

His kiss 321

Chapter 321

An unexpected weight settled in Gabriela's chest, like a stone dropping into still water, sending ripples of unnamed emotion through her core. She forced the feeling aside and plunged back into her project. Romance held no place in her practical world — earning money demanded her complete attention.

Seven days later, her architectural masterpiece stood complete. Farley and Ken circled the model in stunned admiration.

"It's absolutely breathtaking! Gabriela, this would dominate any competition."

Gabriela raised her eyebrows with unmistakable pride. When she committed to excellence, mediocrity became impossible.

Farley inquired, "Should we arrange the meeting with Mr. McCoy now?"

"No need to rush — tomorrow will suffice."

Wesley's earlier praise echoed in her memory, and she couldn't resist capturing photographs from every conceivable angle to send him.

Wesley's response arrived within seconds. "Impressive work."

His economical reply revealed nothing of his true thoughts — perhaps pressing business demanded his attention. Disappointment deflated Gabriela's earlier excitement.

Rather than pursue Wesley further, she forwarded the photographs to Mason instead. "Mr. Garner, I need your honest assessment — where would this piece rank in your club's competition?"

Her sleepless nights had been calculated preparation. Mason's exclusive...

The model club was launching a competition in two days — members would unveil their most treasured creations, battling for a \$200,000 prize and a coveted championship medal.

Mason's response arrived swiftly. "The finished piece is absolutely extraordinary."

A second message followed immediately. "If this weren't destined for Bradley, I'd make you an offer you couldn't refuse."

The photographs alone had bewitched him. Witnessing the actual model would likely prove overwhelming. For these affluent collectors, prize money remained secondary — claiming a trophy for eternal bragging rights provided the true intoxication. Like master anglers, the specific catch mattered less than the exhilarating rush of victory itself.

While Gabriela coordinated tomorrow's meeting with Bradley through Mason, Wesley remained transfixed by his silent phone screen. Thirty minutes had crawled past without a single message from

Gabriela. Irritation prickled beneath his controlled exterior. He had offered genuine praise — yet she'd vanished without acknowledgment?

Gabriela remained oblivious to Wesley's expectant vigil. After she finalized arrangements with Mason, exhaustion finally claimed her, driving her toward a desperately needed shower and sleep. Weeks of relentless work had drained her reserves completely. The moment her body surrendered to relaxation, unconsciousness swept her away.

The following day, Mason arranged Gabriela's meeting with Bradley at Horizon Club. Bradley had sworn to Fiona that Gabriela would never earn his cooperation. However, discovering her ability to craft museum-quality handmade models had shattered his resolve entirely. He'd eventually enlisted Mason as intermediary, secretly arranging this clandestine encounter.

Gabriela transported her masterpiece to the club for their crucial meeting. Within the hushed privacy of their reserved room, Bradley's expression ignited upon glimpsing the model.

Disbelief colored his voice. "Miss Haynes, you truly created this entirely by hand?"

"Absolutely," Gabriela nodded.

She then launched into a detailed explanation of her intricate construction process. Bradley showered her with effusive praise.

He'd suspected the photographs might have been digitally enhanced, but reality surpassed every expectation.

The building's deep brown foundation merged steampunk's cutting-edge technological aesthetic with profound traditional influences, birthing a mesmerizing artwork that commanded absolute attention. Every miniature figure possessed startling vitality and authenticity. The multi-tiered chambers even featured working illumination, creating a vibrant atmosphere.

"This is absolutely magnificent!" Bradley circled the model repeatedly, searching unsuccessfully for any imperfection. Desire consumed him — he ached to claim this treasure for his personal collection immediately.

His promise to Fiona evaporated like morning mist. How could mere friendship compete with his burning passion for extraordinary craftsmanship?

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Bradley reached out, fingertips brushing across the model. The uncanny realism of the building's weathered facade made him linger, reluctant to pull his hand away.

"Mr. McCoy, this piece took me nearly a month to complete," Gabriela said softly, a hint of pride in her tone. "For an entire month, I barely left my workspace except to eat or sleep. Every waking hour was poured into shaping this."

Her explanation carried the weight of expertise, detailing the rust etched into the machinery, the interlocking gears, the meticulous calculations behind every tiny component. She stressed one key point: a steampunk model without age, without the scars of time, had no soul.

Bradly's eyes lit with admiration. "Miss Haynes, you are truly extraordinary."

Though Gabriela never once complained about the hardships, he could vividly imagine the sleepless nights, the painstaking effort. The realization left him awestruck.

He leaned forward, voice filled with unrestrained eagerness. "Miss Haynes, your work is remarkable. I'm willing to pay two million for this model. Would you consider selling it to me?"

Gabriela froze, momentarily stunned. That much money? For a small architectural model?

The raw materials had cost her less than two thousand dollars, and yet Bradley had just offered two million. If she had known that crafting a single model could turn her into a millionaire, she would never have wasted time working an ordinary job.

But she swallowed down her excitement, steadying her expression. Instead, she curved her lips into a poised smile. "Mr. McCoy, it's not money I need."

Bradly's gaze sharpened. He understood instantly that this model was her bargaining chip for collaboration. Yet the promise he had made to Fiona flickered through his mind, dragging hesitation across his face.

Before the silence could settle, Mason cut in smoothly, his tone deliberate. "Gabriela, I really like this piece as well. I'll pay two and a half million. Sell it to me."

Bradly shot up, flustered and indignant. “Mr. Garner, I want this! How could you go after it too?”

Mason didn’t falter. “Why couldn’t I claim this model for myself? And let’s not forget, I’m offering more money than you are.”

Bradly’s composure cracked, frustration rising visibly in his face. Mason, a celebrated entrepreneur, was behaving like some hype man at an auction. Bradly saw through the performance instantly, but desperation had him by the throat. Retreat wasn’t an option. He knew he wasn’t the only enthusiast; Stewart from the Williams Group shared his passion, an interest that bordered on obsession.

Grinding his teeth, Bradly muttered, “Send me the contract. I’ll review the proposal.”

Gabriela, barely concealing her excitement, slid the neatly prepared contract across the table. A quick scan revealed nothing out of place.

“But,” Bradly said, narrowing his eyes, “isn’t your profit margin a little steep?”

“Mr. McCoy,” Gabriela replied smoothly, “the Haynes Group is small. We rarely land projects like this, and the competition is brutal. That margin is barely a thank-you for choosing us.”

Bradly cursed inwardly. What a cunning woman. Knowing his weakness for that model, she leveraged the moment to her advantage. On any other day, he would have bargained the profit margin down by at least three points. But today, eagerness clouded his judgment and he just wanted to take that model home and admire it in peace.

“Alright, deal,” Bradley said finally, forcing a smile.

He summoned the company’s legal team, combed through every clause, and, finding nothing amiss, signed with a flourish.

When Gabriela clasped the freshly signed contract, her heart raced with exhilaration.

Extending her hand, she said with genuine warmth, “Mr. McCoy, I’m looking forward to our partnership.”

This victory was hers alone — achieved without any assistance from Wesley or Kaleb.

Bradley shook her hand, a trace of admiration in his eyes. “Miss Haynes, if you ever decide to craft another model, make sure I’m the first to know.”

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Gabriela nodded eagerly. “Of course!”

That evening, Bradley took the model home and couldn’t stop admiring it. The craftsmanship, the precision, the texture — every detail left him in awe. Trading a project for it? Worth it.

As he was still marveling at his acquisition, Fiona's voice rang through the phone, tinged with curiosity. "Bradly, I heard you signed the contract with Gabriela."

Bradly, still mesmerized by the model, responded absently, "Yeah."

Fiona's voice sharpened. "I thought you promised—"

Bradly cut in smoothly, tone dripping with practiced calm. "You know how business works. I came back to find a partner I could trust, and Gabriela's proposal outshined every other offer. I need to make money, so naturally, I went with her." He paused, then added with a light chuckle, "Come on, Fiona. You and Gabriela are both women. Why make things harder for her? Honestly, she seems like a good person to me. Why would you hate her?"

Fiona was fuming with frustration. Was Gabriela some kind of witch? Every time she plotted to put Gabriela in her place, it somehow backfired. And now, it sounded as though Gabriela had climbed higher in Bradley's esteem than Fiona herself. Unbelievable. First Wesley, and now Bradley?

Gabriela had a talent for bewitching men, and Fiona wasn't about to let her get away with it.

Bradly, refusing to engage any further, ended the call without another word. His attention drifted right back to the model. The more he studied its intricate design, the more it captivated him.

The next morning, he brought it along to the club, eager to show it off. A few members were already gathered when he arrived, Stewart among them.

With a grin, Bradly strode over. “Mr. Williams, take a look at this beauty. It’s a model that fuses steampunk with traditional architecture. What do you think? How does it stack up against yours?”

Until now, Stewart’s deep-sea city model had been the unrivaled centerpiece of the club, and the bridge model Bradly had once splurged on never quite measured up. That had always irked Bradly. Now, with the perfect chance to show off, Bradly seized it.

Stewart’s gaze shifted to Bradly’s model, his pupils narrowing before widening in surprise. His previously detached expression faltered as he stepped forward, drawn in to examine the architectural piece up close.

“Mr. McCoy, where on earth did you find such a beautiful piece?”

Stewart was no casual admirer; he was a seasoned collector. Years ago, Gabriela’s deep-sea city model had impressed him so much that he agreed to her request to develop accessibility software for the visually impaired.

Bradly’s lips curved into a cryptic smile. “You won’t believe it. This was crafted by a young woman. Pretty little thing, with delicate hands, and yet she managed to create something this extraordinary.”

Admiration laced his tone, and Stewart’s curiosity sharpened. “What’s her name?”

“Gabriela Haynes,” Bradley replied with an almost boastful ease. “I heard she’s just taken over her family’s business. She’s trying to land a big project to secure her footing. Honestly, I wasn’t planning to get involved at first, but who knew she’d be this talented?”

As Bradley spoke, Stewart arched a brow, recognition dawning. “I had a feeling that it might be her.”

Over the years, Stewart had seen countless so-called master craftsmen. Their models were flawless — exquisite, even — but they lacked the spark, the breath of life. Only Gabriela’s creations carried that rare magic: grand yet full of vitality.

“You know her?” Bradley asked, intrigued.

“I do,” Stewart replied with a faint, knowing smile, his gaze drifting somewhere far away. “I’ve known her for a few years.”

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Gabriela was unaware that Bradley had carried her architectural model to the club, where he displayed it with unmistakable pride. This unexpected showcase had quietly elevated her reputation within the exclusive circle.

She headed to Haynes Group, the signed contract clutched firmly in her hand. Kaleb studied the document carefully, his expression shifting into something more complex with each passing moment.

His prolonged silence stirred unease within Gabriela's chest. "Uncle Kaleb, did you find something problematic with the contract?"

"Nothing's wrong at all." Kaleb's response came with a rare smile breaking across his typically stern features. "I'm simply puzzled by Bradley's willingness to accept such generous profit margins for our company."

After all, mere participation in this project guaranteed substantial returns with minimal risk exposure. Countless major corporations would have eagerly signed agreements with him at drastically reduced margins. So what had compelled him to choose the Haynes Group?

Gabriela's smile carried a hint of mischief. "I used his weakness to force his compliance with our terms."

When Gabriela had entered that contract negotiation, she had mentally prepared herself for Bradley's inevitable attempts to slash their profits by three percentage points. However, the instant his eyes fell upon her model, they blazed with the fervor of a treasure hunter discovering gold. With such a prize dangling before him, he would have agreed to virtually anything.

Kaleb's disapproval emerged after hearing her explanation. "Even with your confidence in securing this project, you should have offered him some concessions."

Gabriela shook her head with quiet determination. "This represents my first project after joining the company. If I had settled for minimal profits, those executives would never grant me their respect. As for Bradley, I'll discover a way to make amends."

He had completely fallen for her craftsmanship, so she could create another model for him.

Kaleb nodded with newfound understanding, his smile radiating relief. "Gabriela, you are very capable. Like mother, like daughter."

The mention of her mother, who had departed this world far too young, sent a familiar weight settling over Gabriela's heart.

Without warning, the secretary knocked and stepped inside. "Miss Haynes, Trenton and the other executives learned of your arrival and are demanding an immediate meeting."

Kaleb's brow furrowed deeply. "Why do they want a meeting?"

The secretary spoke in a hushed tone. "They believe that after spending a month in hiding at home, Miss Haynes owes everyone a proper explanation now that she has finally appeared."

Kaleb's anger flared instantly. "Absolutely ridiculous! The agreed three-month period hasn't even concluded yet."

The secretary kept her gaze fixed downward, not daring to utter another word.

Gabriela placed a calming hand on his arm. "Uncle Kaleb, don't let anger consume you. They want an explanation? Fine. I'll give them exactly what they asked for."

She stood ready to confront the executives loyal to Marie.

The hastily arranged meeting convened within minutes. Gabriela claimed her position at the table's head, her gaze steady and unreadable. She directed her attention toward Cynthia Schmidt, the PR department head, speaking with measured politeness. "Ms. Schmidt, your makeup requires immediate attention. The PR department serves as our company's public face, yet your collar sits disheveled, and your lipstick appears far too aggressive."

Gabriela paused deliberately, touching the corner of her own mouth. "Additionally, your lip line has gone astray here."

Cynthia, approximately thirty years old, flushed crimson with mortification at the public critique and scrambled to repair her appearance.

Gabriela proceeded to identify several other individuals, requesting they correct their professional presentation.

"Our company specializes in wedding planning services. If we cannot maintain our own polished image, how can we expect clients to entrust us with their most precious celebrations?"

Those singled out hurriedly adjusted their collars and straightened their sleeves. Through these calculated actions, Gabriela projected an aura of absolute command, ensuring no one would dare dismiss her authority again.

Trenton's sneer cut through the tension. "Miss Haynes, you've spent a month cowering at home, and while you've shown no improvement in other areas, your arrogance has certainly flourished."

The Human Resources Department head joined the attack. "Miss Haynes, this meeting wasn't called to discuss cosmetics and clothing. Stop deflecting our concerns and focus on how you plan to justify your behavior."

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Others harboring resentment added their voices to the chorus, treating Gabriela's month-long absence as an unforgivable transgression.

Gabriela waited patiently for their mockery to exhaust itself, then offered a subtle smile. "Since I joined the company, you've done nothing but issue demands. Now I have a question for you. If I secure Bradley's project, I win. So what's your penalty?"

Trenton responded without hesitation. "Should you actually secure this project, I will publicly acknowledge your leadership before our employees. But if you fail, you're out of the company. You should return home to embrace marriage and motherhood."

The remaining executives echoed similar sentiments with eager agreement. "Indeed, Miss Haynes, your beauty is undeniable. Securing a suitable husband should pose no challenge whatsoever."

"The CEO position carries immense stress. Once married, you could remain at home, supporting your husband and nurturing children, rather than squandering our valuable time."

Gabriela's gaze moved deliberately from Trenton to the other two executives. "And what about you? Do you share this sentiment?"

They bobbed their heads with emphatic agreement. "Absolutely."

They harbored absolute certainty that Gabriela could never possibly obtain that contract.

Gabriela turned toward Kaleb, her smile brightening. "Uncle Kaleb, you witnessed their declarations. Please serve as my witness."

Kaleb offered his silent nod of confirmation.

Without ceremony, Gabriela retrieved Bradley's signed contract, passing it to the secretary for circulation among the group.

The executives stared in stunned disbelief after examining the document. "Bradley actually signed this agreement with us?"

Gabriela nodded, her smile radiating warmth. "Determination opens every door."

Trenton's complexion drained to an ashen pallor. Gabriela had already secured the contract, yet she sat there allowing their ridicule to wash over her without resistance. They had just proclaimed such bold declarations and found themselves instantly proven wrong. Would they truly honor their word and publicly acknowledge her leadership?

"You proposed this wager of your own volition. You've examined the contract. It bears genuine validity and legal weight." Kaleb rose from his chair, fixing them with an unwavering stare. "Honor your commitment and acknowledge her leadership publicly."

Trenton and his allies visibly floundered, stammering incoherently while refusing to initiate the promised acknowledgment.

Gabriela harbored no real intention of forcing them to acknowledge her leadership. After allowing several minutes to pass, she spoke with composed dignity. "You represent the company's seasoned veterans. How could I truly compel you to make such public acknowledgments? Let's treat this entire exchange as jest and move forward. However, I hope you now comprehend that whatever achievements men can claim, women can match with equal prowess. Therefore, cease using the tired excuse that women should simply remain home with children to diminish our worth. Such thinking only exposes your profound ignorance."

Gabriela's words carried devastating power, leaving the executives red-faced and utterly speechless.

Within hours, they became the center of relentless office speculation. Employees whispered privately about their failure to honor their wager. Gabriela's declaration spread like wildfire, earning heartfelt admiration from every female colleague, while most male colleagues found themselves respecting her newfound authority.

The disgraced executives pretended deafness to the surrounding chatter. Although breaking their sworn word brought deep shame, they absolutely could not fulfill their public acknowledgment as promised. At best, they would avoid Gabriela's presence in the future, exercising extreme caution to never provoke her again.

Gabriela thoroughly cemented her position within Haynes Group, and this remarkable news traveled swiftly to Wesley's attention.

Following Billy's detailed report, Wesley's lips curved into a subtle smile. "She possesses remarkable capability indeed."

Billy spoke with genuine conviction. "Miss Haynes demonstrates exceptional intelligence."

Gabriela's abilities had consistently left profound impressions on everyone who encountered them.

Recalling the mesmerizing depth of Gabriela's eyes, Wesley found himself musing aloud. "Our company currently has a project seeking the perfect partner. Accompany me for a visit to Haynes Group."

Billy followed Wesley out in contemplative silence.

With a coveted project from Apex Group at stake, countless companies would wage brutal battles for the opportunity to secure it. Wesley instead chose to cooperate with an insignificant company like the Haynes Group — clearly, it was simply his excuse to see Gabriela again.

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Wesley's arrival with Billy took the two young receptionists at Haynes Group completely off guard.

"Mr. Moss, please wait just a moment. Miss Haynes is meeting with a guest right now. I'll inform her immediately!" one of them said hastily.

"There's no need," Wesley replied calmly. "Let her finish first."

Unbothered, he headed toward the lounge to wait, while Billy found the situation oddly amusing. It was the first time he'd ever seen his boss personally visit for business, only to be kept waiting. Still, since Wesley didn't mind, Billy wisely held his tongue.

In her office, Gabriela sat in a meeting of great significance. Her guest was none other than Stewart of Williams Group, accompanied by his assistant, Erik.

Wasting no time on pleasantries, Stewart leaned forward and stated bluntly, "Gabriela, I want to commission you for an architectural model that outshines Bradley's in every detail. Whatever your price, I'll meet it."

More than six years ago, when Gabriela had just graduated high school, Stewart had regarded her as nothing more than a naïve young girl. What caught his attention back then was the astonishing deep-sea city model she had crafted. When she later disappeared, Stewart hadn't bothered to seek her out. Even upon their reunion, his admiration for her still stemmed solely from that single model.

But now, after learning she had produced a piece that had won first place for someone else, his pride refused to let it go.

Listening politely to his request, Gabriela smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry, Mr. Williams. I've just finished a model, and I'm completely exhausted. I'll need some time to recover before starting anything new."

In truth, she was nearly four months into her pregnancy.

Though the worst of her morning sickness had passed, fatigue still clung to her, leaving her in constant need of rest.

Sensing her hesitation, Stewart swiftly changed his approach. "I'm planning to develop a city plaza by the pier. The proposal has already been submitted to the government. What I need now is a partner. Gabriela, are you interested?"

Her heart stirred. How could she not be interested? The offer was promising, and the profit undeniable. Had she not already committed to Bradley's project, she would have accepted on the spot. Still, Bradley's project alone was enough to secure her footing within the company. Besides, her pregnancy would soon be impossible to conceal, and the thought of taking on another major project felt overwhelming.

"Mr. Williams, it's not that I'm being difficult. I've just joined the company, and my energy is limited," she explained gently. "For now, the best I can do is promise to make time for another model in the future."

Noticing Stewart's frown, Gabriela quickly added, "And truthfully, thoughtful design takes time. That's how the best results are achieved."

Stewart's expression darkened. He didn't believe a word of it. Thoughtful design? To him, it was just an excuse. Hadn't Bradley's model been completed in barely a month?

But then his eyes caught the weariness etched on Gabriela's face. His irritation melted, replaced with an unexpected softness.

"Very well," he said at last. "I'll wait. We'll have opportunities to collaborate in the future."

Relieved, Gabriela let out a quiet breath. "Thank you for understanding."

Their business concluded, and Stewart shifted gears with a seemingly casual question. "By the way, how is that man's sister doing?"

Gabriela blinked in confusion. "Who are you talking about?"

"Myah Espinoza," Stewart answered. "The blind girl. Has she undergone treatment yet? My company has just finished developing software for the visually impaired. We're planning a major promotional event next month, and if she's willing, she could serve as our ambassador."

"Gabriela" she repeated softly.

Then she remembered the blind girl she had once met at Moss Manor. Surprise flickered across her face. "Do you know her, Mr. Williams? I'm afraid I'm not particularly close to her."

Gabriela had only met Myah once. The girl's tragic past, her quiet shyness, and her blindness had left a lingering impression, but closeness? Hardly. They couldn't even be called friends.

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Stewart, however, seemed dissatisfied. He frowned slightly. "I understand Myah's circumstances may be difficult for you to accept," he said. "But people shouldn't linger in the past. They need to look forward."

Gabriela studied him in confusion. His gaze was calm and clear, yet his words struck her as strangely out of place. "Are you very familiar with Myah?" she asked cautiously.

"I've only met her once," Stewart replied. Then, with a faint smile, he added, "I know you better."

If not for Gabriela, Myah would have slipped entirely from his memory.

Gabriela hesitated, unsettled. Something about Stewart felt off-kilter. After all, she barely knew Myah herself.

“Mr. Williams, you clearly care a great deal about the visually impaired. No wonder your company developed such remarkable software,” Gabriela said warmly. Then, with a polite smile, she added, “I have some matters to handle. Allow me to treat you to a meal another time instead.”

Catching her intent to close the conversation, Stewart nodded. “Alright.”

Gabriela personally walked him to the door, only for her secretary to hurry over. “Miss Haynes, Mr. Moss is here!”

Gabriela froze for half a beat before replying, “I see.”

Stewart’s lips curved into a knowing smile. “Mr. Moss is here? Then I should at least greet him.”

Before Gabriela could respond, he strode confidently toward the lounge. A knot of unease twisted in her chest because she knew Wesley had no fondness for Stewart. Reluctantly, she followed.

The moment Stewart stepped into the lounge, he was met by Wesley’s intense gaze. There was a charged stillness in the room.

“Mr. Moss, have you come to check on your former secretary?” Stewart smiled lightly. “Apologies. I enjoyed our conversation too much and kept you waiting.”

Wesley’s brow creased ever so slightly as his eyes flicked toward Gabriela.

She forced a smile, as though to smooth the tension. “Mr. Moss, I wasn’t expecting to see you here today.”

“I was just passing by,” Wesley answered curtly, his tone clipped.

Gabriela still couldn’t tell what had brought him here.

Realizing Wesley wasn’t interested in engaging, Stewart wisely chose to retreat — but not without leaving a mark. “Gabriela, I won’t take up any more of your time. Please, don’t forget our agreement.”

As he turned to leave, he caught the faint displeasure shadowing Wesley’s otherwise impassive face. That alone was enough to make Stewart’s smile widen as he walked away, thoroughly satisfied.

Gabriela walked Stewart and Erik downstairs and offered a polite farewell. But just as they stepped out of the building, Stewart’s voice broke the quiet. “Gabriela seemed hesitant to talk about Myah. Strange, isn’t it?” he asked Erik casually.

From what he’d heard, Gabriela had once treated Myah with warmth, almost sisterly affection. So why the chill in her demeanor now?

Erik hesitated, then offered a careful guess. “Maybe what happened back then left too deep a scar. It’s only natural Miss Haynes wouldn’t want to be reminded of that time or anyone tied to it.”

Stewart didn't respond. He slid into the car. "To the club."

Sensing his boss's mood, Erik kept quiet and drove off.

Back upstairs, Gabriela found Wesley gone.

"Mr. Moss took another elevator," the secretary said to her.

She nodded, a strange blend of disappointment and relief tightening her chest. She thought that resigning from her job would mean severing all ties with Wesley. It was better this way. If he'd stayed a moment longer, she wouldn't have known how to face him.

She had barely sunk into her chair when her phone buzzed with a message from Wesley. "Why did Stewart approach you?"

Gabriela stared at the screen and quickly typed back. "He brought up a project and wanted to talk about it. That's all."

A few minutes passed, then another message popped up. "Business or not, stay away from him. You need projects? You come to me first."

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During the earlier meeting, Gabriela had sensed the unmistakable tension between Wesley and Stewart with crystalline clarity. Unbeknownst to her, Wesley simply detested her interactions with Stewart. Though Gabriela couldn't fathom Wesley's reasoning, she found herself instinctively trusting him and responded swiftly, "Understood."

After sending her reply, Gabriela sank into the sofa's embrace. Wesley harbored no affection for her, so why did he monitor her associations with such vigilance?

Gabriela allowed herself a brief respite before slipping into her coat and venturing outside. She had arranged a prenatal appointment with her physician for two-thirty that afternoon.

By March's end, the southern climate had shed its winter bite, and countless young people had already embraced their summer wardrobes. However, pregnancy had heightened Gabriela's sensitivity to cold, making her thick coat a conspicuous sight as she entered the hospital corridors.

While awaiting her turn, she occupied a solitary chair surrounded by devoted young couples. A sharp pang of envy pierced Gabriela's chest. Yet the memory of Brenden's careless expression made her dismiss such thoughts with a determined shake of her head. She possessed the strength to nurture this child alone.

The examination proceeded without complications, yielding reassuring results. As Gabriela departed clutching her ultrasound images, an unexpected collision interrupted her path.

The obstacle proved to be Tessa. Clearly lost in troubled thoughts, she offered immediate apologies.

“Tessa?” Gabriela grasped her arm, gasping at the sight of her ashen complexion and the vivid bruise marring one side of her face. “What happened to your face?”

Tessa hadn’t anticipated encountering a familiar face and hastily released her hair to veil her injuries, murmuring weakly, “Nothing serious — I stumbled during my morning errands.”

Could a simple fall produce such devastating damage?

Though Gabriela recognized the deception immediately, she chose not to press — a calculated silence.

“Tessa, I’ve just completed my examination. Shall I escort you to collect your medications?”

Tessa managed a brittle smile. “This minor wound requires no fuss. You should return home for proper rest, given your delicate condition.”

Gabriela acknowledged this with a nod before inquiring, “I’ve just received my ultrasound results. Would you care to examine them?”

Tessa wavered, her eyes suddenly brimming with unshed tears. “Please.”

The pair settled onto a weathered bench, studying the vibrant images adorning the prenatal examination report. At this developmental stage, the fetus had achieved near-complete formation, revealing distinct features, tiny hands, and delicate feet.

Tessa indicated one particular image with a genuine smile. "Your little one displays such mischief, crossing those legs to conceal the gender from curious eyes."

Gabriela returned the warmth. "Whether boy or girl, my love remains absolute."

Witnessing Gabriela's radiant joy, Tessa recoiled as if struck, tears cascading down her cheeks without warning.

Gabriela frantically retrieved tissues to stem the flow. "Tessa, what's wrong?"

"I just lost my child." Tessa's words emerged as silent sobs, tears streaming relentlessly. "The baby had reached nine precious weeks."

Gabriela recalled Tessa's battered face, and a horrifying realization crystallized in her mind. "That injury upon your face..."

"My husband's fist delivered it." Tessa crumbled completely. "His violence knows no bounds. Striking me wasn't sufficient — he destroyed my unborn baby as well."

He had sent her crashing to the floor, agony tearing through her abdomen, while household members remained indifferent to her suffering. She had summoned the strength to drag herself to her feet and rush to the hospital alone, only to receive the doctor's cold confirmation: the child had not survived.

She had summoned enough strength to call for transportation to the hospital but collapsed upon arrival. When consciousness returned, her baby had vanished forever.

This marked Gabriela's first glimpse into Tessa's domestic nightmare, leaving her speechless and unable to offer guidance. She enveloped Tessa in silent comfort, her hand tracing soothing circles across her trembling back.

Tessa treasured Gabriela's restraint, and after releasing her grief, gradually regained her composure. Suddenly, her spine went rigid, and she straightened with alarm.

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She whispered urgently, "Gabriela, Mr. Moss approaches. He's advancing in our direction."

Gabriela startled, remembering the prenatal documents clutched in her grasp, and desperately attempted to conceal them within her bag. Panic clouded her judgment, causing her to fumble, and the sheet escaped her grip, settling directly before a pair of polished black leather shoes.

Wesley halted, retrieved the prenatal examination report, and studied the ultrasound images of the developing child. Disbelief transformed his features as he regarded Gabriela with eyes blazing with hope. "Gabriela, could you possibly be..."

Expecting?

Terror flooded Gabriela's veins, her fingers betraying her with visible tremors. Catastrophe had struck — her pregnancy had been exposed. Should he demand explanations, would honesty prove her wisest course?

Recognizing Gabriela's distress, Tessa swiftly reclaimed the prenatal report. "Mr. Moss, these documents belong to me."

Wesley's hand found itself suddenly vacant. His expression revealed nothing as he examined Tessa with calculating eyes. "What forces caused such damage to your face?"

The injury appeared severe, and her eyes bore the unmistakable swelling of prolonged weeping. Should pregnancy inspire such profound sorrow?

Tessa lowered her gaze, lacking the courage to respond.

Gabriela intervened swiftly. "Mr. Moss, even as your secretary, Tessa retains the right to decline your inquiries, correct?"

Wesley offered a measured nod.

“Goodbye, Mr. Moss. We shall take our departure.”

Wesley nodded once more. His gaze followed Gabriela’s retreating figure.

Miriam emerged, supporting Loretta from the examination room.

Loretta inquired, “Wesley, what captures your attention so completely?”

Wesley continued observing Gabriela’s diminishing figure, his voice maintaining its characteristic calm while betraying subtle intrigue. “Gabriela seems to have gained a few extra pounds.”

She had dedicated countless hours to crafting an architectural model — an effort that should have drained her. Yet somehow, she appeared to have put on a little weight. Well, the change only enhanced her natural appeal.

Loretta delivered a sharp tap to his arm. “Such observations remain acceptable among us, but never voice them within Gabriela’s hearing.”

Miriam voiced her agreement. “Absolutely — women despise acknowledgment of weight fluctuations.”

Wesley offered a subtle nod of understanding.

Outside the hospital's imposing facade, Gabriela resembled a punctured balloon, her strength abandoning her as she crumpled toward the pavement, completely overwhelmed.

Tessa rushed to steady her. "Gabriela, why are you so scared? Does this child belong to Mr. Moss?"

Gabriela dismissed the notion with a vigorous shake of her head. "There is absolutely nothing going on between Wesley and me."

They had never had sex, so how could this child belong to him?

Tessa's mind conjured a startling possibility. "Perhaps your former boyfriend fathered the child?"

"Stop this absurdity!" Gabriela's frustration intensified. "Dustin and I never shared even the simplest kiss."

Physical intimacy had remained completely absent from their relationship.

Tessa's eyes expanded with astonishment. "You never once kissed your ex? I don't buy it!"

Gabriela fell silent.

Tessa approached her next question with visible hesitation. "Would you consider revealing the father's identity?"

Gabriela responded with an apologetic shake of her head. "Forgive me, but I refuse to elaborate."

Brenden represented a volatile explosive device, and nobody could predict when he might emerge with revelations about that fateful evening. Each additional person who possessed this knowledge amplified Gabriela's mounting anxiety.

Tessa immediately abandoned her inquiry. She expressed her concerns with worried urgency. "However, you've reached nearly four months of pregnancy, and today I observed your waistline expanding. Within another fortnight, concealment will prove impossible."

This reality tormented Gabriela as well. She lived in terror of Brenden creating chaos, and desperately wished to shield Wesley and his grandmother from any knowledge of her condition. Yet as long as she remained within Okburg's boundaries, occasional encounters with Wesley and his grandmother seemed inevitable. How could she evade them throughout the remaining six months?

Tessa offered a practical solution. "You could arrange temporary departure from Okburg. Construct a plausible justification, then return following the birth."

Gabriela had entertained this possibility, though she remained unable to devise an appropriate explanation.

Chapter 330

The taxi rolled to a stop in front of Tessa's place just as she and Gabriela were finishing their conversation.

The moment they stepped onto the sidewalk, a middle-aged woman appeared by the roadside, arms braced on her hips as though she had been waiting for Tessa all along.

"So you've finally decided to show your face!" she sneered, her voice thick with mockery. "Running off to the hospital over a tiny scratch — did the doctor find anything wrong with you? If you've got money to waste, why don't you spend it on some proper supplements for your sister-in-law instead?"

Scenes like this didn't faze Gabriela; she had grown up watching families tear into one another. Leaning closer, she murmured, "That's your mother-in-law, isn't it? Want me to cut her down to size for you?"

When Gabriela let her tongue loose, her words could slice like a blade. Not wanting to provoke more conflict, Tessa murmured, "I appreciate it, but I'll manage on my own."

Gabriela swallowed her retort and stayed quiet.

The silence only fueled Raven Killian's spite. Her tone sharpened as she sneered, "A husband laying hands on his wife — that's nothing new. Yet you still ran off to the hospital, wasting half the day. Don't you feel ridiculous?"

Tessa kept her mouth shut, lips pressed tight.

When her anger finally burned out, Raven waved her hand like a queen dismissing a servant. “We’re out of baby formula and diapers. Head to the store and get them. And while you’re at it, pick up food — everyone’s hungry. It’s already this late and you still haven’t cooked? What, are you planning to starve us all?”

The spiteful words hit Gabriela like a slap. Her stomach twisted in disbelief. What kind of cruel, shameless people were these — happy to pocket Tessa’s money, yet still treating her like a servant?

Her gaze swept over them, fury simmering. Tessa had just lost a child, her body still frail from the miscarriage, and not a single one of them had shown up at the hospital. Now they expected her to stand in the kitchen and serve them?

Gabriela’s chest tightened with outrage. She stepped forward, her eyes flashing, voice edged with steel. “Tessa’s barely recovering — she needs care, not orders barked at her.”

Raven swung her gaze to Gabriela. “And you are?”

“I’m her coworker. We were just at the hospital...” Gabriela started, ready to reveal the truth about Tessa’s ordeal. But the desperate plea in Tessa’s eyes stopped her cold. Forcing down the words, she straightened her back and said firmly, “Our company’s handling a major project right now, and Tessa’s been assigned to travel immediately. She came back to grab her things and join me on a business trip. She doesn’t have a minute to waste cooking for you.”

Raven narrowed her eyes in suspicion. “Which coworker are you supposed to be? Tessa never mentioned any business trip. And if she runs off, who’s going to cook for us?”

