

His kiss 1001

Chapter 1001

Billy's expression flickered almost imperceptibly. Since when had Mr. Moss become so direct in his methods? Was he planning to win Miss Gabriela over through sheer generosity?

"Also," Wesley continued, "find out what Gabriela plans to wear to the banquet, and have Iliana coordinate something appropriate for me."

Iliana was Wesley's personal designer, responsible for most of his wardrobe choices. Billy understood his employer's intention immediately and gave a respectful nod. "Understood."

He turned to leave, then hesitated at the door and came back.

"Mr. Moss, one more thing. Miss Gabriela has accepted an invitation from the founder of SK Elite Boutique to attend his personal showcase next Wednesday."

Wesley, who had been only half listening, went still.

The young man from the art exhibition. Gabriela had introduced him plainly: "Leo, the founder of SK." After they had parted that evening, Wesley had not bothered to look further into him.

But now —

His brow drew together. “Find out everything there is to know about SK’s founder. Detailed information. All of it.”

Billy read the shift in his employer’s tone with practiced accuracy and asked no further questions. He left at once to fulfill the task.

Leo, the founder of SK Elite Boutique, was a renowned international designer known for his mysterious yet deliberately low-key presence.

It took Billy two days to compile a thorough report:

“Leo Strickland, age thirty. Born in Silvermoon Village, a rural settlement in the countryside of Xamfield. He left his hometown at the age of ten under the guidance of Darryl and later studied design under him. By twenty, he had earned his international fashion designer certification and staged a fashion show in Ewraso featuring his own distinct style — though recognition came slowly at first. At twenty-two, he designed clothing for a noblewoman in Ewraso. Two years later, he was invited to design for Princess Alvira at a high-profile royal banquet. At twenty-five, he established his brand, SK Elite Boutique...”

Wesley studied the report in silence.

Leo’s background appeared straightforward enough — but the mention of Silvermoon Village in Xamfield gave him pause. If his memory served him correctly, over two years ago, when he had accompanied Myah for her eye treatment, the family they had stayed with bore the surname Strickland. And the name “Leo” stirred something faintly familiar.

Wesley pointed at the words “Silvermoon Village” and said, “Find out which Strickland family Leo belongs to.”

Most residents of Silvermoon Village shared the Strickland name, but whether Leo was specifically the son of Patrick and Adalynn was still uncertain.

Billy made a call immediately. The investigation was straightforward, and by that evening the answer came back: Leo was indeed Patrick and Adalynn’s son. He appeared largely detached from Silvermoon Village and rarely returned. The villagers did not speak of him warmly, criticizing him for abandoning his roots despite his success and contributing nothing back to the struggling community.

After hearing the report, Wesley recalled that during their stay with the Strickland family, the warm-hearted Adalynn had mentioned a son named Leo. Could Gabriela have met him during that visit?

Chapter 1002

Due to his earlier health complications, Wesley’s memories from that period were incomplete. He remembered Adalynn mentioning Leo’s name, but could not piece together how Gabriela had come to know him afterward.

Sensing his employer’s displeasure, Billy stayed quiet and waited.

Wesley tapped his fingers on the desk once, twice, then said, “Clear my schedule. I’m going to Xamfield in two days.”

On Tuesday, Gabriela left work early, organized her outstanding tasks, and set off to Xamfield with Alissa.

Alissa was in an exceptionally high mood for the entirety of the journey.

“The mastermind behind SK personally invited you as a guest! Gabriela, you’re really something — you’re going to be famous!” Gabriela felt a headache forming behind her eyes. She leaned back in her seat, desperate for sleep, but Alissa was far too animated to allow it. She quietly regretted bringing her along.

Alissa’s so-called fiancé, Huntley, was still residing with the Hopkins family — and had since moved himself into Alissa’s room. On one occasion, Alissa had come home to find him trying on her dresses, bags, and even her lipstick. At one meter seventy-eight, Huntley was not a slight man, and Alissa’s dresses looked comically absurd stretched across his frame — yet he seemed entirely unbothered, admiring himself in the mirror for a considerable length of time.

That night, Alissa suffered nightmares about being forced to marry him. In the dream, they wore matching outfits that resembled costumes more than wedding attire, the same shade of lipstick, and identical high heels — and the crowd erupted in laughter during the ring exchange. She woke drenched in sweat, so unsettled that even gentle, mild-mannered men made her flinch for days afterward.

Since then, she had avoided going home entirely, constantly evading her father’s attempts to drag her back and push the engagement forward. Gabriela’s villa had become her only refuge. If Gabriela hadn’t brought her on this trip, Boden would have found her by now.

“Alissa, settle down,” Gabriela said.

Seeing the exhaustion plainly written on Gabriela's face, Alissa swallowed her remaining questions and pressed her lips together. Gabriela fell asleep against the seat shortly after.

She was genuinely worn out. Since expressing her wish to join Everglow Group, Matthew had thrown himself into organizing a grand event to formally announce her identity, consulting her on every last detail — including the flowers — with an enthusiasm that left no room for rest. Gabriela was not accustomed to large gatherings of that kind and had initially wanted to decline the whole affair. Then she had caught a glimpse of Lauren standing near Matthew, eyes full of venom beneath a strained smile — and changed her mind entirely. “Dad,” she had said, “I don’t know much about these things. You decide.”

That had only made Matthew more enthusiastic.

Alissa shook her gently awake sometime later. “Gabriela, we’re here.”

Gabriela opened her eyes and followed Alissa into the hotel to check in.

They had just reached their room when a quick, familiar voice called out from down the corridor. They turned to find Leo and his assistant approaching at a brisk pace.

Chapter 1003

“Gabby, I’m sorry — I meant to come and get you earlier, but things have been relentless today.” Leo looked genuinely apologetic.

“Don’t worry about it,” Gabriela replied easily. “Alissa and I travel often. We manage perfectly well on our own.”

Leo was dressed in a casual white pullover, light gray trousers, and sneakers — the kind of effortless weekend outfit that needed no thought. His hair was slightly unkempt, evidence of a long and busy day. Despite it all, there was an ease and warmth to him that made his company immediately comfortable.

Alissa leaned in close to Gabriela and murmured, “He called you Gabby?”

It was a notably familiar nickname — the kind reserved for people who knew each other very well.

“He’s older and sees me as a junior,” Gabriela murmured back, nudging Alissa’s head away. The full explanation — that Princess Alvira and Presley often referred to her as “Gabby” when speaking with Leo, and that the nickname had simply carried over — was not something she could easily get into here. She had tried correcting him several times. He had not stopped. At some point, making an issue of it had started to feel more self-important than the nickname itself warranted, so she had let it go.

“You look tired,” she told Leo. “Please rest.”

Leo did not argue. “If you need anything at all, call me or my assistant.” His assistant stepped forward and handed business cards to both Gabriela and Alissa.

They exchanged goodbyes and were on the verge of parting when footsteps sounded from further down the corridor. Billy’s voice carried ahead of him.

“Miss Gabriela — what a coincidence.”

Gabriela turned. Wesley was walking toward her, dressed in a perfectly tailored suit, his stride long and unhurried, his bearing carrying its usual quiet authority. His expression was unreadable as his gaze swept across the group before settling, without haste, on Gabriela.

“Wesley,” she said, her surprise genuine. “What are you doing here?”

For reasons she could not immediately account for, asking the question seemed to make Wesley’s expression darken rather than ease.

Wesley’s displeasure was understandable.

Gabriela’s tone had carried no particular warmth at seeing him — and while the slight stung, he recovered quickly, his composure settling back into place. “There’s an important project in Xamfield I need to look into,” he replied evenly. “I came early to survey the location.”

Billy’s eye twitched almost imperceptibly.

There was no such project. The man had postponed two days of meetings at Moss Group headquarters simply to come to Xamfield and keep Gabriela in his line of sight. Billy had noticed that Wesley treated Stewart — a long-established rival — with a certain dismissive confidence. But Leo, who had appeared from nowhere only recently, seemed to put Wesley on a different kind of alert entirely. And yet here they were, accompanying a guest at a fashion show, dressed up as a business reconnaissance mission.

Since the pretense had to be maintained, Billy was already quietly working through how to make the fiction hold without requiring an actual site visit.

Chapter 1004

Gabriela did not press the matter. “I’ll head in first,” she said simply. After nearly five hours on the road, exhaustion had settled deep into her, and sleep was all she wanted.

“Get some rest,” Wesley said.

Just then, Gabriela noticed Billy using a room key to open the door directly adjacent to hers.

She paused and looked again, making sure she had read the situation correctly.

Wesley met her gaze without a flicker of self-consciousness. “By coincidence, I’m next door. If you need anything, feel free.”

Before Gabriela could respond, he had already stepped into his room.

Alissa whisked Gabriela into theirs and shut the door behind them. The moment it clicked closed, she turned with barely contained excitement. “There is absolutely no way that is a coincidence. Wesley is here for you — it’s obvious. And telling you to reach out anytime? He doesn’t want you spending time with Leo unsupervised.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “Honestly, Gabriela, I think you two should

consider reconciling. Plenty of couples go through rough patches and come out the other side. Life is short — it goes faster than you think.”

Her father’s infidelity had shaped her mother into someone who perpetually compromised. Alissa had grown up believing that practical partnership often mattered more than idealized romance.

“Stop talking nonsense,” Gabriela said, without much heat. “Shower, mask, sleep.”

Alissa, who took her beauty routine very seriously, sprang into action. She showered, applied a whitening mask, instructed Gabriela to remove it in exactly fifteen minutes, and was horizontal on the bed with her eyes closed before Gabriela had finished washing her face.

Gabriela smiled faintly at the efficiency and settled in beside her.

She lay quietly, Alissa’s words drifting back through her thoughts. Life wasn’t long. That was true enough. But she was a sound sleeper, and her mind did not linger on heavy things when rest was available. She drifted off before she could overthink any of it.

The next morning, the two made their way to the hotel lobby.

Rodrigo, Leo’s assistant, was already there waiting to escort them for styling. They exchanged greetings, and since the hotel offered an extensive breakfast spread, the three of them found a table and settled in.

Wesley and Billy arrived while the food was still being served.

The lobby was filling up quickly, and seating was becoming scarce. Wesley approached the table. “Mind if we join you?”

Knowing everyone present, Gabriela could hardly refuse.

Wesley and Billy sat down. Alissa noticed almost immediately that something was off — Wesley’s brows were drawn together, his expression carrying a faint but unmistakable sourness. Beside him, Billy looked utterly deflated, like a dog that had just been reprimanded.

This was Billy — the Billy, the gold-standard assistant of the corporate world — looking like a scolded puppy.

Alissa could not help herself. “Billy, what’s wrong?”

Billy appeared to have been waiting for precisely this opening. He exhaled a long, mournful sigh. “We came to Xamfield to assess the feasibility of combining a resort villa with an amusement park. Unfortunately, I brought the wrong documents. The site visit may have to be scrapped entirely.”

Gabriela stared at him.

Billy, legendary for his competence, had brought the wrong documents. She found this almost impossible to believe.

Alissa, however, looked genuinely sympathetic. “Oh no — is it too late to have them sent over?”

Gabriela was more speechless still. Her assistant, usually sharp enough to spot a scheme from three rooms away, was buying this?

Billy, following Alissa’s compassionate lead, deepened the lament. “Far too late, I’m afraid. It may throw off Mr. Moss’s entire schedule.”

Alissa glanced at Wesley’s thunderous expression, then brightened with inspiration. “It’s just a site survey — it doesn’t have to happen today. Since the documents aren’t here anyway, why not join us at the fashion show instead?”

The storm on Wesley’s face cleared with remarkable speed.

Billy gave Alissa a discreet thumbs-up behind his teacup. She had just solved the problem he had been quietly agonizing over since breakfast. He turned to Rodrigo at once. “Would it be possible for us to attend?”

Rodrigo did not feel authorized to agree on his own and excused himself to call Leo. Leo, upon hearing the request, was characteristically welcoming.

After breakfast, when Gabriela and Alissa went for their styling, Wesley and Billy came along.

Rodrigo led the group to SK Elite Boutique's private styling studio. The space was polished and quietly intimidating — the kind of environment that reminded visitors exactly whose name was above the door. The stylists received Gabriela and Alissa with warmth and genuine enthusiasm, working on their looks with careful attention.

Wesley and Billy, being men, required no styling — a well-cut suit was sufficient. They were shown to a pair of chairs on the side and served premium tea while they waited.

By the time Gabriela and Alissa were nearly finished, Leo arrived at the studio, fresh from the show venue, carrying two garment bags with practiced ease. "Gabby, I had a dress prepared in your size. You should wear this today — please." His manner of offering was so natural and unassuming that it felt less like a gesture and more like a quiet certainty.

Gabriela had brought her own dress and was about to decline politely when Alissa cut in, eyes bright. "Leo, is there one for me as well?"

An SK Elite Boutique gown was well beyond her usual budget, and the opportunity was too extraordinary to let pass simply on Gabriela's behalf. Leo smiled warmly and gestured to the bags beside him. "Miss Hopkins, yours is right here."

The stylist immediately swept Alissa away to change.

Gabriela watched her go, then reached for Leo's box — and found Wesley suddenly there beside her, extending a gift box of his own.

“Gabriela,” he said, his voice measured. “Wear this.”

Gabriela blinked.

“How did you—” How did he have a dress with him? A woman’s dress, specifically?

Wesley answered before she could finish, his expression carefully composed. “I arranged for it last night when I heard you would be a guest at the show.”

Billy grumbled inwardly, keeping his expression neutral with some effort.

Chapter 1006

That outfit had been carefully prepared well before they ever left Okburg. One lie demands many more to hold it up. The real question now was simple: which dress would Gabriela choose?

Gabriela did not deliberate long. Today’s occasion centered entirely on SK Elite Boutique’s fashion show — choosing anything other than an SK gown would be a slight to Leo that she had no intention of making. As for Wesley’s feelings on the matter, she set them aside.

She reached for both boxes with a smile. “I’ve gained a little weight recently, so I’ll try both. I’ll wear whichever fits better.”

Leo laughed softly. "I'm sorry for not being more thoughtful about that."

A shadow passed briefly across Wesley's eyes — there and gone. It did not matter how much power a man held. If the woman did not choose him, all of it amounted to nothing.

Billy, having no interest in navigating his employer's romantic complications, quietly retreated to the nearest corner and made himself as unobtrusive as possible.

Then Alissa emerged from the changing room.

She wore a deep blue dress, cinched at the waist, the silhouette drawing the eye along every elegant line of her figure. Billy turned — and went completely still. The lifelong bachelor, the consummate professional who had never once allowed personal feeling to interfere with duty, found himself staring.

She looked stunning.

Alissa caught his expression immediately, crossed the room with unhurried grace, and smiled up at him. "Billy, don't you think this dress is particularly beautiful?"

Since the incident in which she had accidentally unfastened his belt, he had avoided her with the discipline of a man who had learned his lesson. Had Wesley not been pursuing Gabriela so persistently, Billy might have managed to go the rest of his career without speaking to Alissa again. He nodded now, almost automatically. "Beautiful."

The moment the word left his mouth, he felt the heat creep up to his ears. He turned sharply away.

Alissa noticed the flush and gave a quiet, delighted laugh. “Thank you for the compliment.” With a freshly styled updo and the deep blue gown settled perfectly around her, she felt genuinely pleased with herself. The stylist finishing the last adjustments offered earnest praise — and Alissa found herself eager to see what Gabriela’s transformation looked like.

She did not have to wait long.

Gabriela stepped out in the SK outfit first — a wine-red gown with a deep V neckline and a soft, wavy cut that made her fair complexion luminous. A matching waist band added a precise detail that lifted the whole design. Her hair was loosely gathered at the back, and the overall effect was radiant without trying to be — confident in a way that required no announcement.

Alissa stared.

She had always known Gabriela was beautiful. She simply had not fully grasped what that beauty looked like when given room to unfold.

She restrained herself from rushing forward and clinging to her, barely. “Gabriela,” she breathed, “let’s just stay together from now on. You don’t need to work anymore — I’ll handle the company. You only need to stand there and look exactly like this.”

Chapter 1007

Gabriela, mildly unsettled by the intensity of Alissa's gaze, turned to the mirror instead.

She studied herself and considered the situation carefully. The SK Elite Boutique fashion show — even held in Xamfield — was a significant event in the fashion world, and reporters would be everywhere. A wine-red gown with a deep V was striking, and striking was precisely what she did not want to be today. If her appearance drew more attention than her work, she risked being dismissed as a decorative presence rather than a professional one. That kind of impression, once formed, was difficult to undo.

Before she had quite reached a conclusion, she noticed Wesley's expression darkening. The deep neckline, the vivid color — the look in his eyes made his thoughts perfectly legible.

Before he could say a word, Gabriela spoke first. "The wine-red doesn't quite work with my complexion. I'll try the other one."

She slipped away to change.

Wesley's choice was a water-blue dress — understated, refined, the hemline falling below the calf. Gabriela looked at herself in the mirror and felt a quiet relief settle over her. She turned to Leo with a slightly apologetic smile. "Sorry — this one feels more comfortable, and it coordinates nicely with Alissa's color."

Leo smiled warmly. "Wear whatever feels right. You look wonderful in either."

Alissa nodded with great conviction.

The faintest smile crossed Wesley's lips. His expression shifted — the storm had lifted — and something almost satisfied settled in its place.

With everyone styled and ready, they made their way to the fashion show center.

The venue was extraordinary. Luxury cars lined every approach, and the guests arriving in them were equally impressive — prominent figures from across industries, top designers, celebrated celebrities, and international names that needed no introduction. Reporters and media personalities moved through the crowd with cameras raised, working the scene with practiced efficiency. The atmosphere rivaled the grandeur of the Namlan banquet Wesley had once taken Gabriela to.

As their group entered, the energy of the room shifted for just a moment. Several heads turned. Their combined presence — the ease with which they carried themselves, the way they occupied a space — drew attention that even some of the celebrities nearby could not quite command. Camera lenses swung in their direction.

Leo was on the verge of steering Gabriela toward some of the key fashion insiders in the room when the event's main coordinator appeared at his elbow. "Mr. Leo, there are several details requiring your sign-off." He excused himself and handed their care over to Rodrigo before heading off.

In Leo's absence, several prominent guests who recognized Wesley came forward to exchange pleasantries. Wesley was not naturally drawn to social performance, but he engaged patiently — building connections at Crownridge Group's headquarters required precisely this kind of endurance.

Alissa leaned toward Gabriela and murmured, “Your Wesley really does stand out, even surrounded by people like these.” She glanced at Gabriela’s face and, reading the silence correctly, said nothing further.

Chapter 1008

After a short while, Rodrigo appeared beside them. “Miss Gabriela, the show begins in approximately twenty minutes. Please allow me to show you to your seats.”

Leo had reserved VIP seats with the most unobstructed view of the runway. Gabriela nodded and followed Rodrigo.

As she moved through the crowd, she caught a glimpse of two familiar figures standing in a nearby corner — Cindy and Rebecca, watching. Even across the distance, the animosity radiating from them was unmistakable.

Gabriela raised her eyebrows slightly.

What were these two doing here?

Judging by the hostility radiating from them, they had come looking for trouble. But Gabriela had nothing to hide and could not think of a single angle they could use against her. Besides — with Cindy’s particular brand of dim-wittedness, every scheme she had ever hatched had ended with her embarrassing herself rather than anyone else.

Gabriela could not be bothered to spare them another glance. She followed Rodrigo to her seat without a second thought.

Wesley settled into the seat beside her immediately. Cindy and Rebecca filed into the row behind them — the Howard family name carried weight, but in a room full of genuine movers and shakers, it was not quite enough to secure the front row. They ended up in the third.

Rebecca watched Wesley's open attentiveness toward Gabriela and felt the envy tighten in her chest like a fist. She gripped the armrest hard enough to whiten her knuckles. If Cindy failed to humiliate Gabriela publicly today, Rebecca thought she might not be held responsible for what she did next.

Five minutes before the show was set to begin, Leo appeared — and to everyone's mild surprise, he had Stewart with him.

Stewart had no particular fondness for fashion shows. But upon hearing that Gabriela would be in attendance, he had made an exception. In an instant, two of Okburg's most prominent heirs found themselves occupying the same fashion event. They exchanged brief greetings with Gabriela and the others, then took their seats.

Alissa, wearing an SK Elite Boutique gown herself, spotted Leo's arrival and immediately offered him her seat beside Gabriela. It was the natural thing to do — the influential guest deserved the best position. The gesture left her sitting next to Billy.

Billy did not approve. He had thought well of Alissa this morning. Now she struck him as rather too flexible in her loyalties. He said nothing, however — the lights were dimming — and sat perfectly straight for the duration, pointedly not engaging with her.

Leo's fashion show opened with two distinct themes running in alternation. The first drew from Oswa aesthetics — ethereal and graceful, the skirts of the gowns flowing as the models moved, as though the runway had been briefly inhabited by something otherworldly. The second was wholly Western in spirit — lavish, bold, and unapologetically dramatic. The contrast between the two created a visual tension that kept the eye moving and the mind engaged.

Chapter 1009

Gabriela watched with genuine absorption. Occasionally she leaned over to murmur something to Leo about a particularly striking piece. Leo listened carefully each time and asked whether she had thoughts for improvement. The exchange between them was easy and natural, creating a quiet orbit that others found difficult to enter.

Wesley's expression was less than pleased.

He found himself thinking, not for the first time, about the early days of his relationship with Gabriela. He had carried into it an unconscious belief — one he had never examined and would not have acknowledged at the time — that Gabriela, coming from modest origins, ought to depend on him, look up to him, and be grateful for his attention. He had always viewed her from slightly above. He had assumed she would love everything about him, including the power and the wealth, and that assumption had made him careless in ways he was only now beginning to fully understand.

But Gabriela had become so exceptional, so quietly formidable, that she no longer needed anything from him. And that had produced the unsettling sensation — more illusion than reality, he told himself — that he might not deserve her.

Which was precisely why he was more driven than ever to take control of Crownridge Group and become the most powerful figure in Okburg.

Fortunately, his private turbulence did not outlast the show. The opening event concluded after eighty minutes.

As the crowd began to flow out of the venue, Leo fell into step with Gabriela and explained the schedule for the following six days. Other fashion brands would join the proceedings from tomorrow onward, leveraging the SK name to open their own markets. “The next six days won’t be SK’s main event,” Leo said. “If things are busy for you back home, Gabby, there’s no obligation to stay.”

He meant the words. He also hoped she would not take them too literally.

He owed her something — he had used her name without her knowledge to manage his parents’ expectations, and the guilt of that had not left him. He wanted to repay it by introducing her to as many key people in the industry as he could while she was here.

Gabriela did not give a direct answer. She smiled and said she would see how things stood at the company.

They had barely reached the exit when Cindy suddenly pushed through the departing crowd toward Gabriela, two men with cameras following in her wake.

“Gabriela — I’ve heard the handbag you recently designed caught the eye of Princess Alvira and spent several days on international fashion trending lists. Is that right?”

Her intent was transparent before she had finished the sentence.

Gabriela did not slow her pace or acknowledge her, simply angling her path around Cindy and walking on.

Cindy stepped directly into her way again. “With such a newsworthy topic, why are you avoiding it? Is there something you feel guilty about?”

Gabriela glanced at her sideways. “Why would I be guilty of anything?”

Chapter 1010

The journalists who had been preparing to leave paused. They recognized the name Gabriela — the designer who had created Princess Alvira’s now-famous handbag, who had been personally escorted into the venue today by Leo himself. Any story touching her was worth staying for. Within moments, nearly every reporter remaining in the building had gathered around them, cameras raised.

This was exactly the scene Cindy had arranged.

She smiled, her confidence blooming. “Gabriela, you have been studying under Presley for just over two years. How did you manage to produce a piece that earned international recognition in such a short time?” She pressed forward. “And Shu embroidery — one of the most technically demanding of Oswa’s four great embroidery traditions — how did you learn to design the patterns, construct the style, and execute the embroidery yourself in under two years?”

She had consulted multiple Shu embroidery specialists in preparation. Every one of them had said the same thing: achieving that level in two years was ninety percent likely to be fabricated.

Leo's eyes went cold. He turned to Rodrigo. "Which outlet does this person represent? How did someone like this get credentials for my show?"

Rodrigo looked equally caught off guard. All press credentials were screened carefully. This had never happened before.

A flicker of discomfort crossed Cindy's face. Being called "someone like this" — a paparazzi, essentially — in front of a crowd was humiliating. And the humiliation, in her mind, was Gabriela's fault.

Before the organizers could untangle the situation, Wesley had already moved. He stepped in front of Gabriela, fixing Cindy with a gaze cold enough to stop her breath. "Leave. Now."

Faced with the full force of Wesley's presence, Cindy's legs nearly gave way beneath her. But the cameras were rolling. She was a Howard. No matter how powerful Wesley was, he would not do anything in front of a live audience.

She steadied herself and lifted her chin. "Mr. Moss, we are simply asking whether the handbag Gabriela designed for the princess was genuinely her own work. Surely that is a reasonable question?" She glanced past him at Gabriela with deliberate contempt. "Or does she only know how to use underhanded methods and hide behind men?"

The words landed hard — sharp and precisely aimed, with live cameras capturing every syllable and renowned international journalists recording the moment.

Leo stepped forward as well, his voice quiet but without warmth. “Miss Espinoza. Please leave the venue. Any concerns you have may be addressed privately.”

Facing both men, Cindy felt the pressure closing in. She looked around for Rebecca. Rebecca gave a small, sharp shake of her head — she was not about to appear on camera — and left Cindy entirely to herself.

Cold sweat gathered at Cindy’s back. But she turned to Gabriela one last time. “Don’t you have anything to say? Are you afraid of the cameras?”

“What would I be afraid of?”

Gabriela stepped out from between Wesley and Leo. She looked at Cindy with an expression that had gone entirely flat. “What exactly do you want?”

The triumph in Cindy’s eyes was immediate. She smiled. “Prove that you completed that handbag on your own. Show everyone your real skills — right here, right now.”

Gabriela almost laughed.