

His kiss 151

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“With me here, you’ll be eating delicious, satisfying meals every single day, Mr. Moss,” Gabriela promised.

She was thrilled to snag a part-time job that paid three thousand a day. Loretta and Miriam, pleased to have found a reason to keep her close, secretly rejoiced at the thought that Wesley might finally find himself a girlfriend. Their satisfaction showed in their smiles.

Even Wesley’s expression softened with quiet contentment.

That calm shifted the moment Brenden stepped into the manor.

By early evening he arrived with two oversized boxes of gifts in hand, trailing after Loretta into the house.

Spotting Wesley lounging on the sofa, Brenden greeted him with an easy grin. “Wesley, a friend of mine grows these strawberries—he picked them today. I brought you two boxes.”

“Strawberries aren’t my thing,” Wesley said, his tone turning glacial. “Take them back.”

Brenden froze, caught off guard.

Earlier that year his mother had begun dating a new man and, brimming with excitement, traveled overseas with him, leaving Brenden rattling around the house alone.

The loneliness had been unbearable. He'd planned to spend New Year's tucked away in the countryside with Loretta. However, once he found out that she was staying at Wesley's place, he had no choice but to follow.

"Fine. If you won't have any, Gabriela and I will take care of them!" Loretta cut in, her patience for Wesley's stubbornness wearing thin. Since discovering his maddening obstinacy in matters of the heart, she'd found him especially exasperating these past few days. She shot him a sharp warning look before softening her voice for Brenden.

"Why are you so skinny? Did life in Afluena treat you that badly?" she asked, her gaze warm with concern.

Brenden gave a confident grin. "No, I did fine in Afluena—I'm just sun-kissed. In fact, the tan makes me even more irresistible. There's even a pretty girl pining for me in secret lately."

Wesley didn't bother indulging Brenden's boast. Without a word, he turned away, his face as cold as winter stone.

Gabriela had mentioned the orchids blooming in the back garden, and he decided a quiet stroll among them might ease his foul mood.

Oblivious to the fact that Wesley wanted no company, Brenden jogged after him. “Wesley, hold up!” he called.

By the time Wesley reached the garden path, Brenden had already cut him off. His brows pulled together in sharp impatience. “What now?”

“The other night at the Deluxe Hotel,” Brenden began, “I almost put Gabriela in an awkward spot. You stepped in just in time to save her; I never got the chance to thank you.” His tone softened with a touch of admiration. “Honestly, I didn’t think you had it in you. You played the part so well I nearly believed you really were her boyfriend.”

Wesley leveled him with a glare sharp enough to cut glass.

What on earth made Brenden think he’d been putting on a show?

Feeling the frost in Wesley’s dark eyes, Brenden managed an awkward laugh and said, “Seriously, Wesley, I mean it—thank you. I messed up and hurt Gabriela’s feelings. If you hadn’t stepped in, she would have been humiliated.”

Meanwhile, Gabriela was out in the back garden with Miriam, crouching near a bed of orchids to snap photos. The pot in bloom was worth fifteen million dollars—practically the price of a luxury home. Miriam, a social media devotee, was already picturing the perfect post for her followers. Loretta had no interest in such things, so Miriam had happily roped Gabriela into keeping her company.

They had just taken a handful of shots when Brenden's voice drifted over, carried by the late afternoon breeze.

Gabriela went rigid.

Deep down she knew Wesley had only shown up because Brenden had summoned him, yet Brenden had never confirmed it over WhatsApp. That tiny omission had let her cling to the foolish hope that Wesley might have stepped in for her sake alone.

Now reality pressed in—she had been imagining things.

A man of his standing wouldn't pose as a subordinate's boyfriend without a very deliberate reason.

"What's caught your eye, Gabriela?" Miriam followed the direction of her gaze, then smiled knowingly. "Ah, that's Mr. Brenden Saunders—Mr. Moss's cousin. Mr. Saunders works at Mr. Moss's company as well. Do you happen to know him?"

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Gabriela nodded. "Yes, we've met."

Their exchange drew Brenden's attention, and he strode over with a surprised grin. "Gabriela? What brings you here?"

Before she could answer, Wesley's cold gaze sliced into the moment. "Is there a problem?"

"Not at all. In fact, I'm glad to see her." Brenden's smile faltered as he leaned toward Wesley, lowering his voice until Gabriela couldn't catch the words. "Wesley, truth is... I like Gabriela too. If I'd known how she felt, I'd never have treated her that way at the hotel."

Wesley's mouth curved into a frosty smirk, his eyes narrowing on Brenden with a hard, unblinking stare.

Since when had Gabriela ever shown any interest in Brenden?

His mind flicked back to the time she'd casually mentioned her dislike for overly tall men. Brenden might not match Wesley's height, but he still towered well above her petite frame.

This was the kind of man she'd choose? Seriously?

The more Wesley mulled it over, the tighter his jaw became. A cold weight settled in his chest, and he sent Gabriela a look sharp enough to cut.

Across the garden, Gabriela crouched beside Miriam, adjusting the angle for a photo. The moment Wesley's icy glare landed on her, her fingers twitched and she almost dropped her phone.

A nervous chill rippled through her. Why on earth was Wesley suddenly looking at her like that?

Was Brenden talking about their one-night stand?

Damn, if that was the case, would her brand-new part-time job—three thousand a day—go up in smoke?

The question flickered across Gabriela's mind, tightening her expression.

Wesley, catching the shift, lost all interest in admiring the orchids and strode back toward the house.

Wanting to earn some points, Gabriela passed Miriam's phone back with a polite smile. "It's getting late—I should start on dinner."

Miriam didn't object, happily keeping Brenden by her side for the photo session. Gabriela hurried after Wesley, softening her tone in an attempt to please him. "Mr. Moss, the orchids have bloomed. They're stunning—don't you want to take a look?"

The flowers, after all, were worth a fortune and proudly kept on the manor grounds. Was he impressed by them? Perhaps he should invite some friends over to appreciate those flowers.

"What's there to see?" Wesley's voice cut through the air, cold and sharp. "A man shorter than me?"

Gabriela blinked, caught off guard. Sure, Brenden was shorter than him, but did he have to bring it up like that? For someone usually so composed, Wesley seemed ridiculously touchy; even height could get under his skin.

Trying to steer the conversation away from his prickly mood, she offered, with a tentative smile, “I’m making barbecue ribs and chicken tonight, with a side of corn chowder. Would you be up for that, Mr. Moss?”

Wesley’s gaze swept over her, cool and appraising. She was perceptive, well educated, sharp minded, and could hold her own in the kitchen—yet, in his view, her taste in men was terrible.

The longer he looked, the more his irritation simmered. He turned away without a word and lengthened his stride. Gabriela had to half-jog to match his pace, but he headed straight into the study and shut the door with a firm click, leaving her in the hallway.

With no choice, she made her way to the kitchen, determined to win him over with a dinner that might soften his mood.

Out in the back garden, Brenden couldn’t hide his curiosity about why Gabriela was spending her vacation at Wesley’s house instead of relaxing somewhere else. Miriam gave a breezy explanation. “She’s picking up a holiday side job—making sure Mr. Moss gets proper meals while he’s on break.”

The revelation caught Brenden off guard. Gabriela cooked for Wesley during her time off? An unexpected thought crept in: Could it be... because of him?

His mind ran in circles around the idea. Maybe she liked him so much she had taken the job just to be near him. A flush crept up Brenden's neck and his pulse quickened. Could she really be that into him?

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Miriam's eyes narrowed as she watched Brenden's face flush for no clear reason. "You're burning up! Do you have a fever?" she asked.

Brenden shook his head, forcing a calm tone. "It's the wind. It's too strong. I'm heading back inside. And the photos I took of these lovely flowers should be more than enough." With that, he handed her the phone back.

Miriam took the phone, scrolling through the photos and arranging them for posting. Today, these extraordinary flowers would surely make her friends green with envy. But what caption would hit just right?

"Flowers worth a mansion... so stunning, you'll be speechless!"

She paused, scrunched her face, and deleted it. Too flashy. Too desperate. She needed subtle, but with a punch.

Suddenly, a grin spread across her face. Fingers flying over the screen, she posted, "Captured by Mr. Moss's future wife herself. More priceless than the flowers."

Loretta, still a rookie at scrolling through social media, quickly liked the post and made sure Wesley did too.

Brenden slipped back into the living room and moved on tiptoe toward the kitchen door, where the faint sounds of bustling activity drifted out. A mix of joy and guilt churned inside him. Gabriela was incredible. How could someone like her ever be interested in a playboy like him? Sometimes, being charming came with complications.

Loretta, busy arranging the strawberries, caught snippets of Brenden muttering under his breath. She couldn't make out his words, but the expression on his face was a curious mix—sometimes pained, as if he'd just lost a fortune; other times shy, a small smile tugging at his lips as he leaned against the wall. Something seemed off.

Stepping closer, Loretta patted his shoulder. "Brenden, the sun's almost gone. Come help me gather the green onions."

Immediately, Brenden straightened, composure returning, and followed her outside.

Once there, he worked methodically, helping to gather the green onions and carefully trimming away the dried leaves.

Loretta stood back, quietly observing him, noting each careful motion. "Why don't you stay a few more days? Keep me company, and I'll cook all your favorite meals," she said, her tone warm.

"Sure!" Brenden replied casually, but a flicker of worry crossed his face. Spending more time with Gabriela was tempting, yes, but also dangerous. The longer he lingered around her, the harder it might be for her to walk away. Brenden couldn't help but sigh, certain that his charm had made Gabriela fall deeply for him.

Loretta, noticing the peculiar expression twisting his face, frowned. "Something bothering you lately? Tell me—I'll help, I promise."

"You're so kind, Loretta," Brenden said, touched for a brief moment, before the weight of his thoughts spilled out. "There's this wonderful girl who likes me... a lot. But I already have a girlfriend, and I don't want to hurt her feelings. What do you think I should do?"

Loretta studied him carefully, skepticism etched across her face. Brenden's taste in women was questionable, and he was constantly surrounded by gold-diggers clamoring for designer bags and expensive jewelry. Could a genuinely decent girl really be interested in him?

Loretta gave a casual shrug. "What's so difficult about that? Just keep your distance. Don't give her the wrong idea, and with time, it'll sort itself out."

A pang struck Brenden's chest. Was that really the only way forward? He felt an uncomfortable reluctance settle over him.

Not ready to give up, he pressed on. "How long has Gabriela been working here part-time? Do you know her well? Between Fiona and Gabriela, who's better?"

Without hesitation, Loretta replied, "Gabriela, of course."

Brenden leaned in, curious. "Why?"

As if the answer were obvious, Loretta listed her reasons. “Gabriela is prettier, better educated, brings good fortune to Wesley, and she’s capable with a calm, pleasant temperament.”

Most importantly, she was the only one who could soften Wesley’s cold heart. Brenden’s chest swelled with pride. “I thought so too.”

Loretta, however, couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling that something about Brenden’s reaction was unusual. Why had he swelled with pride when she praised Gabriela? And what had troubled him earlier, leaving him with that conflicted expression—as if wrestling with some difficult choice?

Loretta kept her observations to herself and turned to the kitchen. She decided to cook something for him.

In the kitchen, Gabriela was busy putting the finishing touches on the soup. She looked up as Loretta entered and rolled up her sleeves. “You should take a break. There’s no need to help. Lunch will be ready soon,” she said with a gentle smile.

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“I’m making something for Brenden,” Loretta replied, just as a servant brought in a bag of fresh ingredients.

The moment Brenden’s name was mentioned, Gabriela’s stomach tightened. The next second, Loretta pulled out several portions of pollack from the bag. As she busied herself preparing the dish for Brenden, he lounged on the sofa, reading a text from Renee.

"I miss you so much, darling. Why haven't you replied? Are you hiding something from me? If I don't hear back in ten minutes, you'll owe me a handbag tomorrow and an all-night cuddle when we sleep."

The usual flirtatious banter, which once thrilled him, now felt hollow to Brenden. He texted back, "Miss you too."

Bored, he tossed his phone aside just as Gabriela's voice rang out. "Dinner's ready!"

His heart skipped. Her words somehow carried more weight than a hundred of Renee's declarations of love.

Gabriela set the dishes on the table, then noticed Wesley hadn't emerged. She hurried to his study and knocked gently.

"Come in," came a cool, measured voice from within. She pushed the door open.

The study was immense, shelves towering like a private library. It was spacious, immaculate, and every detail reflected Wesley's meticulous nature. He wasn't at his desk; he reclined in a chair, absorbed in a book.

Wearing a light gray vest over his shirt and with a thick tome in hand, he looked effortlessly captivating.

Gabriela lowered her gaze and said with quiet respect, "Dinner's ready, Mr. Moss."

Wesley closed his book, rose from his chair, and replied smoothly, "Alright, let's go."

Outside, Brenden was already seated, lounging as if he owned the place. It was a familiar display of his usual careless charm whenever he visited the estate. Before him lay a plate of classic BBQ ribs, glistening and fragrant—the kind of dish that made his stomach ache with anticipation. Had Gabriela prepared this knowing it was his favorite?

Just as he lifted his fork, ready to dig in, the ribs were replaced with a new dish.

"You're eating this tonight," Loretta declared.

"This... what is this?" Brenden asked in confusion.

Loretta sat down beside him, a faint smirk playing on her lips. "It's fish. Are you blind, stupid boy?"

Brenden felt a surge of frustration. Why was he being scolded for this? "What's with that face?" Loretta frowned. "I put thought and effort into this, and you turn your nose up at it?"

Brenden grimaced. He couldn't stand the stuff; even the aroma made his stomach churn.

“Wesley knows you’ve been overworking yourself lately,” Loretta continued. “And he suggested you have this for three days straight. Even if he’s strict sometimes, when he shows kindness, you should appreciate it.” Brenden felt a flicker of warmth and glanced at Wesley. He had no idea Wesley cared so much.

Wesley, however, remained perfectly unreadable, his expression fixed and calm. Mustering all his willpower, Brenden dove in and finished the entire plate of fish.

Gabriela, watching quietly from the side, couldn’t hide her surprise. Each chew looked painful, yet he managed to clear his plate.

In the quiet elegance of Rosemont Gardens, Miriam’s voice carried a sharp edge as she scolded Phyllis. “You idiot! Even if Gabriela’s boyfriend really is Brenden, you had no business inviting him there. Do you even know who Brenden is? He’s Wesley’s cousin!”

Phyllis, eyes flashing with defiance, shot back, “Vivian said Brenden’s a notorious playboy, with so many girlfriends he can’t even remember their names.”

She assumed Gabriela’s connection to him didn’t mean much.

“So what?” Marie snapped, her patience wearing thin. “Reputation or not, Wesley treats him like a brother and protects him. That alone makes him magnetic to everyone in the circle. And look what you’ve done! Not only did you fail to embarrass Gabriela, you’ve insulted Wesley. Gabriela’s at his place right now, probably scheming how to get back at you.”

Phyllis felt a flicker of fear, but it was drowned out by envy. “I’m not afraid of her!” she declared. “If she tries anything, I’ll make sure no one walks away unscathed.”

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Phyllis’s face contorted with rage, her features twisted into something almost unrecognizable.

Marie studied her daughter’s pathetic expression and felt fury surge through her veins. She had spent countless days drilling the same lesson into Phyllis’s thick skull—cunning was acceptable, even admirable, but stupidity was unforgivable. Yet this girl remained hopelessly dense.

“You should stay away from Vivian,” Marie snapped, her voice cutting through the air like a blade. “She orchestrated Brenden’s dramatic entrance at your wedding, and even if chaos followed, she would walk away unscathed. Her brother runs the Vasquez Group empire. We’re nobodies compared to them. Why do you think she wastes time with you? Because your foolishness makes you the perfect puppet.”

Marie’s words gained momentum, each one sharper than the last. “We had our chance with Gabriela and we botched it completely. Now she has Mr. Moss’s protection, so swallow your wounded pride and learn from your mistakes!” Marie stared at her daughter, a crushing wave of disappointment settling in her chest. How could she be so stupid?

Even Gabriela possessed the intelligence to align herself with power, while Phyllis had stolen her worthless boyfriend and strutted around like she’d won some grand prize. The sheer stupidity made Marie’s blood boil.

Marie’s harsh criticism struck deep, and Phyllis bristled with defiant indignation. She opened her mouth to deliver a cutting response when Josh’s footsteps echoed through the hallway and he appeared in the

study doorway. Marie's demeanor shifted instantly. "Leave us," she commanded, her tone cold and authoritative.

Phyllis offered a curt nod and retreated toward the exit, her movements stiff with barely contained resentment. As her hand touched the door handle, she left it slightly ajar—just enough to catch fragments of the conversation within.

The moment Phyllis disappeared, Josh's stern expression melted away, replaced by a warm smile directed at his wife. "Gabriela called earlier," he announced, settling into his favorite chair. "She won't be joining us for New Year's this year."

Marie's heart plummeted like a stone into dark water.

"Yourself," Josh murmured, his voice softening as it always did when Marie's temper flared. He offered gentle reassurance like a man trying to soothe a wild animal. "You've been managing the company brilliantly all these years and must have accumulated substantial savings. We can purchase another villa once we vacate this one."

Marie's lips curved into something that might have been a smile if not for the bitterness that poisoned it; her expression grew more thunderous by the second.

Before taking control of Haynes Group, she had harbored a destructive addiction—gambling consumed her like a disease. Sixteen years earlier, she had accumulated gambling debts exceeding three hundred thousand dollars, a crushing burden that Gabriela's mother had paid in full before her death. Then Gabriela's mother entrusted both the company and her daughter's welfare to Josh's care.

Josh possessed the soul of a scholar, finding deep contentment in poetry, but business management remained as foreign to him as a distant planet. Though Marie lacked experience initially, she burned with ambition and determination and quickly seized control of Haynes Group with iron-fisted efficiency.

During those early years she threw herself into the work with religious devotion, genuinely abandoning her gambling habits, but temptation crept back gradually until addiction reclaimed her completely. Just last month, during what was supposed to be a business trip to Ceswlenia, she had succumbed to the glittering allure of a high-end casino, losing tens of millions in a single devastating night and secretly draining company funds to cover the catastrophic losses.

How could they possibly afford a new house when financial ruin lurked around every corner?

Josh studied his wife's increasingly stormy expression and lowered his voice to barely above a whisper. "But if Gabriela's boyfriend discovers we're occupying what rightfully belongs to her, his displeasure could create serious complications for us."

Marie seemed genuinely intimidated by Wesley's influence; invoking his name should provide the necessary leverage, shouldn't it?

Marie instantly felt an oppressive weight settle over her chest like lead.

The world had shifted beneath their feet, and while she might successfully deceive her naive husband indefinitely, Wesley possessed the sharp intelligence of a predator who saw through deception with ease.

If Gabriela decided to voice complaints to her powerful boyfriend, they might find themselves stripped of not only their luxurious home but the company that sustained their entire existence.

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Faced with this reality, Marie surrendered to the inevitable. “You have a point. Gabriela has matured into adulthood, and the house must be restored to her rightful ownership.”

Phyllis pressed herself against the study door, eavesdropping on every damning word, and felt ice crystallize in her veins. She retreated to her bedroom like a ghost haunting familiar corridors.

After her wedding ceremony, she had discovered that adapting to Dustin’s cramped and deteriorating apartment proved impossible, so she continued to stay in her own home. This particular room had once served as Gabriela’s sanctuary—the most magnificent and spacious chamber in the entire villa—but Phyllis had claimed it as her own through sheer audacity.

She had inhabited these walls for sixteen years. There was no way she would surrender her domain to Gabriela now.

Dustin sat on the edge of the bed, absorbed in reviewing a stack of corporate documents with laser-focused intensity. He possessed genuine dedication and burning ambition, yet remained a mere manager at Haynes Group.

Why had the man she had battled so fiercely to capture turned out to be such a disappointment?

Meanwhile, Gabriela had somehow ensnared Wesley, a man wealthy enough to purchase the entire Haynes Group as casually as ordering coffee.

Shouldn't Gabriela be wallowing in some shady bar, degraded by revolting old predators who traded money for sex?

Resentment burned through Phyllis like acid.

Dustin sensed the weight of her burning stare and looked up to discover her eyes blazing with something that resembled barely contained madness. "Phyllis, what's troubling you?"

Phyllis jolted back to the present as though awakening from a nightmare.

Dustin abandoned his paperwork, crossed the room with purposeful strides, and pressed his lips against hers with tender affection. "Phyllis, do you want to—" Phyllis recognized the hunger in Dustin's voice and touch, but irritation suddenly flooded her like poison. She pushed him away with sharp movements. "I'm feeling unwell today."

The sun still blazed outside their windows. How could this man not conceive of something more productive to occupy his time?

Phyllis escaped to the privacy of the bathroom and dialed Vivian's number with trembling fingers. She launched into her interrogation without preamble. "Vivian, you swore you saw Gabriela's boyfriend—Brenden—with your own eyes. How has Wesley suddenly materialized as her romantic partner? Do you understand the catastrophic position you've put me in?"

Vivian's jaw tightened, the same frustration coiling in her chest. The wedding disaster had reached her brother's attention like wildfire, resulting in days of brutal lectures that had nearly shattered her sanity, and her monthly allowance had been slashed as punishment.

She fired back with venom, "You also claimed with absolute certainty that Gabriela's boyfriend was some disgusting older man, didn't you?"

Phyllis's exasperation erupted like a volcano. "This catastrophic blunder has created an enemy out of Mr. Moss himself. Gabriela might exploit this golden opportunity to snatch my family's home."

Vivian's curiosity sharpened to a razor's edge. "Explain the situation to me in detail."

Phyllis recounted the conversation she had overheard between her parents, carefully editing the narrative to cast herself in the most sympathetic light possible. Vivian detected something peculiar in the story. "If the house legitimately belongs to your family, why would you fear her?"

"The property originally belonged to Gabriela's late mother," Phyllis confessed reluctantly. "But my mother possesses substantial wealth, so she undoubtedly secured legal ownership years ago through proper channels. After sixteen years under my parents' care, she comes of age and immediately attempts to seize the house, leveraging Mr. Moss's intimidating influence. Ultimately, it's my father's bleeding

His father's bleeding heart was causing this mess—he felt guilty about failing to assist Gabriela's mother in her final days and now sought to compensate Gabriela for his perceived failures.

After hearing Phyllis's bitter complaints, Vivian's mind sparked with malicious inspiration. "Phyllis, I know an influencer with thirty million devoted followers. Let's orchestrate something spectacular that will obliterate Gabriela's reputation completely. Are you ready to join this war?"

Recognizing Vivian's proven capabilities, Phyllis felt a thrill of excitement surge through her. Without hesitation, she declared her allegiance. "Why would I refuse such a perfect opportunity?"

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Gabriela remained blissfully unaware that Phyllis was once again scheming against her.

While staying at Wesley's place, she felt nothing but radiant, unshakable happiness. With the kind of money she was making on the side, she had no trouble staying cheerful all year. Even better, Miriam and Loretta had finally stopped insisting she share a room with Wesley and had arranged a bright, spacious guest room just for her.

After a hot shower, she flopped onto the plush mattress, rolling across it like a carefree child and soaking in the luxury. The past two nights in Wesley's bed had left her tense and uneasy, unable to truly savor the mansion's soft linens. Now, with the space all to herself, her whole body loosened in quiet relief.

Eventually she tired of her rolling spree, grabbed her phone, and started scrolling—only to have it buzz in her hand with an incoming call from Aubrey.

"Aubrey? Is that really you? I assumed you'd be too preoccupied with your boyfriend. I'm surprised you'd even think to call me," Gabriela said, ready to tease.

Aubrey's voice cut through the banter with a sharp edge. "You've got enough trouble as it is, and you're cracking jokes? Get on Instagram and Twitter right now—someone's dragging your name through the mud!"

It turned out a high-profile Instagram influencer who went by Gem, with thirty million followers, had posted a scathing video. In it, Gem claimed Gabriela had been orphaned at eight, taken in by her uncle, and given every opportunity—financial support, a good home, even a graduate education. Now, Gem accused, Gabriela was repaying that kindness by trying to snatch her uncle's house out from under him. The video went further: if Gabriela succeeded in taking the property, what would stop her from coming for the family business next?

The post was gaining momentum fast on Instagram—enough to stir trouble, though not yet enough to explode into an overnight sensation.

Claire's repost was what turned a flicker into a full-blown blaze. She added her own remark beneath it, "A small favor earns gratitude, but an overly generous one often breeds resentment. In a world where good people are the ones who get hurt, this kind of behavior is chilling. Cut those ungrateful leeches out of your life."

Claire, the undisputed queen of entertainment, had many followers. Her devoted fans quickly echoed her stance.

Within hours, Gabriela's name had been shoved into the number-four spot on the trending chart. The post drew wave after wave of condemnation. "People like her ruin it for everyone—the good ones give up, and the real needy get left with nothing." "It's parasites like Gabriela that have sucked every last shred of kindness from this world."

The outrage swelled, and the mob's determination to track her down and publicly shame her grew fiercer by the minute. Within thirty minutes, someone dug up an old video from her high school days showing her laughing with a pack of notorious delinquents at a bar. Soon after, her workplace was outed, and some people claimed they would confront her there once the holiday break ended. Some queried in disbelief, "Isn't Apex Group the developer behind the country's most popular game? How the hell could they hire someone as pathetic as her?"

Gabriela's pulse quickened as she scrolled. Before she could decide whether to keep reading, her phone lit up—Aubrey again. "I just heard Phyllis is planning to go on Gem's livestream tomorrow to squeeze sympathy out of the audience," Aubrey warned, her voice brimming with indignation.

Though she didn't know the full story of Gabriela's family, Aubrey trusted her enough to believe she'd never scheme to steal her uncle's home. In Aubrey's mind, the real villain could only be that sly manipulator—Phyllis. "I've got a friend with over three million followers—should I ask her to step in and set the record straight?" Aubrey swiftly pressed on.

While her friend simmered with outrage, Gabriela stayed composed, a quiet instinct telling her this could be her best moment to tip the scales in her favor. She comforted Aubrey, "Don't work yourself up over it. Let's just get some rest and see where things stand in the morning."

"Why wait until morning?" Aubrey's temper teetered on the edge of explosion. "Do you have any idea just how much sway Claire holds? You're already sitting at number four on the trending list—by tomorrow you'll probably be number one! How can Claire be so blind? Those lies are transparent as glass! I'm disgusted I ever admired her."

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Though she was once a devoted fan of Claire, Aubrey chose to put her faith in Gabriela rather than a stranger's smear.

Gabriela's lips curved faintly as she assured her, "Relax. I've got a plan."

She reasoned that Claire hadn't bought the influencer's story. This was likely payback for that banquet incident with the styling team—a grudge Claire clearly hadn't let go of.

Gabriela's unshaken demeanor gradually eased Aubrey's temper. "For real?" she asked, still worried.

"I mean it. Trust me," Gabriela replied, her tone calm and laced with quiet conviction.

After years of swallowing her pride, she felt as though fate was finally sliding a weapon into her hand. Tonight, she needed Phyllis to fan the flames until the drama boiled over. A flicker of anticipation warmed her chest as she imagined Phyllis pushing things further; the scandal would spread like wildfire.

If all went perfectly, the entire internet would know by morning.

With that thought, Gabriela set her phone aside and settled in, ready for a full night's rest. Tomorrow, the counterattack would begin. Even under the weight of malicious stories, she drifted into a deep, untroubled sleep.

Claire, meanwhile, faced her manager's sharp rebuke for reposting on Twitter. "Claire, you've worked so hard to reach this point. One careless post from you can set the internet ablaze. Mind your words and actions before they blow up in your face!"

Claire leaned back, utterly unfazed. She had already dug into Gabriela's past and knew her high school reputation was far from spotless. This was her chance to let Wesley see the real Gabriela. The influencer's damning video was a gift—why wouldn't she make the most of it?

The manager pressed on with gentle words of caution. "Stay out of these messy disputes. They can drag you down before you even realize it."

Claire waved him off with an impatient flick of her hand. "Gabriela's nothing but a pest. I could crush her whenever I feel like it. And if you keep nagging, I'll skip the SK Elite Boutique endorsement altogether."

The manager decided it was wiser to say nothing more.

The endorsement—once well beyond Claire's grasp—had been won through backdoor ties to the CEO of the Vasquez Group.

The uproar online grew so deafening that even Marie caught wind of it. One after another, ladies from high society called, their voices dripping with sympathy and polite concern.

Keeping her tone as serene as still water, Marie offered the same line to each of them, "Gabriela's a good person deep down, just a little too stubborn for her own good."

They gushed over her supposed graciousness, but behind the mask, Marie's lips curled in a sharp, disdainful smile. There was nothing gracious about her intentions.

Now that the matter had spiraled, she was content to sit back and watch. If Gabriela's reputation crumbled under this storm, she would sleep easy knowing the house and company would remain securely in her hands.

That night many tossed and turned in restless sleep. But Gabriela—the very target of those spiteful whispers—slumbered without a care and woke feeling rested and clear-headed.

Soon after, Aubrey called Gabriela again. Her voice burst through the phone, bright with surprise. “Gabriela, every trending topic about you is gone!” She didn't even pause before adding, “No wonder you weren't panicking last night. Someone powerful must have stepped in! I'm telling you, it has to be our handsome, mighty boss backing you up!”

Gabriela hadn't said a word before Aubrey barreled ahead with her string of guesses.

As Aubrey's rapid-fire chatter finally tapered off, a thought began to settle in Gabriela's mind. Who else could wipe every trace of those trending topics in a single night? It could only be Wesley's doing.

Once the call ended, she descended the stairs in search of him, only to spot Billy making his way toward the study. She lingered for a moment, then followed at a measured pace.

Chapter 159

Billy burst into Wesley's study without hesitation.

Wesley, seated at his sleek black desk, was already two-thirds of the way through a book. At the sound of the door, he closed it with a precise snap and set it aside, attention now fully on his assistant.

Billy wasted no time, launching into a detailed report. “Mr. Moss, all traces of the incident online are gone. When Miss Haynes wakes, she won’t suspect a thing. Claire’s luxury deals are canceled. SK Elite Boutique has sworn never to work with her again, and she’s been axed from the most popular drama this year. She won’t recover from this anytime soon.”

Wesley lifted his gaze, nodded once, and said, “Well done. Keep an eye on things over the next few days.”

Billy straightened, shoulders back, pride practically radiating off him. “Mr. Moss, you don’t have to worry. Miss Haynes won’t face a single problem while I’m on watch.”

To Billy, this was nothing more than doing what was expected of him. Lately, cruising around in Wesley’s sleek black Porsche had earned him envious stares at every turn. Even Erik from the Williams Group had come by, gawking at the car and muttering under his breath about how stingy his own boss was. Billy couldn’t hide the smug grin creeping onto his face.

Yet beneath his pride, he felt a sliver of guilt toward Gabriela. The car Wesley had given him wasn’t a gift; it was payment for keeping the truth from her. Thinking of Gabriela in trouble made him resolve, silently but firmly, to go all out for her, whether Wesley asked or not.

As their discussion wound through business matters, Wesley’s eyes flicked toward the door, a faint, almost imperceptible smile tugging at his lips. “Ms. Haynes, please come in.”

Gabriela had been standing in the doorway, eavesdropping on their conversation. In that moment she realized Wesley truly was looking out for her. He had even instructed Billy to personally oversee the situation. From childhood until now, no one had ever stood by her so unwaveringly, silently shielding her from everything that could hurt her.

If Wesley were interested in women, Gabriela knew without a doubt she would want to marry him.

She felt a surge of warmth and, startled by his voice, slowly stepped into the study.

Wesley leaned back in his chair, a faint, unreadable smile tugging at the corner of his lips as his fingers tapped a quiet rhythm on the desk. "So, how much did you catch?"

"Maybe... a third," Gabriela replied, her voice steady. "Mr. Moss, I didn't mean to eavesdrop."

The study was soundproofed well enough that she'd only picked up fragments. Wesley's gaze lingered on her thoughtfully, suddenly realizing she was already aware of the online storm swirling around her. "Are you scared?" he asked, voice calm but probing.

"Not at all," Gabriela said instantly, meeting his eyes. "With you backing me, Mr. Moss, what could there possibly be to fear?"

Wesley's smile widened imperceptibly. Her rare confidence—so bold, so unapologetic—was unexpectedly charming.

She pressed her advantage, determination threading through her tone. “I’d like to take half a day off today.”

After waiting so long, she finally had her opening. With Wesley in her corner, she could act decisively and hit Phyllis where it would hurt most. Later, she would meet two very important people—individuals who held the keys to her vengeance against Phyllis.

“Approved.” Wesley didn’t ask any more questions. “Where are you headed? Let my driver take you.”

Gabriela inclined her head politely. “Thank you, Mr. Moss.”

Billy couldn’t resist chiming in. “I drove here. I can give you a ride, Miss Haynes.” Gabriela blinked, a little caught off guard by Billy’s unexpected kindness. He seemed like such a nice soul.

Billy, for his part, was equally surprised. While everyone else was already on vacation, Gabriela still had to request a leave of absence from Wesley to leave his house.

Could it be that Wesley already considered her his private property? He’d always seemed refined and restrained, yet who would have guessed he could be so possessive and quietly intense.

Billy’s sympathy for Gabriela deepened.

Wesley simply nodded. “Alright.”

He already had a sense of her plan, and with Billy's vigilance, she'd be safe under his watch.

Chapter 160

Billy and Gabriela stepped out of the study together. Gabriela exchanged a few quick words with Miriam and Loretta before slipping into Billy's sleek black Porsche and leaving the manor. As the scenery blurred past the window, a surge of emotions swelled within her. Sixteen years had passed. Could she really reclaim what her mother had left behind this time? If she failed, who knew how many more years she'd have to wait.

Noticing her downcast gaze, Billy offered gentle reassurance. "Don't let it get to you. People online don't know the truth, so they hurl those cruel words at you. Mr. Moss has already wiped all related topics. Soon, no one will even remember."

"Thank you, Mr. Clarke," Gabriela replied with a small smile. "I'm not upset... actually, I'm quite happy."

Her plan had always been long-term: spend years building workplace connections, saving money, and gradually turning the tables on Marie. She had never imagined Phyllis would hand her such a golden opportunity. With Wesley supporting her, she felt she already had the strongest ally she could ask for.

Following Gabriela's directions, Billy drove nearly halfway across Okburg. Two hours later, they arrived at their destination.

"Miss Haynes, is this the place? Would you like me to accompany you inside?" Billy offered.

“No, thank you, Mr. Clarke. I can manage on my own.”

They had reached one of Okburg’s old districts. The alley ahead was too narrow for a car, so Gabriela stepped out and continued on foot. She stopped before a weathered wooden door and knocked. Moments later, it creaked open, revealing an older man. He wasn’t yet sixty, but gray streaked through his temples, and his eyes carried the weight of years.

Gabriela’s eyes glimmered with unshed tears. Softly, she whispered, “Farley.”

“Miss Haynes?” Farley Moreno’s face lit up in recognition.

He had once served as right-hand man to Alanna Haynes, Gabriela’s late mother. Though she’d insisted countless times that he use her first name, he never wavered. He addressed her formally as “Miss Haynes,” a mark of both respect and enduring loyalty.

“Please, come in and have a seat, Miss Haynes.”

The last time Farley had seen her was before her college entrance exams. Her arm had been scalded by Phyllis with boiling water, and she’d battled a high fever for days. Gabriela had asked Farley to take photos as evidence of the incident. Afterward, she had secretly left half of her hard-earned savings with him, promising to return only when the time came to reclaim her mother’s belongings.

Six years had passed in the blink of an eye.

Gabriela sat down and briefly outlined her plan. Farley's eyes lit up. "Miss Haynes, you're finally taking action?"

Gabriela nodded solemnly, a trace of concern in her voice. "Farley, I'm sorry, but after this, there's no going back. Life's going to get more complicated from here on."

"It's fine," he said firmly, unwavering. "I've waited for this day every single day. As long as I can help you make things right, I'll do whatever it takes!"

Gabriela chuckled softly. "For now, I just need you to bring out my mother's will. I will let everyone see it."

"Right away, Miss Haynes!"

With that, Farley rose immediately and went to unlock the safe. Gabriela spent the next hour at Farley's side, carefully sorting through documents.

As she prepared to leave, she paused—her eyes tracing the dilapidated house, then dropping to Farley's crippled foot. Her voice softened. "Farley, once the house is mine, would you like to move in and live with me?"

Farley shook his head firmly, a small, knowing smile tugging at his lips. "I've lived here for years. This place is my home now. I don't want to go anywhere else. But you have my word: I'll always be here, and if you ever need me, I'll be ready—no questions asked."

Gabriela nodded, understanding.

Some things couldn't be rushed. She would revisit the idea once the house was truly hers.

After bidding farewell to Farley, she returned to Billy. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"It's nothing," he replied quickly. "Where to next, Miss Haynes?"

Gabriela's lips curved into a wistful smile, her eyes glimmering with a touch of nostalgia. "To a bar called Midnight Oasis..."