

His kiss 111

Chapter 111

The grating, syrupy voice scraped against Gabriela's nerves the moment it reached her ears. She didn't even need to look—Vivian. The same woman who had once tried to ruin her at Grace Robuchon by accusing her of stealing a necklace.

Gabriela didn't bother to turn around and look at Vivian because of their grudges.

The sales assistant, still perfectly composed, offered a courteous explanation. "I'm sorry, Miss. This is a limited-edition piece, and there's only one set available."

Vivian let out a bright, almost giddy laugh. "Only one set? Perfect—I'll take it!" A rare piece like this was exactly what she needed to give her brother and keep him off her back.

Still smiling, the sales assistant shook her head slightly and stated, "Miss Haynes has already reserved it."

At that, Vivian's gaze darted straight to Gabriela, her voice sharpening to a blade. "And what exactly are you doing here?"

Gabriela slid her card across the counter, her tone brisk as she told the sales assistant to wrap the suit.

“None of your business.” She turned, her lips curling into a frosty smile. “What—do you own this place now?”

From the moment they were classmates in high school, Vivian had looked at Gabriela with nothing but disdain.

At Grace Robuchon, she had once falsely accused Gabriela of stealing her necklace—all for the pleasure of publicly searching her and savoring her humiliation.

But fate had flipped the script that day. Gabriela had been dining with her boss, and Vivian’s scheming backfired so spectacularly, she wound up in custody for three days.

When she finally got out, her older brother had ripped into her, then locked her at home for a long stretch to reflect.

Today’s outing was only possible because he’d allowed her to tag along with Phyllis on a gift-shopping trip.

And of course—because life had a twisted sense of humor—the very first person she bumped into was Gabriela. What miserable luck!

With a voice dripping sarcasm, Vivian drawled, “Why is it that every time I step into an upscale place, I find you there too? So Phyllis was right all along—you actually bagged yourself a guy with deep pockets.”

She swept a pointed glance around the store. “So, where on earth is he now? Not here to swipe his card for you?”

Gabriela’s lips curved in a sugar-sweet smile, though the chill in her gaze could have frozen glass. “I’m paying for my boyfriend’s clothes myself—why would I make him pay?”

That smile was the one thing Vivian despised most, and the sight of it made her blood boil. “Have you even looked at the price tag on that suit? That’s a hundred grand—your entire year’s salary, if that. I know you want to make your boyfriend happy, but this purchase will make every bill payment painful.”

Her tone sharpened with feigned generosity. “Tell you what—sell it to me for double. You can walk away richer and spare yourself the trouble.”

Gabriela’s head snapped toward Vivian. “Double the price?”

“Absolutely.” Vivian’s chin tilted, her smirk dripping with condescension, already picturing Gabriela losing her temper.

Before the tension could spark further, Phyllis stepped in, her voice sugarcoated. “Gabriela, Vivian has her heart set on that suit. Why not let her take it?”

Instead of bristling, Gabriela let out a short, amused laugh. “Double? You think that’s an offer? Bring me a million, and it’s yours.”

Vivian's mouth worked soundlessly, fury flashing in her eyes. Her family's wealth was undeniable, but her allowance had limits. A million she could scrape together—spending it, however, would leave her nearly penniless for the rest of the month.

Gabriela arched a brow and turned to Phyllis. "What's the problem? Your friend can't swing it? Maybe you can pitch in and help her out."

Phyllis's brows knit together in disapproval. "It's only that Vivian likes the suit, so why make a fuss?"

Heat climbed up Vivian's neck, her frustration making her voice sharp. "Is your life really that pathetic you have to squeeze money out of people?"

"I'm not forcing anyone here," Gabriela countered, her tone deceptively light. "You're the one who offered double. If that's still too low for me, I have every right to push the price higher."

Then she let her voice drop to a mocking murmur that carried clearly through the boutique. "If you can't afford it, maybe stop pretending you belong in high society. The two of you are utterly vain."

The insult hit home. Both Vivian and Phyllis stiffened, their faces frozen in rage. The sales assistant, hiding her amusement, passed the neatly wrapped suit to Gabriela and said pleasantly, "Miss Haynes, if it doesn't fit your boyfriend, you're welcome to bring it back for alterations."

Gabriela accepted it with a subtle, knowing smile. “Thanks.”

Vivian’s lips curled in a sneer. “What’s there to be so smug about? Spend all you want—your boyfriend might not even be yours alone.”

“Sounds like you’re jealous.” Gabriela’s tone was almost playful, but her words cut clean. “My man’s tall, attractive, and full of ambition. He doesn’t mooch off women like certain losers. Spoiling him is my choice, and I enjoy it.”

Vivian barely flinched. But Phyllis? The color drained from her face. Dustin might have looked perfect on paper, but his modest family background was his one glaring flaw. Gabriela had never let that slide, often tossing barbs about him being a freeloader—a humiliation Phyllis couldn’t stand.

She cursed Gabriela under her breath. In high school, Gabriela had been the perfect punching bag for every petty insult. When had that woman learned to bite back so sharply?

Forcing down her ire, Phyllis curved her lips into a practiced smile. “I can’t wait to meet your boyfriend at my wedding, Gabriela.”

At that, Vivian’s mood shifted. Her irritation melted into a smug anticipation. They’d already set the stage for some chaos—and she was eager to watch Gabriela squirm when the curtain rose.

Gabriela had barely stepped out with the suit when Vivian’s voice rang out behind her, pitched just loud enough for every passerby to hear. “Phyllis, your family took her in and gave her everything without expecting a thing back. And how does she repay you? By obsessing over your boyfriend.”

“Come on, don’t say such things,” Phyllis muttered in a voice dripping with false concern. “She has a boyfriend of her own.”

Vivian let out a derisive laugh. “Oh, you mean that so-called secret boyfriend? Please. She probably invented him out of spite—and now she’s dropping a hundred grand on a suit...”

Gabriela inhaled slowly, willing herself not to waste another ounce of breath on those two worthless scumbags.

Still, one thing had to be clear before the wedding—Brenden’s parade of exes was absolutely forbidden from appearing.

She was paying a hundred thousand for a pretend boyfriend. Keeping a few women from causing a scene at the wedding was hardly an unreasonable demand.

Just as the thought formed, Gabriela’s phone buzzed with a message from “NotASaunders.” “Take the suit to company HQ tomorrow and hand it to Mr. Moss.”

Brenden’s antics rarely surprised her anymore, but this one made her pause. Had he actually made peace with Wesley? And now he was bold enough to rope Wesley into running his errands?

Her thumbs moved quickly over the screen. “Your exes won’t be showing up at the wedding, right?”

Several minutes ticked by before his answer popped up. “Rest assured.”

The next morning, Gabriela tucked the suit into an elegant, ribbon-tied box and carried it to the office. When she finally placed it in Wesley’s hands, a flicker of reluctance pricked at her. This wasn’t just fabric and thread—it was over a hundred thousand dollars in silk and tailoring. She’d never in her life bought something so extravagantly priced.

Noticing the flicker of reluctance in her gaze, Wesley’s lips curved in quiet amusement. He reached for an elegant box beside him and extended it toward her. “This is for you.”

The sleek packaging betrayed nothing of what it held.

“For me?” Gabriela froze for a beat, blinking at him in surprise. Could this unexpected present be Wesley making amends for that pitiful year-end gift?

A low chuckle rumbled from his chest. “Consider it a return gift.”

Her anticipation collapsed in an instant. A return gift from Brenden was hardly appealing to her in any way.

She accepted it with a faint smile and set it down on her desk without much thought.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” Wesley urged.

“I’ll check it out at home later,” she replied, her voice flat.

Without another word, she moved off toward the kitchenette to make coffee.

During the process, an idea lit in her mind. Her step picked up, and she returned with the steaming cup in hand, placing it in front of Wesley. “Mr. Moss, the gifts you handed out this year were incredible. Everyone’s been showing them off online, praising how generous you are.”

As she spoke, Gabriela eased her sleeve back, exposing the plain bracelet at her wrist, letting it catch the light as she casually gave it a small wave. Wesley had more money than he knew what to do with. With the right nudge, maybe he’d suddenly feel like giving her another gift.

Wesley caught the cue instantly, his gaze lingering on the simple piece. A faint smirk played at his lips as he decided to toy with her. “That bracelet really does look good on you.”

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Gabriela’s eyes sparkled with expectation as she looked at Wesley. “Don’t you think the bracelet’s missing something?”

Wesley stifled a smile, his eyes dancing with quiet amusement. “Your hand is striking enough. Jewelry would only weigh it down.”

Really, what kind of taste was that? Beautiful hands deserved luxurious skincare or, at the very least, a stunning watch. He’d missed such an obvious hint. No wonder he was wealthy but still unattached.

Gabriela’s spirits sank, and she tugged her sleeve down.

Shifting gears, she recalled something else. “Mr. Moss, that suit is an off-the-rack piece. Mr. Saunders should probably try it on first.”

Wesley nodded. “Noted.”

He picked up the suit and stepped into the lounge.

When he emerged, Gabriela found herself staring, captivated for a long moment before snapping back to reality. Wait, wasn’t this suit for Brenden? Was Wesley just trying it on to check the fit for Brenden?

As Wesley adjusted his sleeves, he glanced at her. “Do you know how to tie a necktie?”

Gabriela nodded absently. She vaguely remembered tying a necktie for someone before.

“Come here and help me,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

Still dazed, Gabriela approached him. As she drew near, a cool, commanding presence enveloped her, his masculine aura overwhelming. Her heart pounded uncontrollably.

Holding the tie, she noticed the top button of Wesley’s white shirt was undone. Softly, she said, “Your shirt’s unbuttoned.”

Wesley looked down at her. “Button it for me.”

His voice carried a low, husky edge, laced with an almost magnetic pull.

“Of course, Mr. Moss,” she replied.

Gabriela’s fingers trembled with nerves, and when they grazed his firm chest, she pulled back, her ears flushing red. Wesley let out a soft chuckle, his Adam’s apple shifting, sending her heart into a deeper flutter.

“Could you bend down a bit, Mr. Moss?”

With Wesley leaning closer, Gabriela managed to button his shirt and tie the necktie. His usual style was cold and precise, exuding a distant air. The suit she'd chosen was classic, elegant, and refined. It might not have matched the price of his usual attire, but on him, it looked effortlessly stylish and striking.

Gabriela was entranced. "You look incredibly sharp."

The understated outfit highlighted his prominent Adam's apple, drawing her in despite herself.

Wesley was amused by her expression. "The suit's impressive."

Gabriela felt lightheaded. Wesley's height and charm could make anything look like couture.

Only when he changed out of the suit did Gabriela recall the pressing issue. If Wesley was just trying it on, what was the point if it fit perfectly? Caught up in his charisma, she briefly entertained a wild idea. Maybe she should gift the suit to him. It probably wouldn't fit Brenden anyway. But she didn't dare say it aloud.

The rest of the day felt heavy for Gabriela as she wondered whether Wesley had delivered the suit to Brenden.

After getting home and showering, she still hadn't heard from Brenden, so she texted him. "Did you get the suit? Tried it on? Does it fit?"

“NotASaunders” replied quickly, “It fits.”

Gabriela was confused. Had she misremembered? Maybe Brenden wasn’t that much shorter than Wesley.

Well, if he said it fit, there was nothing more to say.

Chapter 114

The days passed swiftly. Three days before the holiday, Wesley had Billy contact the think tank to arrange a trip to Athea. A critical project had hit a snag.

As Wesley’s personal secretary, Gabriela packed his belongings—part of her routine duties. “Athea’s climate is humid and about ten degrees colder than here, Mr. Moss, so dress warmly. Watch your diet too. Celery’s good for your heart. Try to eat some and don’t be too picky.”

As she folded his clothes and packed, she kept up her reminders.

Wesley leaned against the doorframe, watching her with a warm gaze. Despite her forgetfulness, she cared enough to look out for him. If he weren’t worried about raising her suspicions, he’d have brought her to Athea. Having grown accustomed to her cooking, his tastes had grown even more selective.

He looked at her, his voice low and captivating. “Don’t worry. I’ll be back on time.”

Catching his steady gaze, Gabriela realized she was fussing like a concerned spouse, overstepping her role. She handed the two large suitcases to Billy. “Mr. Clarke, you know about Mr. Moss’s heart condition, right? If there’s drinking, keep it under control. Even if the project hits bumps, don’t let him stress too much.”

With Wesley’s wealth, there was no need to risk his health over a project. Billy smiled and nodded. “Don’t worry, I’ll look after Mr. Moss for you.”

Gabriela frowned, puzzled. What did Billy mean by “for you”? Wasn’t it part of his job as Wesley’s secretary to take care of him?

But she quickly brushed it off, following them to the parking garage to see them off.

Soon, Wesley and Billy reached the airport. The think tank members exchanged amused looks at the sight of Wesley’s oversized suitcases.

Billy laughed, explaining for Wesley. “Miss Haynes packed these for Mr. Moss. Besides clothes, there are plenty of energy-boosting supplements.”

The group was stunned. It was only a few days abroad. Surely Gabriela didn’t need to go all out for something like this.

Wesley cast a glance at the group and gave a helpless shrug. “What can I say? She’s always fussing over my health.”

The think tank members were left speechless. It sounded suspiciously like Wesley was flaunting Gabriela’s concern for him.

Even with Wesley and Billy away, under Tessa’s direction, the team finished the last tasks before the break.

The night before the holiday, Aubrey wheeled her suitcase over and said goodbye to Gabriela. “Gabriela, you have to video chat with me at midnight on New Year’s. Let’s count down together! Ugh, I’m already missing you and the holidays haven’t even started.”

Gabriela smirked. “Spare me the theatrics.” Besides, Aubrey would be with her boyfriend, and she probably wouldn’t have time for a video call at all.

Aubrey huffed, “God, you’re frigid. No wonder someone as gorgeous as you is still single!”

Gabriela saw her off at the train station, marking the start of her holiday.

With Phyllis’s wedding approaching, the bride-to-be had grown uncharacteristically quiet. But Gabriela knew her too well—silence usually meant Phyllis was plotting something. Something that, more often than not, involved setting a trap for Gabriela.

Chapter 115

The day before the wedding, just as Gabriela had expected, Phyllis flooded the classmates' group chat with a parade of photos—herself beaming in a pristine white wedding gown, a ring boasting a walnut-sized diamond glittering on her finger as she clung tightly to Dustin's hand.

It was a group of high school alumni, and Gabriela—added for reasons she still didn't understand—had barely typed a word since joining. If not for the constant pings announcing Phyllis's photos, she wouldn't have noticed this group chat at all.

"Congratulations! May your marriage be blissful, Phyllis."

"That wedding dress is gorgeous, Phyllis—and your fiancé is incredibly handsome."

"You two are such a heavenly pair—talented, beautiful, and made for each other."

Originally, their idle chatter had nothing to do with Gabriela—until Phyllis deliberately tagged her and slipped in a few sly jabs.

"Come to think of it, I really owe my thanks to my cousin Gabriela. Without her, I never would've met such an outstanding man like Dustin... and now, he's the love of my life."

The classmates were confused by the message.

“Wait, your fiancé was introduced by Gabriela?”

“Phyllis, you’re not concerned about Gabriela making a play for your fiancé?”

Phyllis let her words drip with insinuation. “Well, truth be told, Gabriela did have a little thing for Dustin. I mean, who wouldn’t? He’s got it all.”

The group’s chat quickly turned into a gossip frenzy.

“Sounds like she’s after your man, Phyllis. Better keep an eye on her.”

Phyllis played the gracious act in her reply. “She probably couldn’t control herself. I’m fine with it, really. But Dustin might not be so at ease.”

That was all it took for the others to jump in.

“Of course he’s irritated. Gabriela must be bothering him nonstop—anyone would lose patience.”

“Exactly. Back in high school, Gabriela was always trying to cozy up to other girls’ boyfriends. Guess some habits never die.”

Gabriela read each message with a blank expression.

None of it surprised her.

Phyllis had always delighted in making her life difficult—grabbing what belonged to her and even stealing the man she once cared for. Now that Phyllis had everything she ever wanted, she still went out of her way to relentlessly provoke Gabriela.

Thankfully, Gabriela had long since let go of Dustin, her heart no longer tangled up in him. Had she still cared, this public jab might have driven her to hide under the covers in tears. Then her swollen eyes would give Phyllis and her friends fresh amusement to gossip over at the wedding tomorrow.

Gabriela simply refused to give them the reaction they wanted, acting as if she hadn't noticed a thing.

Out of nowhere, Vivian chimed in, tagging Gabriela yet again. "Phyllis, Gabriela's been secretly longing for Dustin day after day. You're practically a saint for still thanking her and speaking kindly of her."

Vivian's dig sparked immediate agreement.

"I remember Gabriela being pretty wild back in school—ditching class just to flirt with guys."

“She’s got that dangerous charm—definitely not someone with clean intentions. Phyllis, I’d watch my back if I were you.”

Phyllis’s words breezed through the chat. “Gabriela’s got a boyfriend now, so don’t get the wrong idea. She even promised to bring him to my wedding. From what I’ve heard, he’s quite a catch—sounds like she’s moved on from Dustin.”

Phyllis’s friends were quick to pile on, tossing out snide guesses about what kind of man Gabriela could possibly land.

“Probably one of those shady gang types.”

“Maybe a spoiled rich boy with a string of girlfriends waiting in line.”

“You’re giving her too much credit. I’m betting he’s old, ugly, and she’s just the side piece. Wouldn’t be surprised if the real wife storms in one day to put her in her place. Ha!”

Gabriela stayed silent, which only fueled their cruelty. Their words grew sharper, more brazen, feeding off each other’s scorn.

Back in high school, more than half the class had delighted in tearing her down. It was a long-ingrained contempt—a belief that Gabriela was born to be despised, someone anyone could walk over without consequence.

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A handful of classmates who'd stayed quiet until now finally spoke up, telling the others not to cross the line.

"You've never laid eyes on Gabriela doing any of that yourself. What if it's all just false rumors?"

"Oh, please—what, are you in love with Gabriela? That's the only reason you'd defend her."

Anyone who dared take Gabriela's side was quickly drowned out, their words dismissed before they could gain any traction.

The voices left dominating the chat belonged entirely to those who loathed her, and their attacks grew even more vicious.

Disgust twisted in Gabriela's gut.

She couldn't fathom why they clung to such spite, especially when she'd never done a thing to harm them.

This time, she didn't hold back. Her fingers flew over the keyboard, each keystroke sharp with rage. "What the hell is wrong with you people? Every time you run your mouths, nothing but garbage comes out. Your heads are in the gutter, so of course you see dirt in everything around you—yet you still strut around like you're better than everyone else. Honestly, I feel sorry for your parents for raising such pathetic, worthless trash."

Without waiting for replies, she left the group entirely.

Switching to her private conversation with Phyllis, she sent her an audio clip: “Gabriela, from what I hear, your company’s crawling with single guys. They may not measure up to Dustin, but they’re enough for you. Just find anyone who’s halfway decent and call it a day.”

Those had been Phyllis’s smug words earlier, tossed out while she flashed her diamond ring—a jab meant to sting.

Without hesitation, Gabriela forwarded a video from Grace Robuchon, capturing the moment Phyllis and her friends had falsely accused her of theft. She followed it with a short text: “Don’t you dare bother me again.”

Barely had the message gone through when a sharp knock sounded on her door.

Gabriela opened it to find Phyllis standing there, her expression twisted with hostility. “What the hell do you want?” she asked, her voice cool as ice.

Phyllis’s glare burned with pure spite.

Gabriela’s beauty had always been a thorn in Phyllis’s side—a constant reminder of everything she couldn’t outshine.

She had already stripped Gabriela of her home, her elegant dresses, her delicate hairpins. She had smeared her reputation beyond repair and stolen her boyfriend. Yet the envy still burned.

Gabriela had been torn down to nothing. Yet somehow, she had clawed her way back. Why wasn't she drowning in shame, scraping by on scraps and other people's pity?

Instead, she had walked into a top-tier university, stepped into Apex Group, and landed as Wesley's secretary.

An orphan, living like she belonged to the glamorous world Phyllis could barely touch—how the hell was that possible?

And those eyes—how could they still burn so brightly?

The longer Phyllis stared, the more her rage curdled, her nails digging crescents into her palms.

"What exactly were you trying to say by sending those?" she demanded sharply.

Gabriela's gaze was steady, her voice low and dangerous. "Push me again, and I'll make sure your wedding guests get a front-row seat to the real you."

Phyllis's smile vanished, her tone turning sharp as glass. "You wouldn't dare. Remember—your dead mother only gets to rest quietly in the ground because my mother pays for her grave every year. Mess with me, and I'll see to it your late mother's peace gets ripped to shreds."

The words sliced into Gabriela's chest, freezing her breath. Her gaze darkened, voice low and unyielding. "Leave me be, and I'll leave you alone. Piss me off, and we'll both go straight to hell together, you got that?"

Her mother was the one line she refused to let anyone cross. If anyone so much as brushed against that boundary, she'd strike back without hesitation—even if it meant destroying herself in the process.

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Phyllis faltered under the weight of Gabriela's unblinking stare, a twinge of unease threading through her simmering anger.

She had no doubt that Gabriela would make good on her threat and drag them both into hell.

"I'm perfectly happy with Dustin. We're getting married tomorrow—why on earth would I waste my time provoking you? Get over yourself," Phyllis snapped. With that, she spun on her heel, retreating to her bedroom in a huff. She threw herself onto the bed, willing her pulse to settle.

She wanted a good night's sleep, hoping she would look breathtaking for Dustin the next day.

Once the door clicked shut behind her, Gabriela felt a heaviness settle over her. The confrontation left her utterly drained, not from fear but from years of enduring the same weary cycle.

Since high school, she'd stopped counting on Marie or Josh, clawing her way through every exam and tuition payment alone. She'd earned her degrees, carved out her career, and now stayed rooted in this place for one reason only—because she wasn't leaving without reclaiming the house that had been stolen from her.

Watching her mother's hard-built business fall into the hands of people she loathed was a humiliation Gabriela refused to swallow.

Josh might have promised to give the house back, but she knew Marie would guard it like a rabid dog.

And freeing her mother's burial plot from Marie's grasp—so her mother could truly rest—was another battle she had to win.

To accomplish all of that, she needed two things: money and the right allies. She swore to work harder than ever, chasing every opportunity until she had both.

But money took time to build, and tomorrow demanded her attention first. The thought of Phyllis's smug little smirk made her want to show up dazzling, steal the spotlight, and watch that arrogance crack.

She'd already chosen her weapon: the gown she'd kept after attending a banquet with Wesley that night—a dress that had turned heads before, and would again.

Just as she reached for the gown to take it out for a fitting, her gaze drifted to an ornate box resting on the side table. Wesley had mentioned it earlier, saying it was a return gift from Brenden.

Though Gabriela had little interest in anything from Brenden, curiosity nudged her to lift the lid.

Inside lay a pristine white dress, paired with a necklace featuring a single ruby teardrop that glimmered faintly in the light. A matching bracelet rested beside it, its fine craftsmanship hinting at a steep price.

The dress lacked the extravagant flair of the one from SK Elite Boutique, yet Gabriela decided to slip it on. Its design was clean and understated, but when she saw her reflection, she was taken aback—the fabric draped over her with an effortless grace, exuding a quiet, refined luxury she hadn't expected.

Gabriela couldn't help but be impressed by Brenden's surprisingly refined taste. Even more unexpectedly, he had remembered to prepare a thick coat for her this time.

Once she'd changed, her gaze lingered on the bracelet clasped around her wrist. After a moment's thought, she decided against wearing the new one from the gift box.

Then she composed a courteous message to "NotASaunders." "Thanks for gifting me this gorgeous dress, Mr. Saunders. The wedding begins at 5:30 PM tomorrow at the Deluxe Hotel. Can you get there on time?"

Her message vanished into the chat without a reply. Gabriela's certainty faltered. Brenden was unpredictable at the best of times—would he even bother showing up tomorrow?

Playing it safe, she logged into a rent-a-date site, wired over a three-thousand-dollar deposit, and booked a strikingly handsome young man who seemed like a reliable choice.

After picking up a tailored suit for Brenden, she was left with barely six thousand in her account. Watching her savings dwindle by half again made her chest tighten with regret.

Before long, the house buzzed with noise as Josh and Marie returned, brimming with cheer while putting the final touches on the wedding preparations.

Thankfully, Gabriela had been smart enough to reserve a hotel room. She told Josh she had work to wrap up and slipped out.

Marie shot her retreating figure a frosty glance and muttered, "Phyllis's wedding is tomorrow, and Gabriela can't be bothered to help at all—just how ungrateful can she be?"

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Josh's thoughts drifted back to the heated fight between Gabriela and Phyllis, replaying each accusation Gabriela had thrown. He parted his lips to speak, but shut them again. He still couldn't say who was truly in the right. It was better to keep the two of them apart than risk another blow-up.

That night, Gabriela let go of her worries and slept more peacefully than she had in days.

By the time she stirred the next morning, the sunlight was already streaming across the room. Her energy felt completely renewed, the sparkle back in her eyes. Realizing it was already noon, she rushed through her wash-up, smoothing her hair and freshening her makeup until she looked effortlessly polished.

A sudden knock broke the quiet. “Miss Haynes, the styling team you booked is here. Should I send them in?” a hotel attendant called through the door.

Gabriela blinked, momentarily thrown. Last night, she’d chosen the cheapest single room they had—just eighty dollars a night. Yet somehow, the staff had upgraded her to the penthouse suite, claiming the first ten new guests each day received complimentary premium service. She had thought it odd at the time, but now the situation felt downright suspicious.

When the stylists swept inside, arms laden with cases of cosmetics, the scene felt almost unreal. They were the very team responsible for Claire—the reigning goddess of the entertainment industry. At their head stood Annie Wright, her warm smile lighting up the room. “Well, Miss Haynes... looks like fate’s brought us together again.”

After exchanging pleasantries, Gabriela let Annie and her team get to work, still a little dazed by the turn of events.

For more than two hours, the stylists moved around her in a flurry of quiet efficiency before finally helping her into the white gown and fastening the ruby pendant at her throat.

Under the soft lighting, she looked even more breathtaking than she had on the night of the banquet, and Annie couldn't help showering her with praise. When it came time to slip on the matching bracelet, Gabriela shook her head.

Annie tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her eyes.

Gabriela brushed it off with a flimsy excuse. "I'll have a coat on anyway, so no one will even see the bracelet."

She certainly couldn't admit that she didn't want to take off the plain, unassuming bracelet already on her wrist.

Annie let the matter drop. "Well, there's a natural elegance to your wrists. This bracelet may be simple, but on you, it looks effortlessly stylish."

The compliment warmed Gabriela more than she expected. She'd been faintly annoyed that Wesley's year-end gift had been nothing more than an unremarkable bracelet, yet hearing genuine admiration for it stirred an unexpected flicker of joy.

Annie kept her own observation to herself—that the ruby pendant at Gabriela's throat was worth millions and would outshine everything in the room. Whether or not Gabriela wore the bracelet was irrelevant.

Once the makeover was done, Gabriela saw the team off, headed downstairs for a quick meal, and pulled out her phone to message Brenden, asking when he'd be there. His reply still hadn't come, yet an

unexpected calm settled over her. If he had arranged for the styling team to be here, he surely would show up. And even if he wouldn't, she had a contingency ready.

Her hair was styled into a chic, effortless updo that lent a fresh, youthful air to her poised elegance. The moment she stepped out of the car, a ripple of surprise passed through the onlookers—several failed to recognize her at first and leaned toward one another in hushed speculation.

“Who is she? She’s breathtakingly gorgeous. Did the Haynes family hire a celebrity guest?”

“No clue. We’ll find out soon enough.”

Without so much as a glance at the murmuring crowd, Gabriela glided toward the entrance of the Deluxe Hotel. Josh had taken over the entire venue, and a gleaming row of luxury cars lined the driveway.

By the doors stood a towering wedding portrait of Phyllis and Dustin. The couple were stationed at the entrance, smiling as they welcomed arriving guests.

But the moment Gabriela neared, Dustin’s eyes locked on her, and his confident grin faltered, the smugness slipping from his face.

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Dustin gazed at Gabriela, momentarily transfixed.

Her radiance was undeniable, commanding attention from every angle.

He took an instinctive step forward, her name nearly escaping his lips. Phyllis's expression darkened instantly. She hissed through clenched teeth, "Dustin."

Hearing his fiancée call his name brought him back to reality. He quickly donned a polished smile. "Welcome, Gabriela."

Clad in a tailored white suit that accentuated his lean physique, Dustin looked strikingly handsome. Yet the intensity in his eyes was unsettling, almost nauseating.

Gabriela maintained a composed expression. "Wishing you both a lifetime of joy," she said evenly. In her mind, those two were better off bound to each other.

She offered a perfunctory gift and went inside. Dustin's eyes lingered on her retreating form for a long moment.

Phyllis's fists tightened, her resentment simmering. Gabriela's entire look was surely calculated to command attention at her wedding.

Unconcerned with their opinions, Gabriela started looking for Josh to offer her congratulations. Josh and Marie were occupied with greeting guests, as were Dustin's parents. Dustin's mother, Doris Owen, elated that her son was marrying into wealth, beamed uncontrollably.

Spotting Gabriela, she deliberately looked away, letting out a sharp, dismissive snort, as if her presence might taint the occasion.

Dustin's father, Simeon Owen, a kind-hearted man, wanted to approach Gabriela, but Doris's quick pinch on his arm stopped him cold.

Doris knew Marie disapproved of Gabriela. With a calculating glance, she approached Marie, her smile overly warm. "Isn't that the girl you raised? Arriving so late?"

Marie cast a cool glance at Gabriela. "She and Phyllis don't get along. It's enough that she showed up."

The society women around Marie exchanged surprised glances.

"I heard her mother died when she was eight, and your family took her in for over a decade. She seems rather distant, doesn't she?"

Marie sighed, feigning regret. "My husband's sister entrusted her to us before passing. I'm not her mother, so I hesitated to discipline her too firmly. That's why she's grown so headstrong and bitter. I haven't fulfilled my duty."

Phyllis, raised in opulence, still carried a trace of nouveau-riche flair. Marie, on the other hand, led the Haynes Group with the commanding presence of a seasoned businesswoman, earning admiration in

elite circles. Her resigned demeanor lent credibility to her words, and those women readily deemed Gabriela ungrateful.

Initially charmed by Gabriela's beauty and considering an introduction, one of them now had second thoughts. She hadn't realized that Gabriela's beauty was only a veneer over a flawed character. She sighed. "It seems Gabriela's ungrateful. It's commendable your family honors its promises and hasn't cast her out."

Marie said nothing further, quietly endorsing the sentiment. Soon, the women in the group had silently labeled Gabriela as deplorable.

Gabriela finally located Josh. His face brightened at the sight of her. "You look absolutely stunning today, Gabriela."

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She exchanged a few words with him before settling into a corner seat. She hadn't intended to stir trouble, but Vivian approached with a group of young ladies, closing in swiftly.

"You actually showed up, Gabriela? Haven't you humiliated yourself enough?"

"Phyllis overlooked your relentless pursuit of her fiancé. Have some dignity."

"Look at your outfit today—so extravagant. Trying to outshine Phyllis on her big day?"

Most guests had arrived. Phyllis and Dustin entered as the final jab landed. Phyllis's lips curved into a subtle, satisfied smile, her earlier irritation easing. Dustin kept his distance, but his eyes repeatedly drifted to Gabriela, his thoughts inscrutable.

Phyllis paused, then pulled Josh toward Gabriela.

With feigned concern, she asked, "Where's your boyfriend, Gabriela? Didn't you say he'd definitely be here? The banquet's about to start."

Josh, caught up in the event, had forgotten. Now reminded, he looked at Gabriela expectantly.

"He'll arrive soon," Gabriela replied calmly.

"How soon is 'soon'?" Vivian sneered. "Don't tell me your boyfriend's stuck working overtime? Most reputable companies are off today. Or is he in some low-end service job?"

A giggle rippled through the group.

Another woman chimed in loudly, "She probably doesn't even have a boyfriend—just making that up."

Laughter spread among them.

"I'll text him," Gabriela said, unfazed.

"Texting's slow," Vivian taunted. "Lucky for you, his girlfriend's right here. Why not ask her? That'd be quicker."

Gabriela's heart sank. Before she could respond, a short-haired woman in a pink gown stepped forward, eyeing her with open hostility. "With a face like that, it's no wonder my boyfriend fell for you."

Gabriela's brow furrowed. The woman pressed on, "So, what number are you on Brenden's list of girlfriends?"

Gabriela recalled Wesley mentioning Brenden was dating his forty-first girlfriend, so she was supposedly number forty-two? Better to deny knowing Brenden entirely.

As she considered this, a familiar voice called out, "Renee, am I late?" Gabriela's unease deepened. She turned to see Brenden.

Dressed in a sharp dark blue suit, his confident stride and striking features drew attention despite his modest height.

Renee Nielsen linked her arm with his, pouting playfully. "Honey, why are you so late?"

Brenden tapped her nose with affection. "Traffic held me up, sweetheart. Don't be upset."

Gabriela's heart dropped.

She had prepared two plans: if Brenden didn't show, she'd use a stand-in from a rent-a-date service. But she hadn't anticipated the worst-case scenario unfolding—Brenden and his girlfriend both showing up.

In an instant, she resolved never to admit knowing Brenden.

Renee, however, had no intention of letting her off easily. She turned to Brenden and complained, "Honey, this woman claims you're her boyfriend and promised to attend the wedding with her."

The nearby women erupted into loud, unrestrained laughter.

"Hilarious! Gabriela's boyfriend is a playboy with countless girlfriends. Place your bets—what's her number?"

"Does it matter? At least someone's willing to take her."