welcomed her in as their daughter and sister and friend, and she was lying to all of them. And she hated herself for it.

“Hey.” Gus gently touched her arm. “I’m gonna help with her things and then I need to take a nap or I won’t make it through the rehearsal tonight.”

She was disheartened about their earlier conversation, but she understood.

Gus took a step toward her, wrapping his hand around behind her neck, bringing her

head closer to press his lips against her forehead.

She looked up at him with a closed-mouth smile. “Get some rest.” Her eyes followed him as he walked toward the house with one of Grandma’s bags.

He paused to glance back over his shoulder at her before he disappeared inside.

If only she knew what was going on inside that head of his.

After lunch, Genevieve surprised all the girls by taking them snowshoeing on their property. They all geared up with winter clothes and boots, snowshoes, and poles and headed out. The sky was bright and blue on the only clear afternoon they’d had so far. And while it was beautiful, Merritt was preoccupied, wondering if Gus was still asleep and what he had meant earlier before they were interrupted.

Merritt was bringing up the rear of the group, and Rhonda wasn’t too far ahead, so she sped up to reach her.

“Hey, can I talk to you for a minute?” Merritt asked her.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:19 am

“Sure.” She slowed her steps so Merritt could fall in beside her.

“This might seem like a strange question, but when you met Gus last summer, did you like him?”

“Yeah, he’s a nice guy.”

“No, I mean, did you have feelings for him?”

Rhonda pressed her lips together and seemed to think for a moment. “When I met Gus, it was the day my divorce was finalized. Genny and I went out to celebrate, and he was there with some friends. We talked and flirted, and we danced to one song. Then he left. That was the extent of it.”

“Oh.”

“Look, I know what this is about. I saw the look on your face when we got back from riding this morning.” She paused and looked over at Merritt. “This is harder than I thought it was going to be. Divorce, I mean. My husband was a despicable man, so I’m happy to be rid of him. But honestly, I’m lonely. Soon it will be a year, and I haven’t been on more than a couple dates, and both of them were losers.”

“I’m really sorry, Rhonda.”

“I’m the one who should be apologizing to you, Merritt. Gus is great. He’s fun and sweet, and he paid attention to me. It was wrong to ask him to ride with me like that. I knew it when I asked, but I just miss men, you know. I miss being held.” Tears were

in her eyes now.

“Rhonda, don’t cry. Your tears will freeze.” Merritt gave her a little smile.

Rhonda laughed and swiped at her tears with the back of her glove. “I hope you can forgive me. I wasn’t trying to steal your husband or anything.”

“I was just going to ask you to stop flirting with him,” she replied.

They laughed together, and Merritt’s heart went out to her. She felt bad for disliking Rhonda without knowing all she’d been going through.

“I’m really happy for my sister and Sebastian,” Rhonda said as she looked ahead at Genevieve, “but it’s not easy to be around all that love. And seeing you and Gus together ... well, it’s hard not to be jealous.”

Merritt was surprised to hear her say that.

“When I see the way you two look at each other, I can’t help but want someone to look at me that way too.”

They continued on their snowy trek, and Merritt was glad they had cleared the air. But she couldn’t stop wondering what it was that Rhonda saw that made her want what Merritt and Gus had.

That evening, Genevieve’s grandparents arrived for the wedding rehearsal, as did the pastor, wedding coordinator, and musicians.

Merritt had never been involved in a wedding before, so she had never attended a rehearsal. There was a lot more to it than just walking down the aisle. The wedding planner went over the order of the ceremony, the timing for walking in and out,

where they would stand. Once that was done, they ran through the entire ceremony—the music, seating the parents and grandparents, walking the aisle for the processional, the position of the bridal party on the stage, the vows. Sebastian and Genevieve didn't complain at all when they were asked to practice the first kiss as man and wife. In fact, they kept it going past everyone's applause, and Gus and Rhonda had to break them up, which gave everyone a good laugh.

Gus seemed more relaxed since his afternoon nap, and he kept smiling at Merritt from his place on the stage, which made her stomach flutter. She couldn't seem to take her eyes off of him. He was so handsome. More handsome than any man she'd ever known. And she loved being around him, spending time with him, being close to him.

Yesterday's kiss flashed through her mind, and she shook it off as her cheeks flushed. She really needed to focus on the rehearsal and remember why they were there.

But seeing Sebastian and Genevieve on stage made her long for a real wedding someday, one that proclaimed true love, not just a pretend version. Her mind wandered, and she pictured herself in a long gown, walking toward her groom, somewhere on the bluffs overlooking Malibu.

And when she pictured the groom at the end of the aisle, she saw Gus.

Her heart stuttered in her chest. She had only thought of Gus because of their current situation. That had to be the reason. Right? Maybe all Rhonda's earlier talk about the way they looked at each other was just messing with her head.

As the bridal party practiced the recessional, Gus's eyes locked with hers as he linked arms with Rhonda and followed Sebastian and Genevieve off of the stage. She managed a little smile at Gus, which slipped from her face the minute he had passed her by.

This was Gus. Her fake husband. Emphasis on fake. There was no denying the attraction between them, but this suddenly felt like more. So much more.

Her mind formed a question she already knew the answer to. Had her feelings for him changed?

She wasn't sure when it had happened, but she realized she'd been fighting this and lying to herself about her true feelings for a while.

Oh, this was very inconvenient. What was she going to do now? She couldn't let on that she was falling for him or things would get awkward very quickly. How would they make it through the rest of their year together with her feelings in the mix?

Because based on how he'd been acting, she was fairly certain he didn't return her feelings. And there was a very good probability she would walk away at the end of the year with a seriously broken heart.

THIRTY

Gus sat on a stool next to Franky at the local sports bar, watching his father and brother throw darts. They were having lunch together, while the girls were at the salon, getting beautified for the big day.

It was hard to believe Sebastian was getting married in less than six hours. Gus could still remember the day his brother met Genevieve and how crazy he was about her from the start. It was like he knew from the moment he met her that she was the one.

Gus's thoughts turned to Merritt. It was different with them. Their relationship mirrored his parents' in so many ways—from dislike to friendship to love. It felt like that's how it was supposed to be with them. He still couldn't believe how love had snuck up on him like this. But it had. She was in his heart now. And he needed to know if he was in hers.

He was torn. Maybe he would tell her how he felt tonight after the wedding. Or perhaps it was best to keep his feelings to himself and see if hers would grow into more. If she didn't already feel something for him, that is. But what if he told her and she didn't feel the same? The good thing they had going would be ruined.

But that was just it ... he wanted more than this. He wanted to be with her for real and for her to want the same.

"Penny for your thoughts," Sebastian said as he took the empty barstool beside Gus.

"I was thinking about the day you met Genevieve."

Sebastian shook his head. “That was the dumbest thing I’ve ever done, saying I was from the PR department and asking you to pretend to be me.”

“It was hard to be you,” he admitted. “You’re so darn perfect, and I’m so far from it.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m not perfect. Lying about who I was should’ve convinced you of that.”

“But you had good reasons.”

“There is no reason good enough to lie to someone you love.”

Gus felt sick to his stomach. Sebastian was right. Lying to Genevieve had nearly backfired for him. He’d nearly lost her. And Gus lying to the family about his marriage to Merritt was just proof that he needed to grow up and make mature decisions.

He blew out a deep breath.

“What is it?” Sebastian asked.

“I have to tell you something.”

He glanced around at the others. Franky was talking with Dad and the grandfathers, none of them paying attention to him and Sebastian. He lowered his voice. “Merritt and I ... we’re not really married.”

Sebastian’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“We’re married legally, but it’s not legit. It’s an arrangement.”

“What kind of arrangement?”

“I asked her to marry me to give me a more wholesome image so I could get back into the company, and I’m paying for her company’s global expansion.”

Sebastian’s mouth dropped open. “Gus, what the heck?”

“I know.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “But it’s gotten complicated.”

“It wasn’t complicated from the start?”

“Well, it was ... awkward at first, but now ...” He groaned and dropped his forehead to the counter.

“You’re in love with her.”

Gus lifted his head and looked over at Sebastian, who was smiling at him.

“I told you I’d never seen you like that with a girl before. I don’t care if it started as a lie, what matters is it’s real now. Am I right?”

“I love her. I’ve never felt this way before. It’s making me insane.”

Page 92

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

Sebastian chuckled. “I’m familiar with the feeling.”

Gus glanced at the others again then looked back at his brother. “You won’t tell anyone, will you? Because I know I have to come clean. And I will.”

“You really have changed, haven’t you?” Sebastian wore a thoughtful expression.

“I don’t know about that.”

“The old Gus never would’ve told the truth like that. You would’ve done whatever you could to divert the blame. I like this new you.”

“I’m trying. But obviously, I’m failing.” He frowned.

“Not at all. You came clean to me. You were honest. That’s a sign of positive change.”

Gus’s lips lifted into a smile.

“What are you going to do about Merritt?”

“I have to tell her.”

Back at the house, there was a flurry of activity. The guys were sent off to a small room in the loft of the barn so Sebastian wouldn’t see Genevieve having pictures taken with her bridesmaids outside.

“Looking good, bro,” Gus said as he straightened his brother’s tie.

“Where are your socks?” Sebastian asked as he looked down at Gus’s bare feet inside his shoes.

Gus glanced down. “I don’t suppose anyone has an extra pair.”

“You can’t not wear socks!” The panic in Sebastian’s voice made Gus laugh. With each passing minute, his brother became more and more anxious.

“Calm down, dude. I forgot them in my room.”

“Seriously? We have less than an hour!”

“Bash.” He took his brother by the arms. “I’ll get them. Don’t worry.” The color looked like it was going out of Sebastian’s cheeks, and Gus eyed him. “Hey, breathe.”

Sebastian let out the breath he’d been holding and took fresh air into his lungs.

“Are you good?” Gus asked.

He nodded. “I’m good. I just want everything to be perfect for her.”

Gus smiled. “It will.”

He stepped into his winter boots with bare feet and braved the cold outside. He hoped his socks were in their room like he’d told his brother.

As he walked toward the house, he spotted Genevieve standing in the snow next to her horse, Charisma, having photographs taken. She was a truly beautiful bride, and

he was sure his brother was going to cry the moment he saw her coming down that aisle.

Inside the warmth of the house, he began toeing off his boots.

“You’re not supposed to be in here.”

He looked up to see Merritt standing before him in a sleek black dress that hugged her curves in all the right places. His foot caught in his boot, and he stumbled to the side, grabbing one of the log pillars that separated the entryway from the kitchen.

She giggled. Oh, how he loved that sound.

He righted himself, eyes trailing down her body and back up again. He was certain he resembled a cartoon character with eyes popping out and tongue hanging on the ground.

“There are no words to adequately describe how good you look right now.” His voice came out deep and raspy, but he couldn’t help it. The sight of her did things to him. That and the pink blush of her cheeks at his words.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“You look pretty good too.” She gave him a shy smile.

It was then that he realized what she held in her hands.

“You forgot your socks.” She held them out to him. “I was just about to bring them to you.”

He didn’t know why that small gesture meant so much to him, but it did. And before he knew what he was doing, he had pulled her into his arms and crushed her to him. “Thank you.”

She laughed. “Uh, you’re welcome.”

He slowly inhaled the scent of her shampoo so she wouldn’t catch on to what he was doing. He was so completely gone for her. And he couldn’t bring himself to release his hold.

And then it occurred to him that she wasn’t moving either and she wasn’t pushing him away. Could this mean what he hoped it meant?

He loosened his grip a fraction and slid one hand along the back of her silky dress to her shoulder-length hair. He turned his head until his lips rested against her temple. He wanted nothing more than to kiss his way to her lips, but they needed to have a conversation first.

“Gus,” she whispered as she leaned back and looked up at him.

He wished he could read that look in her eyes. But then she stepped back, laying a hand on his chest, looking at him with friendly admiration, and the disappointment hit him straight in the heart.

“You really do look so handsome.” She nodded toward the door. “You should get back to your brother. The wedding’s going to start soon.”

“Yeah, I should. Thanks for the socks.”

“You’re welcome.”

As he walked to the barn, he made his decision. He had to tell her. Tonight. And if she didn’t feel the same, then at least he would know.

THIRTY-ONE

Considering the fame of the Schultz family, Merritt was surprised that Sebastian and Genevieve were able to keep their guest list to less than a hundred people. She liked small, intimate weddings, and this was the most beautiful one she had ever attended. But it wasn’t only the setting or decorations or music. It was the celebration of the love Sebastian and Genevieve had for each other. Their love was inspiring and true, and Merritt longed to experience a love like that.

Gus’s sock-induced hug earlier had made her wonder if maybe she wasn’t alone in her feelings. But she couldn’t dwell on that right now. After this weekend, she would see if something was still off with him and broach the subject then.

Merritt stood to the back of the room, watching her husband usher the guests down the aisle to their seats. He was a beautiful man, and she thanked God for allowing them to cross paths. If only she knew whether their paths would keep moving in the same direction or if they would part ways.

He walked toward her and held his hand out. “May I show you to your seat, miss?”

“That’s Mrs.”

“Well, your husband is a very lucky man.” The corners of his mouth turned up in a sweet smile.

She slid her arm through his, letting him guide her along the aisle. He stopped at the row where the Schultz family would be seated and leaned in to kiss her cheek before she took her seat next to the chairs reserved for parents and grandparents.

“See you after,” he said.

“Do you need a tissue in case you cry?”

He snorted. “Yeah, I won’t be crying.”

“We’ll see.” Genevieve had shared a little of her vows with Merritt and Skylar while she was working on them, and Merritt was fairly certain there wouldn’t be many dry eyes in the place.

The ceremony soon began, and Genevieve looked angelic, floating down the aisle in her lace wedding dress and long lace-trimmed veil. Sebastian couldn’t keep his eyes off of her as she approached, and it tugged at Merritt’s heart.

When it was time for the vows, Merritt pulled a tissue from her purse in anticipation of Genevieve’s vows, but then Sebastian began to speak.

“I never really thought much of love at first sight until that morning you walked into the gift shop. You were the prettiest woman I had ever seen, but you also caught my attention by insulting the cherry truffles ...”

Genevieve made a face to show her dislike of that flavor, and laughter filled the room.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“You didn’t know who I was,” he continued, “which was different and refreshing, and the more I got to know you, the more I found myself falling in love with you. You aren’t just beautiful on the outside, Genevieve, you have a beautiful heart and soul. You love people and the horses you care for at the rescue. You give of yourself every day to those around you, including me, and I wouldn’t be the man I am today if I hadn’t met you. You inspire me to be more, to do more, and I can’t wait to see all we will do together to better this world.” He reached up and touched her cheek. “I love you, and I promise to love, honor, and cherish you for as long as we both shall live.”

Merritt wiped a tear and caught sight of Gus quickly wiping at his eye, which had her stifling a laugh. Won’t cry, indeed. He looked at her and gave her a little shoulder shrug, and she couldn’t help but smile.

“I never knew what love was, Sebastian. Not until I met you,” Genevieve began. “Not until you gave up everything and moved out here to the mountains with me. You make me feel safe and secure. You make me laugh and smile. You hold me when I cry and support me in my passions. You fill places in my heart and my life that I didn’t even know were empty.” She pressed her lips together, clearly holding back tears. “I wish you had known my dad because you are exactly the man he prayed I would meet, and he would have loved you so much.” Sebastian wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb. “I love you, Sebastian Kurtis Schultz.” She winked at him. “And I promise to love, honor, and cherish you for as long as we both shall live.”

After the rings and a sweet first kiss were exchanged, the new Mr. and Mrs. Sebastian Schultz made their way out of the room to share a few quiet moments together before the bridal party walked back the aisle.

Merritt was anxious to be near Gus as she exited with his parents and Grandma Mabel.

There were many hugs and kisses and congratulations when they joined the newlyweds. The moment Gus saw Merritt, he came straight for her, wrapping an arm around behind her to bring her close to his side. She didn't have to fake a smile for his family anymore, because now that she knew how she felt about him, being at his side made her happier than she could've imagined. Even if he wasn't yet privy to her true feelings.

After some bridal party and family photos in the barn, everyone joined the guests in the reception area. Merritt looked around from her seat with Gus near the bride and groom's table. The completed decor was beyond beautiful. With the flower arrangements in place and candles lit, the place looked worthy of a bridal magazine, and she was fairly sure pictures of the event would end up on the pages of magazines with the groom being a Schultz and all.

When the delicious meal was finished, Gus was handed a microphone. "Wish me luck," he whispered into Merritt's ear before he stood.

She smiled up at him as he began to speak.

"I've always looked up to my big brother. He was excellent at everything he did, and I wanted to be just like him when I grew up. But I never made things easy for him. He was constantly taking care of me, cleaning up after my messes, being the best brother anyone could ask for. And I wish I could say that I've been as good a brother to him, but what I can say, what my wife reminded me of recently"—he turned his eyes on Merritt for a moment then back to his brother—"is that I appreciate you, Sebastian. I appreciate all that you've done for me over the years. I appreciate the way you've believed in me and prayed for me and always wanted the best for me. You never gave up on me, and you will never know how much that means to me."

Merritt glanced over to see Sebastian's eyes glistening with tears, and he wasn't the only one.

"I am so happy for you and Genevieve. You have found the kind of love we all hope to find. The kind that lasts a lifetime." He held his glass in the air. "And I still want to be just like you when I grow up." He looked out at the guests. "To Sebastian and Genevieve."

The clinking of glasses filled the room as Sebastian stood and embraced his brother. They held onto each other tightly, and Merritt noticed Sebastian speak into Gus's ear, but she couldn't hear what was said.

After the rest of the speeches, Sebastian stood and walked to the side of the stage, returning with a guitar. He came to stand beside Genevieve, who gave him a curious look.

"So, I wrote a little something for my wife."

Her hands went to her face as he proceeded to play a lovely song he had written for her.

Gus leaned close to Merritt and whispered, "Totally want to be like him when I grow up."

She smiled over at him and turned to ask, "What did he say to you earlier?"

"I'll tell you later." He smiled at her and looked back at his brother with a new admiration in his eyes.

It warmed her heart that he had taken what she'd said the other night seriously. Yes, it had been in the middle of a quarrel, but it had obviously stayed with him.

When Sebastian's song ended, Genevieve swiped the tears away and stood to kiss her husband. He then took her hand and walked her to the center of the dance floor as the music played for their first dance as husband and wife. He held her close, their foreheads together, as they swayed. Their connection was mesmerizing to watch.

Since Genevieve's father was no longer with them, they put their own twist on the traditional father-daughter dance, having Genevieve dance with her mother while Sebastian danced with his mother.

The bridal party joined them next. Merritt sat at the table alone while Gus danced with Rhonda. She knew she had nothing to worry about where Rhonda was concerned, but watching him hold another woman in his arms, those arms where she wanted to be, wasn't her idea of a good time.

When the dance was over, Gus sauntered toward her.

She pretended it didn't affect her, but her stomach was doing somersaults.

"Dance with me, wifey."

She rolled her eyes, secretly loving it when he teased her with that nickname, and took his hand, following him onto the dance floor. As soon as his arms were around her, holding her close, everything was right again.

"The wedding has been so beautiful," Merritt said.

He nodded. "It really has."

"And I saw those tears you tried to hide during the ceremony. You should've taken the tissues I offered."

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

He chuckled. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Whatever you say.”

His arms tightened around her back. “Thank you for coming with me. You’ve made quite the impression on everyone.”

“Your family is wonderful. I’m glad they like me because I really like them too.”

“What about me?”

She gave him a curious look. “What about you?”

“Do you like me?”

Her stomach flipped again at his tone. “You know I do.”

Gus pulled her closer, and goosebumps shot across her skin at his warm breath against her neck. Butterflies flew into action in her stomach when his lips brushed against her shoulder then the side of her neck on the way to her ear. “Because I more than like you, Merritt.”

Had he just said that? Did he really feel more for her?

She didn’t move, didn’t speak. Her mind raced, questioning whether she’d heard him right, until he shifted, moved one of his hands up to cup her cheek, and erased the distance between them, pressing his lips to hers. It was gentle, unhurried, and

romantic, and she felt it all the way to her toes.

This kiss wasn't for show. It was all for them.

THIRTY-TWO

They remained on the dance floor through another song as more guests joined in. Merritt was at home in Gus's arms, and she wanted to stay there all night. She glanced around the room at everyone dancing and noticed Skylar, standing alone to the side, watching Franky dance with Ivy not too far away.

"Hey, could you do me a favor?" she asked Gus.

He gently brushed a hair back from her face and let his fingers glide along the length. "Anything."

"Ask Ivy to dance for the next song?"

"Franky's girlfriend?"

Merritt nodded, and Gus followed her gaze to his sister. His eyes widened a little as they met hers again.

"Does Skylar have a thing for Franky?"

"Shhh!"

"She does! Is that the secret she told you?"

She put her fingertips against his lips to quiet him. "Yes," she whispered, "but you can't let on that you know."

He pressed a kiss to her fingers. “I won’t. But Sky and Franky? I never would’ve put them together.”

“Why not? They’re best friends.”

He ran his fingertips along her cheek. “Like us.”

“And like your parents. Friends first, then more.”

“More is good.”

His focus on her was so intense, she felt weak in the knees.

“About that ...” They really needed to talk about what was happening between them, but the final notes of the song came and blended into another. Merritt almost couldn’t rip herself away from his stare, but she remembered Skylar.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“Go on.” She gripped his arms and turned him in Ivy’s direction.

“Yes, wifey.”

Merritt shook her head and smiled as she went to Skylar’s side.

“Hey,” Skylar greeted her. “Are you having—”

Merritt quickly took her arm and moved in Franky’s direction.

“What’s happening?” Skylar shuffled along beside her.

They reached Franky just as Gus spun Ivy across the dance floor.

“Hello, ladies,” Franky said.

“Hey, Franky,” Merritt replied. “Looks like you’ve lost your dance partner.”

“It would appear that way. Would you like to dance?”

“I was about to get a drink, but maybe Sky would.”

He held his hand out to her. “Take a spin with me?”

Skylar smiled at him. “Sure.”

Merritt watched them move together, one of his arms sliding around her back, the

other holding her hand. They looked so comfortable, falling into easy conversation. It was good to see a smile on Skylar's face, and Merritt was glad she had intervened, if only for a five-minute dance.

As the night wore on, Merritt found herself watching Sebastian and Genevieve. They moved through the room, mingling with their guests, never far from each other. Sebastian was always touching her in some way—holding her hand, his palm against her lower back, playing with her hair. His complete devotion to her was apparent in every look and every touch.

And Merritt realized she had seen that same look in Gus's eyes when they were dancing earlier. The way he had gazed at her, touched her face, and kissed her so sweetly.

Merritt's nerves were suddenly in a tizzy as she watched Gus dance with Skylar, and she had to know if he wanted more from their relationship. But what if he said no? What if he wanted to keep their agreement as is? What if she opened her heart to him and he rejected her?

Adelia approached then, and as if she knew something was off, she took Merritt by the hand and led her to the horse stalls, pulling her into the farthest one.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

Merritt shook her head as tears threatened to fall. "I love him," she blurted.

"You love Gus?" Adelia's eyes widened.

Merritt nodded as she exhaled through her nose. "What am I supposed to do now?"

"What do you want to do?"

“I don’t know, but this has become real for me. And he said he more than likes me, but I don’t really know what that means. I don’t know if he’s where I’m at.”

“And where are you at?”

“I want him to love me the way I love him.”

Adelia smiled. “You have to tell him that then.”

“I’m afraid of what he’ll say. What if he doesn’t feel the same?”

“If you don’t talk to him, you won’t know.”

“You’re right.” Merritt paced back and forth as Adelia stood beside her in quiet support. “This is such a mess. Sometimes, marrying Gus feels like a huge mistake, and I wish we’d never done it.” She groaned. “I don’t want to be married to him like this anymore.”

Adelia stared at her. “You don’t?”

Merritt stopped pacing. “No.”

Adelia stood for a few long moments, deep in thought. “But marrying him has brought you this far. Not only has it helped your business, but you’ve found the man you love. I know it was a crazy plan to start with, but you wouldn’t be in love with him now if it hadn’t happened this way.”

“I know. I just wish it had been real from the beginning so we wouldn’t have had to deceive people. I love his family, and I feel horrible for all the lies.”

“So, what do you want?”

“I don’t want to pretend anymore. I want him to love me back and want to be married to me for real. I want to walk down an aisle like Genevieve did with Sebastian today. I want to write my own vows and promise to love him, for better or for worse, for the rest of our lives. That’s what I want. And I want it all with Gus.”

Adelia’s face lit up, and she threw her arms around Merritt. “I’m so happy for you.”

“You’re getting a little ahead of yourself. I don’t even know if he feels that way about me.” She stepped back and looked at her friend. “But I am going to tell him.”

“No time like the present.”

Merritt straightened her shoulders. “You know what, you’re right.”

Adelia gave her a nod of encouragement.

Merritt turned on her heel and left the horse stall in search of her husband, calling over her shoulder, “Wish me luck.”

THIRTY-THREE

Marrying Gus feels like a huge mistake, and I wish we’d never done it.”

Gus’s stomach bottomed out at Merritt’s words. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop when he went looking for his wife. He’d seen Adelia pull her away and went after her, determined to heed Sebastian’s earlier advice. Tell her how you feel, Gus. Don’t let her get away. But he reached the horse stall just as she’d said those words. After everything they had been to each other, after the kisses they’d just shared ... a mistake?

“I don’t want to be married to him like this anymore,” Merritt admitted.

“You don’t?” Adelia asked.

“No.”

His heart tightened in his chest, and he turned and walked rapidly toward the exit before they spotted him, leaving the warmth of the barn rather than heading back to the party. His dress shoes crunched on the freshly fallen snow as more fat flakes fell from the sky and landed on his nose and eyelashes. But he couldn’t feel the cold. Not now. He felt nothing.

His mind reeled, doubting every moment of their relationship until he was spiraling out of control. She had certainly been convincing when kissing him back earlier. His chest ached because he had thought that kiss was real. He had thought it was about

them showing each other how much they really cared, but maybe that's not what it was for her. Maybe she'd gone along with it for show. And he felt like a fool for believing she might actually love him back.

Gus walked past the house and down the long driveway. He knew people would probably start to wonder where he had run off to, but he couldn't go back there and face her. Now that he knew how she really felt about their marriage, he needed to figure out what to do next.

As he walked, the emotions overwhelmed him and spilled out with his tears. Before this night, he had never known what a broken heart felt like. Every part of him seemed to be affected—head pounding, throat tightening, heart aching, stomach churning. He would've preferred never to experience any of it. This was why he had steered clear of love for so long. But with Merritt, it couldn't be avoided. They don't call it falling in love for nothing. He fell, all right. And now he was suffering the fallout.

By the time he returned to the house, he knew what he had to do. He didn't bother returning to the reception. He went into the house, shut himself in their room, took out his phone, and dialed.

THIRTY-FOUR

Bright sunlight shone through the bedroom window, waking Merritt from sleep. She rolled onto her side, again disappointed to see an empty bed and even more disappointed about the way last night had ended.

So determined to tell Gus how she felt, she had searched every room in the barn with no success. When she finally turned in around midnight, he wasn't in their room, and she wasn't sure what to make of his disappearing act.

She sat up and stretched, glancing out the window at the fresh blanket of snow. It was beautiful but just the sight of it gave her the chills. She much preferred sunny California. Their flight was set for the afternoon, and while she loved being with the Schultzes, she was ready to go home.

Merritt looked at the clock on the nightstand, realizing she'd slept in a little later than usual. She rose to get ready for the post-wedding brunch with the family and noticed Gus's packed suitcase near the door. In the bathroom, all of his toiletries were gone from around the sink. He must be just as anxious as she was for home.

When she came out of the room, she found everyone scattered about the house. Harriet, Ida, and Rhonda were in the kitchen, preparing the meal, while Skylar and Adelia set the table. Ephraim was relaxing in the great room with a mug of coffee, chatting with Grandma Mabel and Genevieve's grandparents. Franky and Ivy were snuggled up on the love seat, and Merritt could see Skylar was doing her best not to look over at them.

"Can I help?" Merritt asked as she stepped into the kitchen.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“I think we’re almost finished in here. But maybe the girls could use a hand setting the table.”

She moved into the dining area as the door to the house opened and in walked the newlyweds, returning from a night away at a private cabin in the mountains.

“We’re home!” Sebastian called out.

The house filled with whistles and clapping, and Sebastian grabbed hold of his wife before she had a chance to take her boots off, dipping her back as he planted a firm kiss on her lips. Her cheeks were pink when he lifted her up to standing, but she was beaming. Marriage looked very good on them.

Merritt glanced over at Adelia and Skylar. “Have either of you seen Gus?”

They shook their heads.

“Did you two talk last night?” Adelia asked.

“No.”

“You didn’t?”

“I couldn’t find him.” A feeling of unease settled over her.

“Hey, has anyone seen Gus this morning?” Skylar called out.

“I saw him ride up on one of the horses a little while ago,” Franky replied.

Merritt was relieved. For a minute there, she was starting to get worried about him.

Sebastian volunteered to go find him and took off outside while the ladies finished preparing brunch.

After several minutes, Harriet placed the last of the dishes on the table as everyone took their seats. “Where are those boys?”

“Do you want me to go check on them?” Skylar asked.

The door opened then, and in they walked. Their expressions were somber, and Merritt was once again concerned.

“Looks like that won’t be necessary,” Harriet replied. “So glad you could join us,” she told her sons.

“Sorry, Mom,” Sebastian said.

“Sorry, Mom,” Gus echoed.

Gus came to sit next to Merritt, but he made none of his usual moves to show affection in front of the family. He didn’t even say good morning.

While the family talked and laughed, Gus remained quiet.

Merritt softly bumped his elbow with hers. “Is everything okay?”

He nodded almost imperceptibly. “Just tired.”

But something told her that wasn't the whole truth. And by the look on his face, she could tell something was definitely wrong.

The afternoon flight home to Los Angeles was as quiet and awkward as brunch. Gus spent the duration with his seat reclined, headphones in his ears, and eyes closed, while Merritt either stared out the window in frustration or fought the urge to grab hold of his arm and shake him.

And now, as they drove to their house in Malibu, they were barely communicating, and her mind was working overtime.

Gus's strange behavior had completely thrown her off and had her questioning whether or not she should talk to him about her feelings or wait until he finally told her what was going on.

By the time they walked into the house, she could stand it no more.

"Okay, seriously, what is wrong?" she blurted.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

He glanced up from whatever he was looking at on his phone. “Nothing.”

“That’s a load of crap, Augustus.”

He closed his eyes, and his jaw twitched like he was gritting his teeth.

“Did something happen with you and Sebastian? You left the reception early and then you looked upset when you two came in for brunch this morning.”

“It’s not Sebastian.”

“Then what is it?”

“Just leave it alone, okay?”

“This isn’t like you. Why won’t you tell me what’s wrong?”

“Just drop it.”

“But maybe I can help.”

“You can’t,” he snapped.

Her mouth fell open as he stood and disappeared down the hallway and into his room. The slam of his door made her jump. And that’s when it hit her that this wasn’t about his family at all. This was about the two of them.

She dropped into the nearest chair. Had she done something wrong? Maybe he regretted their kiss on the dance floor. Maybe he regretted all of this. Her eyes stung with tears, and she let them fall.

When their friendship had first formed, they had been able to talk about pretty much anything, and she thought it would always be that way. But obviously she'd been wrong since he'd clammed up on her so quickly. How could she make it right if he wouldn't tell her what she'd done?

After sitting for a while in the silence, trying to keep her sniffing to a minimum so Gus wouldn't hear, she made her way to the kitchen for a glass of water then went to sit outside. Staring at the pool only made her think of all the time she and Gus had spent there, and her heart ached with longing for him. The tears began to fill her eyes again. If only he would talk to her.

"Hey." Gus's voice startled her.

She turned to see him standing just outside the door, holding a water bottle, and quickly wiped a rogue tear away, hoping he wouldn't see her puffy eyes in the dim light.

"Do you want one?" He tilted the bottle toward her.

She pointed at her glass. "I'm good."

He took a few steps closer and looked up at the night sky but said nothing.

An excruciating minute passed with no communication.

"Don't forget, I have that trip to London tomorrow night." Merritt finally broke the silence.

“What time is that again?” he asked.

“It’s the red-eye.”

“Can you meet me on your lunch?”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Sure.”

“Twelve-thirty. I’ll text you the address.”

“Okay.” She smiled over at him, hoping for more conversation, but all she got was a good night over his shoulder as he shuffled inside.

“Night.”

She reclined and looked up at the stars, praying that things would be better tomorrow. At least lunch together was a step in the right direction.

THIRTY-FIVE

Merritt took a little more time applying her makeup the next morning. She had spent most of the night thinking about their lunch today, trying to decide if she should tell Gus how she felt about him or not. Of course, it would depend on whatever had been bothering him, which she hoped he would reveal.

When noon rolled around, she climbed into her car and entered the address of the restaurant into her phone. She wasn't sure where he was taking her since he hadn't given her the name. The thought that he might want to surprise her filled her with excitement.

But when she arrived, confusion clouded all other emotions at the sight of an office building. An office building she had been to once before.

Merritt tried to stay optimistic, but she was filled with dread as she entered the building and found Gus waiting for her in the lobby.

"I thought we were going to lunch," she said. "Do you have some business to take care of first?"

He motioned for her to walk down the hallway before him, leading her with a soft touch to her lower back.

She looked over at him, hoping he could read the fear and confusion on her face.

Gus opened the door at the end of the hallway, and the receptionist ushered them into

the office of attorney Rex Redman straight away.

“So nice to see you again, Ms. Christianson,” Rex said.

Merritt looked at her husband. “Gus?”

“Mr. Schultz has requested a dissolution of the marriage and the original agreement, effective immediately.”

“What?” Her stomach dropped as her eyes darted to Gus’s. “What did you do?”

“Just fixing a mistake.”

Her brow furrowed. “What are you saying?”

He took two steps and stopped before her, taking hold of her arms. “I’m saying you’re free. You don’t have to play house with me anymore.”

Tears burned her eyes, and she tried very hard to keep them from falling. “I don’t ... why are you doing this?” She swallowed the lump in her throat.

He looked pained when he stepped away. “I’ve already transferred the remainder of the money you were promised for the year into your account. It’s yours.”

“I don’t understand. What did I do?” Her chin quivered.

“You didn’t do anything.” His eyes met hers. “You were perfect.”

“What if this isn’t what I want?”

“I know it is. You don’t have to pretend with me, Mer.”

“I’m ...” She wasn’t sure anything she said would convince him to change his mind.
“I thought we were—”

“You can remain in the house until arrangements are made to move you back to your apartment in Santa Monica,” Rex interrupted, “and you’ll have to attend a meeting with a judge.”

“I’ll be gone to London for a few days for work,” she mumbled. “I’ll just go back to my place when I get home.”

“That’s fine,” Rex replied.

Gus stood quietly to the side.

Merritt turned to look at him. “Why would you do this? You didn’t even ask me if I wanted to end things early.”

“It was getting too complicated.”

“For who? For you?” Her voice cracked as she fought back a sob. “Why didn’t you talk to me first?”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“I didn’t need to. I know how you feel about this. I know how you’ve felt about it from the start. It was a stupid idea, and it’s over now.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes.”

Her hurt suddenly shifted into anger. She thought they were in this together, but he had made this decision without a second thought. And how on earth could he know how she felt about it if he didn’t give her a chance to respond. Was this because of his family? Because she had told him that she didn’t like lying to them. The more she thought about it, the more furious she became, until she was downright fuming.

“You know what, fine,” she snapped. “Give me a pen. I’ll sign.”

She yanked the pen from Rex’s hand, scribbled her name where he directed, and threw the pen at Gus. And just like that, her time as Augustus Schultz’s wife was over.

The anger that had rushed through her body kept the tears at bay until Merritt stepped outside the building, and then she lost it. She was a mess of tears as she drove, slapping the wetness from her cheeks as she made her way home. Well, not her home anymore, and that thought brought on more tears until she was loudly sobbing.

She pulled into the driveway and rushed to her room to pack for London. Half of the clothes in her suitcase were splashed with tears by the time she finished, but she didn’t want to be there when Gus came home, even if that meant leaving for the

airport much earlier than necessary.

Sitting alone at LAX for hours, staring at the planes coming and going, Merritt felt numb. It should have been a relief. He had given her all of the money she needed to keep going with her plans for Merritt Cosmetics without being obligated to stay married to him for a year. Anybody else who had agreed to such a situation probably would've been thrilled to get out of it early with the entirety of the money. But then, they probably wouldn't have been stupid enough to fall in love with their fake husband.

The sadness overwhelmed her. Gus didn't want to be married to her anymore, which meant he didn't care for her as she had hoped. Maybe he didn't even want to be friends anymore. The sobs began all over again at the thought of not having him in her life.

"Miss, are you all right?" An older gentleman in an airport custodial uniform stood over her.

Merritt nodded her head as she wiped at her cheeks.

"Here." He offered her his handkerchief.

"Oh, I don't want to get it all snotty." She grabbed her purse. "I have a tissue in here somewhere."

He lay the piece of fabric across her lap. "It's yours."

"That's very kind of you." She used it to dry her eyes.

"Whatever has you so sad will pass. Tomorrow is a new day."

“Thank you.” She smiled for the first time in hours.

“Have a safe flight.” He pushed his cleaning cart across the floor in front of him as he returned to work.

She knew what he said was true, but right now, it hurt. She’d never felt this kind of pain before, this excruciating feeling of loss, and she wondered how many tomorrows it would take to get over a broken heart.

Merritt’s plane touched down at 7:30 a.m. London time, and just as she was waiting for her suitcase at baggage claim, her phone signaled a text.

Gus: I thought you should know I’m going to see my parents to tell them the truth.

Her stomach dropped. Being part of their family had been one of the best things about this agreement, but once Gus spilled the beans, they would probably never want to see her again. It would really be over for good. She felt desperate to stop him, but she knew if she called and heard his voice right now, she would break down all over again. So she texted a reply.

Merritt: Can you wait until I get back? Please. We need to talk.

Gus: I think it’s best to get it out of the way as soon as possible.

Merritt: When are you going?

Gus: Tuesday.

Merritt: They’re going to hate me.

Gus: Nah. They’ll be too busy being disappointed in me. As usual.

She didn't reply. Her mind was whirling. She hated this. Only days ago, she thought things were changing between them. If only they could go back to that kiss at the wedding, to him telling her he more than liked her. What had happened between then and now that had made him end things?

Gus: I'm sorry, Mer. For everything.

His text brought tears to her eyes, and she couldn't bring herself to reply. She was confused and wanted answers. She deserved to know why he had ended their agreement so abruptly. But first, she needed a meal, a bath, and sleep to give her a clear enough mind to form a plan.

Maybe if Gus had all the facts, if he knew she loved him, things would be different. There was also a chance that it wouldn't change a thing, but it was a chance she was willing to take. She only wished she had told him before he'd done something so drastic.

THIRTY-SIX

For the past two days, Gus had been moving through a fog. Without Merritt in the house, everything seemed meaningless, and he was beginning to wonder if he should've ignored what he'd heard and let things go on as they had been. At least then she would be with him.

But that would've been selfish. He knew better now. He understood what it meant to put another person's feelings above his own. He finally knew what it felt like to fall in love, and he loved Merritt too much to make her stay in a marriage she didn't want to be in. No matter what they'd agreed to.

If only he hadn't heard them talking and remained oblivious for the rest of the year. But the end was inevitable, whether it happened now or months from now. He still would've had his heart ripped from his chest when she left, so it was probably best

that he got it over with.

As soon as she had signed the papers, the urge to bawl like a baby had nearly overwhelmed him. But he'd held it inside until she left, until he could get to his car, where he let the tears fall.

Secretly, he'd been hoping she wouldn't sign, that she'd say it wasn't all a mistake, that she wanted to stay with him. She had clearly been upset that he'd decided without asking her first, but he was sure that had to do with their friendship or him being controlling or something.

What he'd asked of her was preposterous, and he had made it right. And now he needed to make things right with his family.

His stomach was queasy and knotted up as he drove to his parents' house. Once he told them the truth, his chances of getting back into the family business would be slim to none. He only hoped they would respect his confession.

He was also determined to do whatever he could to shed the very best light on Merritt. She had developed a relationship with his family, and he didn't want her to look bad in their eyes.

When he pulled up to the house, Skylar's car was in the driveway, and a wave of relief flowed over him. He hadn't told her what this was all about. She would probably be upset at first, but he knew she would have his back. He hadn't told Adelia yet either, but she said she'd come over to talk when he returned to Malibu later that night. Their support would be needed to get him through all this without falling back into old habits. Although, the thought of drowning his sorrows at the nearest bar and taking a random woman home left nothing but a bad taste in his mouth. Just the thought of other women felt like a betrayal to Merritt. She was the only one on his mind and would be for a long time.

Gerard greeted him with his usual kind manner and directed him to the family room.

What he found there—or rather whom—knocked the air out of his lungs.

Merritt stood next to the fireplace, alone in the room. She looked so beautiful, and he fought the urge to go to her and take her in his arms.

“Hi,” her sweet voice greeted him.

“Mer? What are you doing here?”

“I hopped on a flight home after you texted me.”

“What about your meetings?” He took two steps closer to her.

“I postponed them.”

A few more steps toward her. “Why?”

“Because I love you, Gus, and I can’t let you do this to us.”

His stomach flipped at her confession, and his heart beat rapidly in his chest. “You love me?”

She nodded with the prettiest little smile on her face.

“But ... you told Adelia you didn’t want to be married to me anymore.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. “How do you know that?”

“I overheard you talking in the barn.” He looked guilty. “I didn’t mean to.”

She huffed. “If you’d listened to our whole conversation, you would’ve heard me say that I didn’t want to pretend anymore, that I wanted to be married to you for real and have a real wedding and—”

He was across the room in three more steps, taking her face in his hands, and capturing her mouth with his. The feel of her lips against his, returning the kiss, no more pretending ... it was the greatest moment of his life.

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“Gus.” She whispered between kisses. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

He leaned back to look at her and smiled at the tears he found in her eyes. “I love you, Merritt. I think I have since the moment you plowed me down with your car.”

She laughed, causing a tear to slip down her cheek.

He kissed the salty trail it left behind. “I was afraid to tell you how I felt because I didn’t want to lose you. I wanted you to stay with me. And I hoped maybe your feelings would change before the year was over. But when I heard you talking to Adelia ...” The pain of it returned and he paused. “I had to let you go.”

She ran her fingers through the hair above his ear. “I’m sorry you misheard that conversation.”

He shook his head. “I should’ve talked to you before I called Rex. I just didn’t want you to feel trapped in this situation. I wanted you to have your freedom, and I hoped that maybe someday there would be a way to have you in my life. Even if only as a friend.”

“I don’t want to be only friends.”

“What do you want?” He wanted to hear her say it again.

But instead, she stepped back and dropped to one knee.

His mouth fell open. “Mer, what are you doing?”

She smiled up at him as she took hold of his hand. “Augustus Paul Schultz, will you marry me ... again?”

He chuckled as he pulled her up from the floor, scooping her into his arms as if carrying her over a threshold.

She let out a surprised cry and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Is that a yes?”

“That’s a heck yes. I’d marry you again this minute.”

“I’d like a real wedding. One I can invite my parents and friends to. Can we do that?”

He brushed his nose against hers. “Yes, baby. We can do whatever you want.”

She kissed his lips softly, then gazed into his eyes. “Whatever I want?” The look she gave him quickened his pulse.

“You drive me crazy, you know that?” He nuzzled her neck and pressed a kiss there.

The sound of Gerard clearing his throat turned their attention his way.

“Your family is waiting, sir.”

He placed Merritt back on solid ground and took her hand as Gerard motioned them toward the kitchen.

“Good morning, darling.” Mom greeted him with a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

“Morning, Mom,” he replied with a squeeze.

“Come, sit,” she told them.

Gus was surprised to see Sebastian and Genevieve seated at the breakfast table with their father. “I thought you two were on your honeymoon.”

“We rerouted here first. We’re leaving tonight,” Sebastian replied.

Gus hesitantly sat down in a seat between Skylar and Merritt. Why did it feel like he was about to be ganged up on?

“Merritt told us why you were coming home,” Dad said.

Gus swallowed hard. “She did?” His eyes turned to Merritt, and she gave him a supportive closed-mouth smile.

“I’m sorry, Augustus.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

Gus looked at his father with surprise.

“I’m sorry for not seeing the changes in you sooner, son. I’m sorry for not giving you the chance you deserved, for making you think you needed to go to impossible lengths to prove you’re worthy to be a part of our business.”

Gus bit down on the inside of his cheek, trying to hold back the tears.

“When you have children of your own, I hope you never have to experience what it’s like to watch one of them destroying their life.” Dad got choked up, which wasn’t something he did in front of them often, and Gus felt his own tears breaking through. “You are our son, who we love dearly, and we’ve only ever wanted what was best for you. I didn’t know that asking you to step away from the company for a while was going to do more damage. I only wanted you to have time to get your life in order, and I prayed you would come back stronger.”

“And maybe you and Merritt didn’t start off in a traditional marriage, but she’s good for you. I’ve seen more change in you in the past two months than in the past year.”

Gus was ashamed. “I’m sorry for lying to you all. I was desperate to show you that I’d changed, but you wouldn’t see it.” He looked at his brother. “When I thought about being a man worthy of Dad’s respect and admiration, I thought of you, Bash. You’ve always had that, and I’ve always wished I did.”

Dad’s head fell and when he looked at Gus again, tears were spilling from his eyes. “I never meant for you to feel that I didn’t respect you, Augustus. It hurt to see you struggling, that’s all. And I tried to help in the only way I knew, with tough love. It’s

how I was raised, but I never considered that it might make things worse.”

“It’s all right, Dad. I’m fine. And despite the stupid things I’ve done in the past, I’m in a good place.” He put his arm around Merritt. “I have this beautiful woman by my side, and I’m going to keep working on being a better version of myself.”

“We want you to come back,” Dad said.

“What?”

“To Schultz Chocolate. We want you back. As president.”

Gus looked over at his sister, who was smiling at him. “Sky, I don’t want to take anything away from you. You’ve earned your position.”

“Stop. You know I want you there. We’ll be co-presidents for now, and when Dad officially retires, one of us will take over as CEO.” She grinned deviously. “May the best woman win.”

He stuck his tongue out at her, and she returned the favor.

“Okay, kids,” Sebastian piped in.

They all laughed, which lightened the mood in the room substantially.

Gus looked over at Merritt. “I’m going to have to discuss this with my wife first, of course.”

“I thought you weren’t married anymore,” Skylar said.

“We haven’t met with the judge yet, so technically we still are,” Merritt replied.

“But even if we weren’t, Merritt just proposed, and I said yes,” Gus announced.

The table filled with joyful gasps, high-fives, and congratulations.

“That’s so wonderful.” Mom’s hands were clasped together happily.

“We’re so pleased,” Dad said.

“It feels weird to congratulate you guys since you’ve already been married for two months,” Skylar said with a laugh, “but I’m so happy you fell in love for real. I was kind of mad you got married the first time without us.”

“I know you were,” Gus said.

“Now we get to plan another wedding!” Skylar exclaimed.

“Maybe you should quit your job and become a wedding planner.”

She gave him a sarcastic look. “You’d like that wouldn’t you.”

He shrugged, and they both laughed.

Merritt squeezed Gus’s hand. “Will you go with me to talk to my parents today? I need to tell them about us and about my business.”

Source Creation Date: June 28, 2025, 8:20 am

“Of course, I will.” He placed a soft kiss on her lips. “Hopefully it’ll go better than last time.”

She chuckled. “Don’t hold your breath.”

He smiled.

“So, what are you thinking for your wedding,” Skylar said.

“Will you get married here or in California?” Genevieve asked.

Gus listened contently as the ladies chatted about wedding plans. He couldn’t believe all that had happened in a day. Only hours before, he thought he’d lost everything, and now he had everything he’d ever wanted.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Are you sad?” Gus stood in the doorway of Merritt’s empty Santa Monica apartment, watching her walk through the space one last time.

“I have so many good memories here.” She stopped in the center of the living room. “It’s so weird seeing it empty like this.”

Gus walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, resting his chin on her shoulder. “You can still change your mind and keep it if you want.”

She leaned her head against his. “What would I do with it?”

“It could be our love nest.”

Her soft chuckle brought a smile to his face. “I don’t need it.” She turned in his arms. “I have a home with you, and that’s the only place I want to be.”

He pressed a soft kiss to her lips. “For those couple of days you were gone, the house felt emptier than this place does right now.” He leaned his forehead against hers. “I never want to be apart from you again.”

“Neither do I.”

He smiled. His cheeks hurt from smiling so much lately. He’d never been so happy in his life.

Merritt gave him a quick kiss and pulled away to look around the room once more.

He took her hand in his. “Are you ready?”

She nodded, and they headed out into the streets of Santa Monica.

“Can we walk down to the pier before we go?” she asked.

“Yeah, let’s.”

They walked along the street and down to the beach, strolling along the water for a while until they took a seat on the sand near the pier.

Gus wound his fingers through hers and pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

“I’ve been thinking about the wedding,” she said, “and as much as I would love to get married here, I think we should do it in Michigan.”

He looked over at her with surprise. “You do?”

“Yeah.”

“But what about your dream of us getting married on the bluff in Malibu?”

She smiled over at him. “We’ll be splitting our time between here and there anyway. Our families are there. And I think my parents would appreciate it. They’re not much for travel.”

“We can fly them here. This is our wedding, and it should be what we want.”

“This is what I want.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” She kissed the back of his hand and smiled. “What do you think?”

“I’m in.” He twisted into her, kissing her firmly as he laid her back onto the sand.

“Augustus.”

Gus pressed soft, feathery kisses to her nose, her lips, her cheeks, her neck until he had her giggling. He lifted up to look at her. “You’re not supposed to laugh. I’m trying to be romantic.”

“It tickles.”

He went in again, kissing slower with gentle pressure. This time she didn’t laugh. He rolled so he was above her, and she reached for his head, bringing him up to look at her.

“You sure you don’t want that love nest right now?” He knew she wanted to take things slow and wait until they were officially committed to each other, not just by their fake courthouse vows, but he was finding it difficult to resist her.

She giggled again. “What was it Granny Schultz used to tell you? Take your—”

“Take your time, Augustus.” He gave her a cute crooked smile, and she pulled his head down to whisper in his ear.

“Don’t rush perfection.”