

His kiss 161

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Only a few days remained before the New Year, and the streets were silent, almost abandoned.

Billy kept the car moving briskly, reaching the Midnight Oasis bar in just under thirty minutes. Its exterior leaned toward a gothic mood—murals of shadow-thick forests, inky vines, and watchful ravens stretched across the walls. By contrast, a patch of emerald-green plants formed a neat little garden near the entrance, a touch of life breaking the darkness. The mix of styles gave the place an odd yet memorable charm.

The midday hour left the bar nearly empty, its quiet settling like a soft echo in the air. Gabriela cast Billy a knowing glance. “That’s quite a drive, Mr. Clarke. Just give me a little time, and I’ll take you out for lunch,” she promised lightly.

Billy opened his mouth to decline, but Gabriela had already slipped out of the car. She had arranged everything beforehand with the bar’s owner, and before she even crossed the threshold, a tall, broad-shouldered man strode out, his deep voice carrying easily. “Gabriela! Finally, you’re here!”

Flashing him a warm, easy smile, she replied, “Hey, Tyler. It’s been a long time.” Tyler Jordan owned the place.

Years back, when Marie’s gambling habit had spiraled out of control, she’d racked up over three hundred thousand in debt. Tyler’s father had been among the creditors—holding an IOU from Marie for twenty thousand. With Gabriela’s mother’s help, Marie could have wiped out all her debts. Just a day before she secured the funds, Tyler’s father went to collect money from another debtor. The man, crushed under the pressure, jumped into the river, and the incident spiraled into tragedy.

The man's death brought the police down on Tyler's father, who was sentenced to twenty years in prison—and he had yet to see freedom.

Unlike his father, Tyler refused to walk the same ruinous path. He worked hard, saved every penny, and eventually opened his own bar, determined to live clean. Back in Gabriela's high school days, she had worked as a bartender at Tyler's bar. Her striking looks and natural charm drew customers in without her even trying, turning the bar into a livelier spot whenever she was around.

Tyler had always been the dependable sort—steadfast, straightforward, and protective. To him, Gabriela was just a poor girl trying to save up for tuition, and he quietly took it upon himself to look out for her.

Over time, their easy conversations turned into genuine friendship. It was during one of those talks that Gabriela learned about his father's prison sentence and the old IOU. The detail stuck with her. Convinced the IOU might come in handy one day, she asked if she could keep it, promising she'd work hard until she could pay back the twenty thousand herself.

Being a decade older, Tyler treated her like his own sister—always looking out for her. When they finally crossed paths again after a long gap, he grinned, gave her hair a playful muss, and said with mock reproach, "Look at you—top university student now."

Gabriela laughed and got straight to why she was there. When Tyler heard Gabriela was being slandered online, his expression darkened instantly. "Who's got the nerve to mess with you? I'll round up a whole crew and make them regret it."

Back when he first learned about her suffering, Tyler had reacted the same way—threatening to rally his friends to grind Phyllis's bones and win back Gabriela's house. Years had passed, but his hot-headed streak was as fierce as ever.

Gabriela chuckled, shaking her head. “No need for an army this time, Tyler. Just help me record a quick video.”

“Name it and it’s done,” he said without hesitation. “What do you want me to say?”

Pulling out her phone, Gabriela adjusted the camera and hit record.

Once the matter was wrapped up, Tyler insisted she stay for lunch. “I’ve got a friend waiting outside,” Gabriela said with a quick smile. “I’ll bring him in to join us.”

She jogged out to the curb, waved Billy over, and ushered him inside before introducing him to Tyler. Tyler clasped Billy’s hand in a firm shake. “So, you’re Gabriela’s boss, huh? Quite the high achiever.” His grin widened as he added, “Gabriela is at a top university, and she’ll graduate with a master’s degree next year. She’s every bit as impressive. You make sure you take good care of her.”

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Billy kept his reaction to himself, though inside he marveled that Gabriela had such a capable friend.

A thought crossed his mind—was Wesley meant to hear about this, given his possessive streak?

Before long, Tyler had filled the table with steaming, fragrant dishes and threw down a challenge for Billy to drink against him.

Gabriela leaned in, her voice light but resolute. “Not happening. He’s the one behind the wheel later.”

Respecting the reminder, Tyler simply chuckled and poured himself a few cups instead.

When the last plate was cleared, Billy found Tyler surprisingly likable, the kind of man he could trust. Tyler, feeling the same, treated Billy as though they’d already shared years of friendship. “Swing by whenever you’ve got time, man. I know a guy like you might think we’re a bit rough around the edges, but I stick by my friends. I’ve got plenty of people I can call on, and if you ever run into trouble, I’ll back you up without a second thought. Gabriela’s had a hard road—do me a favor and keep an eye out for her. I owe you one.”

As they stepped out of the bar, Billy remarked with a hint of amusement, “Your friend’s got quite the passionate streak, Miss Haynes.”

Gabriela’s smile warmed. “Tyler really is a wonderful person.”

Billy gave a slight jolt, as if her words had caught him off guard. Wesley could never know about this.

On their way back to Moss Manor, the place was already buzzing with activity.

With Gabriela absent, lunch duties fell to Loretta and Miriam, who laid out braised ribs, steamed fish, stir-fried beef, and a few simple side dishes. They avoided onions and celery, which Wesley couldn’t stand, and left out any trace of chili.

Yet for all their effort, the spread lacked the warmth of Gabriela's cooking. Loretta had been feeding Wesley for more than ten years, but today every bite tasted flat, as if the flavor had been drained away.

He toyed with his fork but barely ate a bite.

Brenden leaned over with a mischievous grin. "How come Gabriela's not in the kitchen today? I've been dreaming about those BBQ ribs she makes."

A cold shadow crossed Wesley's face.

Loretta cut Brenden a sharp look before setting down a plate of fish. "What, you think she works here just to feed you? Eat your fish."

Gabriela's hefty daily rate was meant to coax Wesley into opening his heart—not to give Brenden someone to boss around in the dining room.

Brenden sat frozen in disbelief. No mouthwatering dishes from Gabriela today—and now this dreadful, overcooked fish? The day was ruined.

Meanwhile, Gabriela had no idea Wesley was quietly pining for her cooking. She was absorbed in messaging Aubrey.

Although Wesley had already wiped every trace of the scandal from trending topics, the netizens hadn't forgotten. Comments still seethed with anger, accusing Gabriela of throwing her weight around and lashing back because she had something to hide.

Though the trending topics about her had disappeared, public anger still simmered. Relentless critics drifted to other popular platforms, publishing long tirades that dragged Gabriela into even larger conversations. Before long, the scandal reached people who neither followed celebrity gossip nor touched Instagram.

Some influential figures insisted Gabriela had no moral compass and was nothing but an ingrate. Their words ignited another wave of outrage, with uninformed netizens piling on and hurling ugly insults her way.

By the end of the day, Gabriela's name was dirt—her reputation seemed beyond repair. Aubrey fumed at her phone, locked in an endless online brawl, trading blow after blow with strangers in Gabriela's defense. She sent Gabriela a furious message: "Have Mr. Moss handle these fools and get their accounts wiped out."

In her eyes, these nobodies had no right to hurl such vile insults at Gabriela. Gabriela offered reassurance. "I've already thought of a way to handle it. Just breathe, Aubrey. Don't lower yourself to their level." But Aubrey's temper refused to cool.

The online attacks were vicious—too vicious. If the truth wasn't cleared up soon, when work resumed her colleagues would inevitably regard Gabriela with contempt.

Aubrey was seething with anger, unleashing a torrent of curses at Phyllis and her whole family.

As Phyllis's cousin, Gabriela felt unfairly pulled into the conflict.

To calm Aubrey's escalating fury, Gabriela shared the two videos she had recorded earlier that day. Soon after, Aubrey fell silent.

Later, after watching the videos, she called Gabriela, her tone brimming with enthusiasm. "Gabriela, you're incredible! How did you get these videos? Why didn't you tell me sooner? I was so stressed out!"

Gabriela offered a weary smile. "I've always said there's no need to panic or lose your temper."

"I thought you were just trying to make me feel better," Aubrey admitted. Then she proposed, "Should I get my friend with three million followers to share the video now?"

Gabriela responded calmly, "No need to rush. Let's hold off for now."

"Alright, I'll follow your lead this time," Aubrey agreed.

After diffusing Aubrey's anger, Gabriela leaned against her seat, feeling exhausted.

Meanwhile, Billy, who was driving, stole subtle glances at her. All morning, Gabriela had seemed unlike her usual vibrant, cheerful self. She was unusually quiet, yet there was a newfound calmness about her. It was as if the confident, carefree persona she usually projected was a carefully constructed mask. Beneath it, she seemed to be patiently biding her time, waiting for an opportunity to escape the chaos surrounding her.

Billy was struck by this realization. Gabriela was such a kind, genuine person, yet she was forced to endure such distressing circumstances. It felt profoundly unfair. He silently hoped that Wesley would always be kind to her.

Eager to return to Moss Manor and update Wesley on the situation, he was interrupted by a call from Wesley while still on the road.

It turned out Phyllis had gone live online. She and Vivian had been stirring up trouble all night. When a well-known celebrity like Claire shared their video, the drama quickly made it onto the trending lists.

Phyllis was thrilled, reveling in the attention and unable to sleep from the excitement. But by morning, all the trending topics related to Gabriela had vanished.

Marie warned Phyllis, "You failed to take Gabriela down completely, so stop now. I'll clean up this mess."

Phyllis, however, refused to back down. Even after the trending topics were removed, the post continued to gain traction across various platforms.

Unwilling to let go of her vendetta, Phyllis secretly met with Vivian and that influencer, Gem, to plan a live stream.

At 2 p.m., Gem appeared on the live stream, her face heavily made up—enhanced by beauty filters, giving her an almost artificial, doll-like appearance. As the stream began, her followers flooded the chat with greetings and crude questions about Gabriela’s situation.

Gem introduced Phyllis, who looked strikingly beautiful with subtle makeup, further refined by the stream’s filters. The audience buzzed with curiosity about her identity.

Phyllis introduced herself and launched into a carefully rehearsed speech. She claimed Gabriela, whom her family had raised, was vain, ill-tempered, and rebellious, constantly borrowing her clothes and jewelry without permission. As Gabriela grew older, she allegedly used her looks to hang out with unsavory characters at bars. After starting her career, Phyllis accused, Gabriela set her sights on taking her uncle’s house.

Worse, Phyllis claimed Gabriela had tried to seduce her newlywed husband, who had been Gabriela’s schoolmate and someone Phyllis admired.

Phyllis delivered her accusations in a soft, weary tone, appearing polite and fragile, which quickly won over the sympathy of viewers. The comment section exploded with support for her and bitter criticism of Gabriela.

“Stay strong, Phyllis! Millions of us have your back!”

“Gabriela is so disgusting. What a despicable person!”

“When you encounter someone this awful, you cut them out of your life so they can’t hurt you.”

“Phyllis’s parents even helped Gabriela get through college, and this is how she is repaid? Unbelievable!”

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The screen was soon flooded with hateful remarks directed at Gabriela. “Gabriela should go to hell!” “Bitch!” “Utterly repulsive.” “Shameless.”

Wesley, who had tasked Billy with monitoring the situation, was also keeping a close eye on the online developments. Seeing the overwhelming wave of malice and insults aimed at Gabriela, his expression darkened. He immediately ordered Billy to contact a top PR expert, sparing no expense to reverse the tide of public opinion as quickly as possible.

Billy, still driving, pulled over to the side of the road and explained, “I’m about half an hour from the estate.” Wesley’s impatience was palpable. He trusted Billy above all his other capable assistants and wouldn’t feel confident entrusting this task to anyone else.

Overhearing the conversation, Gabriela spoke up softly, “Let me talk to Mr. Moss.” She took Billy’s phone and, in a calm tone, reassured Wesley, “I’m fine, Mr. Moss. You don’t need to worry about this. I can handle it myself.” This was a personal matter between her and Phyllis, and Gabriela was determined to resolve it on her own terms.

Wesley's brow remained furrowed. "Are you sure you're okay?" Most women would be devastated by such an onslaught, and Gabriela's composure took him by surprise. Her insistence on handling it herself left him feeling sidelined and displeased.

"I'm fine," Gabriela assured him. "But I do have one small favor to ask."

Wesley's mood lifted slightly. "What is it?"

"I was hoping you could advance my salary," she said. While the current online buzz was significant, Gabriela worried that Aubrey's friend with three million followers might not generate enough attention, and she might need to hire paid promoters to amplify her response.

Wesley's face soured instantly.

Why was she begging for money while her reputation was in tatters?

He scoffed, "Fine. How much do you need?"

He half-jokingly thought he might as well advance her salary for years to come, tying her to Apex Group indefinitely.

Gabriela named the amount she needed, and after their discussion she handed the phone back to Billy and checked her own.

An unknown number was calling.

She answered, only to be met with a middle-aged man's voice, dripping with malice. "You're Gabriela, right? Listen, you're an absolute disgrace. Your workplace address is out there now—brace yourself for what is coming. Go to hell, you worthless trash."

The words were venomous, laced with vile intent, as if the caller wanted to destroy her through the phone.

Gabriela calmly ended the call and switched her phone to silent. Her number had been leaked online, and a flood of harassing calls and messages filled with hateful, repulsive language followed.

Despite her mental preparation, the intensity of it all still caught her off guard. She texted Aubrey, "Time to post those two videos, please. Thank your friend for helping out. I owe her a meal."

Aubrey, eager to expose Phyllis's true colors, replied with enthusiasm, "No problem. Let's take Phyllis down!"

After ending the live stream, Phyllis noticed dozens of missed calls from Marie. She called back casually. "Mom—"

Before she could continue, Marie cut her off sharply. "Go back online now and clarify that everything you said was a misunderstanding. Gabriela didn't steal our house—it was hers to begin with."

Phyllis's face darkened. "No."

When she had earlier unveiled her so-called truth, the online crowd had rallied behind her, unleashing a barrage of insults at Gabriela far more venomous and degrading than she had anticipated. Gabriela was branded as trash, a nuisance, while Phyllis was elevated as the epitome of innocence and virtue.

Having invested so much effort in fueling this controversy, why would she now step in to defend Gabriela?

"Mom, you're the one who always said, 'If you want something, seize it—no matter what it takes,'" Phyllis declared. "Now that Gabriela is a public target, open to everyone's attacks, why should I show her any mercy?"

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"Idiot!" Marie's voice cracked like a whip, her chest tight with fury and dread. She should have shut Phyllis down the moment she caught wind of those trending topics last night. Unfortunately, greed and overblown confidence had blinded her.

She'd convinced herself Wesley barely cared about Gabriela or would toss her aside without a second thought. But who could have guessed the entire scandal would vanish from the internet by morning? Deleted. Erased. As if it had never existed. And who else could pull strings like that except Wesley himself?

The message couldn't have been clearer: Gabriela was under his protection. Handing the house back quietly might have kept the peace.

But no—Phyllis had to go live, grinning into the camera as if she were the victim. She was digging her own grave.

Marie snapped, pacing like a caged tiger. “Wesley had the trending topics killed overnight. He’s protecting Gabriela, and you still dare to livestream? What are you thinking? That you’re important enough for him to crush personally?”

Phyllis crossed her arms, chin tilted in defiance. “No matter how rich or powerful he is, he can’t muzzle the entire internet.”

She thought back to the flood of sympathy in her live chat as millions rallied behind her, spitting venom at Gabriela’s name. The memory curled her lips into a smug smile.

“Trending topics? Sure, he could erase those. But public opinion? That was a beast even Wesley couldn’t cage.”

“You idiot! Get back on that livestream and apologize to Gabriela! Right now!” Marie’s temper was a storm breaking loose. She couldn’t comprehend how a woman as shrewd and capable as herself had ended up with a daughter so dangerously clueless.

“If you don’t do as I say,” she shouted, her voice cutting through the air, “then pack your things tonight and get the hell out of here! Go live in that pathetic shoebox your poor husband calls home!”

Phyllis, spoiled from birth and unaccustomed to such brutal words, slammed her phone down.

From across the room, Vivian's amused laugh floated over. "Let me guess, your mother's asking you to let Gabriela off the hook?"

Phyllis scowled, arms crossed, though a flicker of unease passed through her eyes. "She's scared Wesley will take Gabriela's side."

Vivian waved off the concern with a lazy smirk. "Please. You know exactly what kind of man Wesley is. If he really gave a damn, he'd have done more than just scrub the trending topics last night."

By the window, Gem lounged with feline grace, admiring her freshly painted nails. She didn't even look up as she chimed in in a silky, dismissive tone. "Wesley lives in a world none of us will ever touch. Gabriela's just a pretty distraction to him, nothing more. Wiping those trending topics? That was a casual flick of his wrist. You really think he's in love with her?"

In just six months, Gem had climbed from a few hundred followers to this million followers, riding a wave of influence powered by a benefactor whose reach was every bit as dangerous as it was powerful.

"And look at Claire! She's the one who actually lit the match for those trending topics," Gem said, still admiring the glossy curve of her nails. "If Wesley were truly out for blood over some woman, Claire would've been exiled from the entertainment industry before sunrise."

Phyllis felt some of the tightness in her chest ease at Gem's calm, cutting logic. Exactly. Why would a man like Wesley waste his energy protecting Gabriela for long?

And Phyllis had already planted the seed that Gabriela was still hung up on Dustin. If Wesley had even an ounce of pride as a man, the idea would fester. Surely by now, Gabriela was halfway out the door of the Moss Manor, if not already thrown to the curb.

The more she thought about it, the more certain Phyllis became.

The internet was in a frenzy today, a perfect storm of scandal. Gabriela's name had shot to the top of the trending list like a flare in the night.

Those in the know spat her name like a curse, while curious strangers, lured in by the sudden buzz, looked her up only to join the chorus of mockery and contempt.

Then came the twist. A minor influencer, known online as Little Bell, dropped a video. It was Farley's account of what had really happened.

In the video, he didn't waste a second on pleasantries. His voice was steady, but there was a hard edge beneath it.

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"My name is Farley Moreno. I once served as the assistant to Ms. Nanna Haynes, the former CEO of the Haynes Group. She wasn't just a remarkable leader—she was a devoted mother who cherished Gabriela like the most precious thing in her life. When Gabriela was only eight, tragedy struck. Ms. Haynes was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Knowing her time was short, she entrusted her younger brother, Josh, with Gabriela's care. She even paid off more than thirty thousand in gambling debts for his wife, Marie—hoping that kindness would buy Gabriela a lifetime of peace."

Pausing for a moment, Farley's jaw tightened. "After Ms. Haynes passed, Marie took over the Haynes Group and used her position to frame me for embezzlement. I had no way to fight back and I was forced to resign. It didn't end there. She sent men to break my right leg and warned me to stay far away from her affairs. She thought that by cutting down everyone who'd been close to Ms. Haynes, she could finally sleep easy. What she never knew was that I kept a copy of Ms. Haynes's will."

His hands shook as he held the document up to the camera. The words were clear, stark, undeniable. "Haynes Group is to be temporarily managed by Josh Haynes. Once Gabriela Haynes reaches the age of twenty-two, the company must be returned to her, unconditionally."

The title of the video flashed across the screen: Gabriela's Late Mother's Will. It was Gabriela's own choice—a deliberate spark to ignite the flames. She'd be a fool not to ride this wave, especially when it was her story to tell.

And it worked. The moment the video went live, the internet lit up. Shocked viewers flooded the comments, sharing and reposting until the story began to spread like wildfire.

Meanwhile, Wesley had eyes everywhere. The moment the video crossed his desk, he didn't hesitate. One call, and the clip was flooded with paid traffic, catapulting it straight to the top of the trending list.

Within hours, the video wasn't just viral; it was the most talked-about thing online.

Little Bell's follower count exploded by hundreds of thousands, climbing by the minute. Sensing the momentum, she struck again.

The second video opened with a scene that hooked viewers instantly. Tyler, a debt collector with a gravelly voice and a scowl, addressed the camera, demanding repayment from Marie. “You’ve been carrying these gambling debts.”

“For sixteen years, Marie Haynes. And we’re not even asking for interest, just the damn principal. Consider it a favor.”

Tyler held up the IOU, then laid bare his father’s ruin, using it as a stark warning about the grip of gambling. The proof was unshakable. Sixteen years ago, Marie hadn’t just been a gambler; she had been drowning in debt. The one who’d thrown her a lifeline, covering every last cent, had been Gabriela’s mother, Alanna.

When both videos finished their circuit online, a strange hush fell over the internet. It was the silence before the backlash—the collective pause when millions of people realized the story they’d been shouting about was wrong. An hour ago, Gabriela’s name had been spat like poison. People had hurled every insult in the book. Some had even planned to track her down in person, certain they were on the side of justice.

The videos hit the internet like a slap that echoed, leaving the mob stunned and off-balance.

An influencer with fifty million followers cut straight to the bone. “Phyllis and her family were liars. On her live stream, she claimed Gabriela was trying to steal her home. That was a lie. The house they were staying in was Gabriela’s to begin with. Yet Phyllis still dared to play the victim. That’s not just shameless; it’s rotten.”

Then came another blow. Gabriela’s high school teacher stepped forward and posted, “Gabriela was an extraordinary student. When her aunt refused to pay her tuition and even tried to have her expelled,

she worked part-time to cover her own fees. She sat for the college entrance exam with a fever and still earned a place at Okburg's top university, Rutherford University. I wanted to help her more back then, but her aunt was too domineering. All I could do was offer small, discreet aid. I still regret not doing more."

This post spread like wildfire, reshared again and again, each repost twisting the knife into Phyllis's public image.

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The netizens who watched Gabriela's high school teacher's video were completely stunned. Some suddenly realized that she had taken that bar job only to scrape together her tuition, not to mess around with unsavory characters. But then came the voice of a baffled netizen: "Gabriela busted her back working part-time just to stay in school, yet her cousin dragged her name through the mud, calling her shameless and without dignity. Here's what I don't get: why did she suddenly burn with a raging fever on the very days of the college entrance exams? Something about the whole story feels off, like puzzle pieces that don't quite fit. I just pray the truth isn't as cold and ugly as the thought gnawing at the back of my mind."

Farley had been quietly tracking the online chatter all day. When he saw the latest rumors swirling, he made a snap decision and asked his young neighbor to post the photos of Gabriela's burned arm.

Because the post carried Gabriela's name, it ignited like dry tinder. Shares multiplied, comments poured in, and by morning the young man's account had surged by over a hundred thousand followers. He was left blinking at the numbers, utterly floored.

Farley then recorded another video and clarified the story behind those photos. "When Gabriela was a child, Phyllis made a sport of tormenting her—kicking her out of bed in the dead of night, slicing her school uniforms into rags, and letting her starve. At school, Phyllis rallied others to shun her, spreading lies that tarnished her reputation. Gabriela... she just clenched her jaw and endured it. Before her college entrance exams, Phyllis stormed into her room at midnight with a kettle of boiling water.

Gabriela woke in time to shield her face, but her left arm— the skin came away in layers. She ran a fever until the exams were over. If she hadn't woken up, her face would have been ruined forever."

Farley's eyes reddened as he spoke; the memory alone was enough to tear him apart. If Alanna had known what her daughter endured, it would have shattered her. The video revealed the harsh truth with photos of angry red burns on Gabriela's arm, accompanied by Farley's raw account.

Viewers couldn't watch without feeling a knot in their chests. Comments flooded in.

"Honestly, Phyllis is a monster. She and her family are toxic to the core. Alanna paid off Phyllis's mother's debts, gave them a home, even handed them a company. No one asked them to treat Gabriela like royalty, but the bare minimum of treating her like a human being was too much to ask.

"If Alanna had left her daughter with a random family, Gabriela would have had a far better life than this."

"I was wrong to criticize Gabriela. I owe her an apology."

"Count me in."

"Same here."

The moment Gabriela returned to her room at Moss Manor, she locked the door and sat by the window, phone in hand, watching the online tide turn in her favor. In just hours, she had flipped the board entirely.

Now it was Phyllis and her family who were in the crosshairs, with public fury beating down on them like relentless waves. Any hope of a quiet New Year had gone up in smoke.

Soon, some netizens gathered outside Rosemont Gardens, shouting for Phyllis and her family to return the house to Gabriela. The gates stayed sealed, the windows dark. Not a single face dared show itself to the mob outside.

Inside, the air was equally tense. Marie's voice sliced through the living room like a whip. "I told you to stop, but you just had to keep going. Now Wesley doesn't even have to lift a finger. The netizens are lashing out at you."

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Phyllis's complexion had turned ashen. Her hands shook, and her eyes darted toward the curtained windows. She couldn't fathom how netizens who had been hurling stones at Gabriela just yesterday had, overnight, turned their pitchforks on her. Now they were at her very doorstep, and it overwhelmed her.

Questions spun in her mind, each one colder than the last. What was she supposed to do now? And her future? What would her friends think of her now? Could she still command the room, bask in the glow of admirers like before?

Her chest tightened; panic threatened to spill over.

Seeing her unravel, Dustin wrapped his arms around her. “Don’t be afraid. We’ll handle this. I’ve already called the police. They’ll be here soon to clear out the crowd.”

Josh was baffled. “Marie, explain this to me. Didn’t we already agree to give the house back to Gabriela? So why the hell are we still being dragged through the mud like this?”

Marie’s eyes narrowed, her tone a mix of disdain and resentment. “Because your sweet niece isn’t just some helpless victim. She knows how to work the crowd. And because your darling sister kept her will from you when she entrusted her daughter to you.” She leaned in, each word deliberate. “Call Gabriela. Tell her we’ll be out after the New Year. And make it very clear that this mob at our gates needs to vanish. Today.”

When Gabriela picked up, Josh’s voice cracked instantly. “Gabriela! It’s me!” The sound of him crying made something in her chest tighten with guilt—unwelcome but undeniable. No matter what Marie and Phyllis had done, Josh had never treated her with malice.

But guilt wasn’t enough to soften her resolve. She’d swallowed her pride for years, enduring quietly, and this was the moment she’d been sharpening her patience for.

The house was just the first domino. Next came the company, until every ounce of power was back in her hands.

“Uncle Josh, I’ll make sure everyone knows you’ve always been good to me,” Gabriela said softly, with an edge beneath it. That way the public’s anger wouldn’t reach him.

Josh broke entirely, words tangled with sobs. “I didn’t know... God, I didn’t know you’d been through all that, Gabriela. I’m so, so sorry.”

When his sobs ebbed into silence, she ended the call and typed a short message to Farley. “We did it.”

After reading the message, Farley looked around at the peeling wallpaper and the sagging beams of his home. In his mind, he was back in the glittering boardrooms of years past, standing at Alanna’s side, untouchable. His eyes stung, his jaw tightened.

“I kept my word, Ms. Haynes,” he mumbled under his breath.

Aubrey had stayed quiet through the entire online firestorm, watching it burn from the sidelines.

By the time she called Gabriela again, the exhilaration of witnessing Phyllis’s downfall had faded. Her voice quivered on the line. “Gabriela, how could your life have been this awful? You must have been so desperate back then. If I’d known you then, I swear I would have ripped Phyllis to shreds for you!”

“I wasn’t desperate,” Gabriela replied with a soft laugh that carried a hint of mischief. “If I’d had spare time, I’d have rather spent it on a good meal and a long nap.”

Aubrey paused, certain Gabriela was just putting on a brave face. Her voice dropped to a tender murmur. “I really want to hug you right now.”

Gabriela smirked. "Go hug Kevin instead. I'm actually in a great mood, and your crying will wreck it."

Aubrey, primed for a teary sisterly moment, blinked at the rejection. How could Gabriela be so mean?

After ending the call, Gabriela tucked away any trace of emotion, squared her shoulders, and planned to head downstairs to make dinner. The moment she opened her door, however, she nearly collided with Loretta and Miriam.

Miriam had been glued to every scrap of online gossip about Gabriela. When the mob attacked, she'd dived in headfirst, battling strangers in the comments section like a knight with a Wi-Fi connection. When the tide turned, her heart ached for Gabriela's past struggles. She'd grabbed Loretta by the arm, determined to check on Gabriela in person. They stood outside her room, pacing like sentries, torn between knocking and leaving her in peace.

The moment Gabriela stepped out, Loretta and Miriam turned toward her like sunflowers tracking the light, their faces brimming with tenderness. Without hesitation, they each wrapped an arm around her, sandwiching her between them.

"You've been through enough, Gabriela," Miriam said firmly. "From now on, this is your home."

"That's right," Loretta chimed in, her tone fierce. "Stick by my side and I'd like to see anyone try to mess with you again."

Even Brenden muscled his way into the huddle, his hand landing gently on her shoulder. "Stay strong, Gabriela. You're the best."

Gabriela couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry.

Yes, the past had carved its marks into her, but she'd never been the type to sit in the ruins and weep over them. If she'd let grief swallow her whole after her mother's death, she would never have made it through those endless, poisoned nights under the same roof as Phyllis, who seemed born for the sole purpose of breaking her spirit.

"I'm fine," she said at last, a faint smile tugging at her lips. "So... what are we having for dinner? I'll cook."

"Absolutely not," Loretta replied, finger raised in mock severity. "The garden's in bloom, and you're going to enjoy it. Go walk among the flowers, breathe some fresh air, and let your mind settle. Tonight, I'm the one cooking for you." With Loretta's order and Miriam's encouraging nod, Gabriela knew resistance was pointless. She gave a lighthearted salute and turned toward the garden path.

Brenden moved as if to follow, but Loretta caught him by the arm. "And where exactly do you think you're going?" she asked. "Come with me." Brenden's gaze followed Gabriela's retreating figure, and a quiet sigh slipped from him. He liked her, but he couldn't return the feeling. Better to keep his distance than risk turning things painfully awkward, so he stayed put beside Loretta.

Out in the garden, Gabriela wandered along the path until her steps slowed. By a cluster of blossoms stood Wesley. The pale white of his sweater caught the light, setting off the clean lines of his frame. His tall figure seemed almost carved into the scene, a quiet anchor amidst the spill of color.

For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

Wesley, aloof and untouchable as he always was, looked entirely different here—softened by the dappled light and the delicate flowers. There was a refined grace to him now, something almost magnetic. Gabriela let out a bitter laugh. He was such a remarkable man, yet his heart held no room for women.

Wesley's gaze shifted, meeting hers. His voice, stripped of its usual cool edge, came low and steady, "Come here..."

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Gabriela jogged toward Wesley, her breath coming in quick bursts.

Wesley's gaze dropped to meet hers, his eyes harboring emotions that churned beneath a carefully controlled surface. The urge to reach for her clawed at him, but he held himself rigidly, afraid one wrong move might send her fleeing.

"Did you handle the online buzz about you?" he asked, his voice steadier than his racing pulse.

Something unreadable flickered across his features. All she could discern was an unexpected gentleness that made her chest tighten with gratitude. "Everything's handled. Thank you for caring, Mr. Moss," she replied, her voice warm with appreciation.

Wesley studied her face. She had grown up in a suffocating, nightmarish household; those painful past experiences were being revisited now, tearing open old wounds for strangers to dissect and judge. Yet her eyes remained untainted by the darkness she'd endured. She was still the bright, captivating Gabriela.

Something shifted in Wesley's expression. Before he could stop himself, his hand moved to the crown of her head, fingers threading gently through her hair. "Don't be afraid anymore. You have me now."

Gabriela's smile blazed across her face as she nodded vigorously. "I only found the courage to release those videos and evidence because you stood behind me, Mr. Moss."

Without his protection, she and the financially struggling Farley would have watched helplessly as Marie buried those posts before they could cause any damage. Given Marie's ruthless nature, she would have dispatched thugs to steal the will and driven Tyler's bar into bankruptcy within weeks if she hadn't feared offending Wesley.

Wesley's mouth curved upward before he asked, "Now that you've reclaimed your house, what dreams are you chasing?"

The question caught Gabriela off guard. She blinked, then answered with honest enthusiasm, "I want to stay close to you and earn mountains of money."

Wesley's smile turned to stone. Was that truly the extent of her ambition?

Unease flickered across Gabriela's face when she noticed his disapproval. "Actually, dreams don't need to be grandiose affairs."

Wesley's response cut through the air like a blade. "Craving vast wealth ranks among the most grandiose dreams imaginable."

His expression turned coolly superior, the kind that reminded her exactly how far her simple mind fell short of his razor-sharp intellect—an intellect that generated wealth at will. Heat crept up Gabriela's neck. She scrambled for safer ground. "Then I'll aim smaller—maybe deciding what to purchase with my next paycheck, or choosing my next vacation destination."

"What would you buy?" Wesley pressed. "And for this vacation, who would accompany you, and where would you venture?"

Gabriela's temples throbbed. Conversations with Wesley felt like navigating a minefield. Did even imaginary dreams require such exhaustive detail? She grumbled under her breath, "I haven't gotten my next paycheck yet. Why torture myself thinking about these things?"

A melodic chime interrupted her complaints—her phone's banking alert. She yanked the device from her pocket with frantic urgency. One glance at the screen, and the world tilted off its axis. How many zeros stared back at her? Gabriela counted the seven digits once, then twice. A wild thought seized her—had scammers grown this sophisticated?

Wesley easily glimpsed her screen. With calm, he announced, "That's your advance for ten years' salary."

Reality crashed over her. Gabriela's words tumbled out in a rush. "There's absolutely no need for advance payment, Mr. Moss. I've already resolved everything."

Thanks to the media storm Phyllis had created, Gabriela hadn't spent a penny of her own money.