

His kiss 431

Chapter 431

“Honestly, Gabriela is insanely pretty. Even with this awful camera angle, her face and figure still pop.”

That single compliment was buried under hundreds of nasty replies.

Watching the livestream chaos, Aubrey was furious. “This is absolutely disgusting. How dare Fulton and his filthy family talk like that — and why are they dragging Gabriela into it?”

Her fingers flew across the keyboard. She jumped into the comments and went to war with the trolls, firing back post after post.

Tessa, still holding herself together, turned to Gabriela with guilt in her eyes. “I’m sorry, Gabriela. I never meant to drag you into this.”

Gabriela gave her a calm, steady smile. “You didn’t. This is just Fulton being shameless. The truth always comes out. When it does, this will flip.”

Tessa nodded, then turned to Aubrey. “Didn’t you say you have a friend with a big platform? Can you ask her to help me? I want to go live too.”

Aubrey agreed instantly.

Gabriela thought for a moment, then said, “Leave the livestream arrangements to me.”

She called Vivian.

After listening, Vivian stared in disbelief. “Gabriela, just because I helped you deal with Marie before doesn’t mean we’re suddenly friends. Why should I get involved now? Who says I’m not just going to sit here and enjoy the drama?”

“I’m only asking you to talk to Gem and let her give Tessa a slot on her stream,” Gabriela said evenly. “You can sit back and enjoy whatever you want.”

Vivian almost laughed. “Are you actually serious? We’re enemies. Why would I help you?”

Gabriela’s tone sharpened with certainty. “Because I know you’re not heartless. You’ll do what’s right. And Tessa is trending right now. If Gem brings her on, Gem’s numbers will spike even more. It’s good for her.”

By the end of Gabriela’s relentless push, Vivian felt like she had lost her mind — because somehow, against all logic, she agreed to let Gem get involved.

That afternoon, the hugely popular streamer Gem brought Tessa onto her livestream.

In just one year, Gem's following had skyrocketed from thirty million to fifty million. The moment her livestream began, her massive audience flooded the channel. Within minutes, hundreds of thousands of viewers tuned in, their curiosity peaking the instant they recognized the striking guest as Tessa—the woman currently dominating the trending feeds.

She offered a calm smile, adjusted the camera slightly, and began, "Hi everyone, I'm Tessa. I came here today to tell you the truth about my divorce."

Tessa then rolled up her sleeves, revealing the mottled bruises that ran along her arm. She held the hospital's official medical report up to the lens, the bold red stamp glaring like a seal of truth. "Fulton has a violent streak," she stated evenly. "I've been beaten so many times my body's a patchwork of scars. These bruises are just the ones on my arms—everywhere else, old wounds and new ones overlap, never given the chance to heal."

The sight of her battered arms and the stamped report was enough to whip the viewers into a frenzy. It told them everything they needed to know. The truth had finally come to light.

Gem joined in with a firm voice, "No matter how much Fulton claims he loves her, laying a hand on her is inexcusable. Domestic violence has no justification. As women, we must stand up and fight back!"

The comment section erupted, with fans piling on in agreement.

"So the real reason for Tessa's decision to divorce is domestic violence! Those who have insulted her should apologize immediately!"

“I’m living through the same nightmare. I’ve endured years of beatings, but I stay for my children. I stand with Tessa. She’s right to walk away!”

With the truth laid bare, the tide of public opinion turned decisively in Tessa’s favor, countless voices online declaring their support.

Fulton instantly posted another video in response. The footage, taken outside Rosemont Gardens, showed him on his knees, sobbing pitifully. However, the clip had been selectively edited—it kept only his groveling and the moment Coleman struck Tessa, while erasing every shred of Tessa’s testimony.

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Online users, loyal to whatever moved them in the moment, quickly rallied around Fulton.

“Even Tessa’s own father disagrees with her. That tells me she’s the one in the wrong.”

“Her father was right to call out Gabriela. Women these days blow tiny issues out of proportion, threaten divorce, and ruin social stability.”

“Couples fight. It’s normal. My parents argued all the time. Decades later, they’re still together and fine.”

“Maybe what Tessa calls domestic violence is just a normal argument. Fulton’s right leg was ruined saving her, and that injury cost him a decent job. Of course he’s unstable sometimes.”

“Honestly, Gabriela is the real problem. Without her stirring things up, Tessa would’ve stayed in her marriage quietly.”

“Exactly. Gabriela’s meddling is what drove Tessa to demand a divorce, and now it’s blown up. Who knows what Gabriela really wants out of this?”

Aubrey, furious at Fulton’s shameless performance, jumped back into the comments and fought the trolls again.

But this time the tide was against them.

Most people sided with Fulton. His story — the heroic rescue in college, plus Tessa’s father publicly opposing the divorce — fueled a national wave of backlash against Tessa.

Even though Tessa had already shown proof of her injuries, people brushed it off. They accused her of faking evidence and lying about abuse just to smear Fulton.

Gabriela, who had taken Tessa in and helped her hire a divorce lawyer, was dragged into the fire as well. Hate began spilling onto her name.

Tessa had never imagined that asking for a divorce would explode into a spectacle like this, or that it would pull Gabriela into the line of fire.

For days, her parents and relatives called nonstop, begging her to change her mind and go back. They were being harassed online too. They were humiliated.

Tessa felt crushed, like breathing itself had become unbearable. For a moment, she even thought about giving up on the divorce — and resigning herself to a lifetime of misery.

Gabriela quickly reassured her. “Tessa, stay inside and keep a low profile for now. We haven’t done anything wrong. We’ll get through this.”

Exhausted in both body and spirit, Tessa did as Gabriela said.

The next day, Gabriela received an urgent call from Kaleb, telling her to come to the office immediately.

“There’s a crisis — GD is threatening to pull our contract.”

Gabriela rushed to the company, only to be intercepted at the entrance by Fulton, who dropped to his knees in front of her.

“Miss Haynes, I’m begging you, stop interfering in our marriage,” he cried. “I love Tessa so much. I can’t live without her.”

A swarm of reporters had followed him, cameras flashing nonstop in Gabriela's face. They crowded around her, shouting loaded questions.

Online, people once again rushed to Fulton's side.

"Even Tessa's father doesn't approve of her behavior. Clearly she's in the wrong."

"Her father was completely right to call out Gabriela. Women today blow tiny things out of proportion, talk divorce over anything, and ruin social stability."

"Couples fight. It's normal. My parents fought all the time but they're still together after decades. Nothing wrong with that."

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"Maybe what Tessa calls domestic violence is just an argument that got heated. Fulton's right leg was destroyed saving her — of course that messed him up and made it hard for him to get a job. No wonder he's unstable."

"In my eyes, Gabriela is the real homewrecker here. Without her stirring things up, Tessa would have stayed with Fulton and kept the marriage going."

"Exactly. Gabriela is the one who pushed Tessa to demand a divorce, and now she's pretending to be righteous. What's she really after?"

Aubrey, furious at Fulton's act, jumped online again and went after the trolls.

But this time, public opinion was almost completely on Fulton's side.

People kept repeating the story about him injuring his leg to save Tessa. They pointed to Tessa's parents urging her not to leave. They twisted all of it into a national wave of outrage against her.

Even though Tessa had already shown her injuries on camera, people brushed it off, saying she faked the evidence to smear Fulton.

Gabriela, who had given Tessa a place to live and even helped her find a divorce lawyer, was dragged in with her. The hate spread to her name, too.

Tessa had never anticipated that her desire for a divorce would spiral into such a public spectacle, even dragging her best friend into the chaos.

In recent days, her parents and relatives had bombarded her with calls, urging her to reconsider. They, too, were being hounded by online trolls, and the entire ordeal was utterly mortifying for them.

Crushed under the weight of it all, Tessa felt as if living was more unbearable than death. She even considered giving up on the divorce, resigning herself to a lifetime of misery. But Gabriela quickly reassured her, "Tessa, just lay low for now and stay indoors. We have done nothing wrong. We will find a way through this."

Drained both physically and emotionally, Tessa heeded the advice. The next day, Gabriela received an urgent call from Kaleb, summoning her to the office immediately. "There's a crisis," he said. "GD is threatening to pull our contract!"

Gabriela hurried to the company, only to be ambushed at the entrance by Fulton, who dropped to his knees in front of her. "Miss Haynes, I'm begging you, stop interfering in our marriage! I love Tessa so much; I can't live without her." A swarm of reporters trailed him, their cameras flashing relentlessly in Gabriela's face.

Pointed questions were thrown at her. "Miss Haynes, why are you pushing for Tessa's divorce?" one shouted. "They've been a stable couple for years. Why encourage a split? Is it because your own troubled childhood makes you resent happy endings?" Gabriela kept her face impassive, refusing to answer any of them.

Thankfully, security soon stepped in, clearing the reporters and allowing her to finally enter the building.

The GD representative, Addie, who had been waiting impatiently, didn't hesitate to confront her. "Miss Haynes, your public image has taken a serious hit. As a global brand, partnering with the Haynes Group now risks damaging our image with consumers. We cannot entrust future projects to you. We are ending the contract." Despite Gabriela's attempts to explain, Addie turned and walked away.

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To make matters worse, GD was now demanding significant compensation from the Haynes Group. The news spread like wildfire through the company offices, and other potential partners began to pull back from collaborations, leaving the future of the Haynes Group uncertain.

Seizing the moment, three directors — backed by several executives — confronted Gabriela in her office.

The HR director snapped, “Do you understand how much effort and how many resources we poured into getting that project, only for you to ruin it?”

The marketing director added, “Miss Haynes, you owe us a plan to fix this.”

The finance director warned, “If this isn’t resolved, you’ll destroy your mother’s legacy.”

Kaleb cut in coolly. “This project was secured solely by Miss Haynes, without using company resources.”

The finance director scoffed. “Miss Haynes, do you always hide behind Kaleb when something goes wrong?”

Kaleb shot him a look so cold the room went silent.

Another executive spoke up. “Miss Haynes, I suggest you let Tessa go back to her family and stop interfering in her marriage.”

Gabriela rose to her feet and met each of their eyes in turn.

“Tessa is my friend. I’m not abandoning her,” she said. “As for the GD contract, I’ll take responsibility. Give me time. The Haynes Group is my mother’s legacy. I value it more than anyone. I won’t let it fall.”

Her conviction made the room pause. The executives had all seen what she was capable of before — the deals she’d secured, the growth she’d driven. Slowly, they chose to back her.

“Miss Haynes, we’re trusting you,” one of them said. “Don’t let us down.”

Gabriela nodded with steady resolve and bowed slightly. “Thank you.”

With the executives standing behind her, Gabriela’s position was effectively untouchable. The directors knew it.

Still, the finance director sneered, “Miss Haynes, this can’t drag on. We expect a concrete solution within a week.”

“Alright,” Gabriela said without hesitation.

After they left, Kaleb turned to her. “Gabriela, are you sure you want to keep supporting Tessa through this?”

"I have to," Gabriela answered. "Uncle Kaleb, I was trapped in the same kind of nightmare once. If Allan hadn't helped me back then, I might not be alive now."

With Tessa pushed this far, Gabriela couldn't shake the fear that if she let go, something irreversible might happen.

Seeing her resolve, Kaleb swallowed his doubts.

He wanted to tell her that leaders in business couldn't survive by being too sentimental, that softness could ruin everything. But he also couldn't help but admire her.

"Alright," he said. "I'm with you on this."

"Thank you."

As Gabriela began thinking through how to reach GD's top executive and repair the contract, a message appeared on her phone from "NotASaunders."

"Hey Gabriela, are you alright?"

She knew now that it was Wesley.

That simple question was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

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Exhausted from the nonstop chaos of the past few days, Gabriela felt a sudden urge to lean on Wesley. She typed a long message, spilling everything — the pressure, the anger, the fear — but in the end, she couldn't bring herself to send it.

Maybe, to Wesley, that night between them had meant nothing. Maybe it had been nothing more than a momentary distraction, like idly teasing a stray animal on a boring afternoon.

Maybe that was why he still messaged her while pretending to be someone else, using Brenden's name.

Gabriela deleted the draft, put her phone away, and headed to the restroom.

After sending his message, Wesley stared at his phone. The "typing" bubble appeared and stayed on his screen for a long time — and then vanished. No reply.

Why wasn't she responding?

He almost texted again, almost asked her if she needed anything. But as he looked up at the Lakeshore Building, he leaned back in his seat and forced himself not to send another word.

From her stall in the restroom, Gabriela overheard voices outside just as she was finishing up.

“Isn’t Miss Haynes getting a little too full of herself, sticking her nose into someone else’s marriage?”

“Honestly, I used to admire her. She’s young, gorgeous, capable — not like those arrogant socialites. But this time, she’s gone too far getting involved in Tessa’s divorce.”

“With GD about to pull out and no other company willing to work with us, we should probably start job hunting.”

“Let’s give it a few more days...”

Their voices weren’t even especially cruel. Just practical. Realistic. That somehow stung more.

Gabriela washed her hands in silence. A cold thought crossed her mind: would she really have to ask that person for help?

When work ended, she grabbed her bag and headed out immediately. Farley had told her that Truett had been fussy all day and might be coming down with something.

Gabriela hurried toward the building’s exit.

The moment she stepped out, a crowd closed in around her.

“There she is!” someone shouted. “The homewrecker who ruins other people’s marriages!”

Rotten eggs and wilted vegetables flew toward her.

She froze for a moment as an egg burst against her clothes, soaking into the fabric and ruining the expensive outfit she had bought to maintain her professional image.

Rage shot through her. That outfit wasn’t just clothing — it was an investment in credibility. And now it was ruined.

Near the entrance, a red car idled by the curb. Inside, Rebecca lounged comfortably, watching with satisfaction as Gabriela was pelted.

Her driver held up his phone, recording every second.

“Make sure the video is clear,” Rebecca said, eyes gleaming. She was thrilled at the thought of publicly humiliating Gabriela.

Once this footage hit the internet — once Wesley saw it — would he still look at Gabriela the same way?

Not far away, Wesley's car sat parked along the curb as well.

When he saw Gabriela standing there, not even dodging, just silently taking it, his jaw tightened. His hand went to the door, ready to get out.

But after a beat, he stopped himself. His expression cooled, and instead he turned to his bodyguard.

"Go break up that crowd."

"Yes, sir."

Just then, someone else reached her first.

Stewart.

He had rushed over the moment he heard that GD had cut ties with the Haynes Group.

He tore off his jacket and threw it over Gabriela's head and shoulders, trying to shield her from the incoming hits as he pulled her toward him.

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"Come with me, Gabriela!"

His only thought was to get her to his car and away from the mob.

But Gabriela shoved his hand off and pushed straight back into the crowd instead.

She grabbed the woman who was still holding an egg by the collar.

Then she yanked the egg from the woman's grip and slammed it onto her forehead.

"Are you out of your mind? Do you know how much this outfit costs? Even on sale, it was nearly thirty grand. You ruined it. Can you afford to replace it?"

The woman, dripping egg, stumbled back in shock — then snapped, "You're a meddling bitch. You made Tessa leave her husband. You deserve this!"

Gabriela grabbed another egg and cracked it against the woman's head again.

“What does it have to do with you what happens between me and my friend? Tell me — how much dirty cash did you take to show up here and throw things at me?”

“I’ve got your face memorized. My lawyer will be in touch. This outfit is worth nearly thirty grand, and you’ll pay full price!”

The woman, now dripping with egg yolk, panicked. She had only been paid a few hundred dollars for the stunt—thirty thousand was impossible for her to pay. She tried to run, but Gabriela yanked her back by the collar.

“Don’t even try running. I’ve recorded all your faces. I’ll track every one of you down.”

The rest of the crowd, mostly idle troublemakers paid to cause a scene, froze. Gabriela’s ferocity had unnerved them. It was unbelievable—most women in such a humiliating situation would break down in shame, not fight back like this.

With the mob now subdued, Gabriela calmly began recording their faces.

“For ruining my clothes and causing emotional distress, the pocket change you were paid won’t cover it,” she said with a sneer. “But listen—anyone who names the mastermind behind this gets a pass. No legal notice.”

The crowd exchanged uneasy glances. Finally, a man stepped forward and confessed, “It was Fulton! He hired us to create a scene here.”

The woman who had ruined Gabriela's outfit quickly added, "Fulton told us to stake out your villa too. If Tessa showed up, we were supposed to pelt her with eggs."

Once two had broken the silence, others chimed in, terrified of legal consequences.

"Fulton's mother told me to keep watch on Tessa's family. Once they left their house, I was supposed to lash out at them under the guise of a righteous netizen."

Satisfied with the recorded confessions, Gabriela dismissed those who had spoken. "You're free to go."

Those who hadn't spoken up began to panic, pleading softly, "We were just trying to make a few bucks, Miss Haynes. Please let us off!"

Gabriela made them an offer. "There are still some eggs left. Go and throw them at Fulton's house. Finish the job, record it, and post it online for me to see. Do that, and I won't make you pay."

The group eagerly agreed and scattered.

Rebecca watched in disbelief from her car. How could these people take her money and then betray their employer so easily? These hired troublemakers were utterly useless!

From his own car, Wesley couldn't help but laugh at Gabriela's commanding presence. She never followed the script. But his amusement faded as he noticed Stewart watching Gabriela from a distance, his expression a mix of awe and admiration. He was clearly captivated by her bold defiance.

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Stewart had witnessed the entire scene. Gabriela hadn't just shut down the mob — she had turned them against the person who hired them. It was impressive.

As the crowd finally dispersed, he hurried toward her without hesitation.

She looked like a walking salad, with lettuce and tomato stuck in her hair and streaked across her face. But all he could focus on were her eyes — bright, steady, unyielding.

The closer he got, the harder his heart pounded.

Gently, he reached up and brushed vegetable scraps from her hair and cheek.

"Gabriela, that was way too reckless," he scolded, worry threading through his voice. "If just one of them had pushed farther, you could've been seriously hurt."

Gabriela yanked at her ruined clothes, exasperated. "Yes, I went a little too far. I should've dragged the main ones to the police and made them replace this outfit."

Stewart let out a laugh.

Tilting his head, he said, a touch of warmth in his voice, “Come on. I’ll buy you the exact same outfit. My treat.”

Gabriela narrowed her eyes at him. “Since when are we close enough for you to be buying me clothes?”

Hands raised in surrender, Stewart gave her a small, rueful smile. “Gabriela, I get it now. I acted horribly. I never should have used Allan’s death to stir things up between you and Wesley. I’m honestly sorry.”

His tone softened, almost pleading. “Could you please stop looking at me like I’m the villain?”

He went on, swearing again and again that he wouldn’t try to manipulate her anymore.

Noticing that he himself was standing there splattered with egg and shells, Gabriela’s guardedness began to ease.

“Alright,” she said at last. “I’ll accept your apology. And... thanks for stepping in earlier.”

For someone like him to openly take her side in public — that touched her more than she wanted to admit.

Stewart waved it off. "Don't thank me. Just promise you won't block me again."

After Gabriela discovered he had forged the body donation documents, she had blocked him everywhere — WhatsApp and everything else.

"Alright," Gabriela said quietly.

Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she added him back on WhatsApp.

By then, a ring of onlookers had formed around them.

Leaning closer, Stewart lowered his voice. "How about we finish this in the car? We both need clean clothes anyway."

Spotting a few of her own employees in the watching crowd, Gabriela gave a short nod.

Stewart opened the car door for her and lifted his hand over the frame, shielding her head. He smiled. "Careful. Don't bump your head."

"Thanks," she murmured, slipping inside.

She didn't notice the shift in his eyes, but he was watching her with a look that had softened, warmed — something new settling in.

Across the street, Wesley saw all of it.

His stare burned with intensity.

Watching her step into Stewart's car like that was almost unbearable.

His hand clenched so hard on the armrest that it nearly cracked.

Billy swallowed and spoke carefully. "Mr. Moss, Miss Haynes is leaving. Should we follow her?"

A sharp snap cut through the air.

Billy flinched.

Wesley had just broken the pen Billy had handed him minutes earlier for signing documents. The pen — a limited-edition Montblanc worth tens of thousands — was now in two pieces between Wesley's fingers.

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“Mr. Moss... that was mine,” Billy said weakly.

Wesley turned a glacial stare on him.

Billy immediately went silent.

“Drive us to the company,” Wesley said, his tone low and hard.

Billy slumped in surrender. “Understood.”

After the crowd finally dispersed, Rebecca was still reeling.

Had Gabriela completely lost her mind?

In the midst of the humiliating scene, she hadn’t shed a single tear and had even managed to quell the commotion. What unsettled Rebecca the most was how Gabriela had somehow steered those troublemakers into turning against Fulton without spending a single cent. The entire situation felt utterly absurd.

Following Stewart, Gabriela slipped into a nearby boutique and quickly changed into a fresh outfit.

Stewart reached for his wallet, ready to cover the cost, but she gently pushed his hand away and insisted on paying for herself.

The destruction of her beautiful and expensive outfit stung a little, but there was a quiet relief in spending her own money. At least this way, she held on to her independence.

Watching her, Stewart's shoulders slumped with quiet frustration. "If clothes are off the table, then at least let me buy you dinner. Please accept this as my apology for using Allan to hurt Wesley."

Gabriela gave him a measured look. "If it's about Allan, your apology belongs to Myah. There's something I must take care of at home—I have to leave right now." Ignoring his repeated offers, she slipped into her car and headed back to her villa, her mind already on her child.

During the drive, she scrolled absently through her phone, her face lit by the shifting glow of the screen.

Clips of Fulton's house being pelted with rotten eggs and vegetables had already gone viral. The camera angles were so odd they made the chaos appear even more ridiculous.

One video in particular caught her eye—Raven tugged and clawed at a woman. The sight was both ludicrous and unexpectedly entertaining.

Soon, a flood of Fulton's most humiliating photos spread online, cleverly remade into memes by gleeful netizens.

Laughter rippled across social media, turning the once-heavy divorce scandal into a carnival of jokes.

Rebecca stumbled across the viral clips and images, her expression darkening.

These hired troublemakers had no sense of principle—they had taken Fulton's money only to betray him and, in the process, ease the public's hostility toward Gabriela.

The entire situation had turned out completely different from what she had hoped.

Just when Gabriela seemed destined to be shattered beneath a barrage of sneers, the tide had somehow turned in her favor, leaving Rebecca seething. Her fury settled into a cold resolve. She would push Fulton harder until Gabriela's reputation was thoroughly ruined.

Without hesitation, Rebecca instructed her driver to place a call to Fulton.

Later, Rebecca returned to the Howards' house only to see Jasper already waiting outside, his presence making her eyelid twitch with unease.

"Jasper," she called quickly, hurrying over and slipping her arms through his as if to soften his mood. "How do you even have the time to drop by today?"

Jasper's gaze bore down on her, cold and unrelenting. "Did you set up those trending topics about Fulton and Tessa?"

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Rebecca's pulse jumped. "I did," she confessed in a rush, the weight of his sharp eyes leaving her no room to dodge. Her voice trembled with guilt. "All I meant to do was make Gabriela suffer a little."

"Is that so? You pulled it off?" Jasper's expression didn't flicker. "Tell me—how much did you end up spending?"

Rebecca faltered, lowering her voice. "I spent five million in total."

The check written for Fulton alone had been a million. On top of that came the cost of buying trending topics, flooding platforms with promotions, paying for fake traffic, and even hiring troublemakers to stir things up.

"Five million? I'd say it was far more than that. You also used my network to pressure GD into tearing up their contract with the Haynes Group." Jasper's mouth twisted into a smile that reeked of menace. "Why don't you add it all up and tell me what exactly you gained from it?"

Rebecca stiffened, her voice carrying a trace of defiance. "At least GD walked away from the Haynes Group. That company won't last much longer—and Gabriela is still being dragged through the mud."

A low chuckle escaped Jasper, his tone mocking. “Rebecca, you only burned through five million. Do you realize how much your little stunt is costing me?”

Because of her recklessness, the approval for the Eventide Vale project was frozen. Jasper had tried reaching Wesley in person, but Wesley refused to meet, sending only his assistant with a pointed message: “Mr. Howard, the GD contract had originally been promised to Gabriela by Mr. Moss. Thanks to Miss Howard’s sabotage, Mr. Moss has now broken his promise. If you want to fix this mess, you’ll have to offer the Haynes Group an even bigger deal to make up for the damage.”

Jasper was on the brink of rage, his thoughts running dark.

To him, the Haynes Group was nothing more than an ant — something so insignificant it wasn’t even worth stepping on. And yet, thanks to his spoiled cousin, that ant kept getting shoved into his path. Again. Again. Again. The irritation was constant.

Rebecca, shaken by the cold smile on his face, clung to his arm and shook it anxiously. “Jasper, I was wrong. I swear I won’t do it again. Please don’t be mad at me.”

He watched her for a long moment, then suddenly let out a laugh.

He ruffled her hair in a light, almost careless motion. “I’m not mad. I only came to tell you one thing — don’t ever go after Gabriela again. Understand?”

Rebecca’s chest burned, resentment twisting beneath her ribs, but she still nodded. “I understand.”

After Jasper got back in the car, his assistant blurted out, “Mr. Howard, why do you always let Miss Howard off so easily when she’s this reckless?”

Jasper absently turned the ring on his left hand, a faint smile tugging at his mouth. “Because I’d rather see her cause trouble than see her turn cold and dead inside.”

The assistant didn’t understand, so he held his tongue.

“Drive to Gabriela’s place,” Jasper said evenly. “I want to see her.”

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As Gabriela approached the villa entrance, she noticed two unfamiliar men standing by the roadside.

A light rain was falling. One of them, clearly an assistant, held an umbrella for the other — a man with presence.

Jasper stood beneath the umbrella.

His features were sharp and refined, his expression unreadable. He wore a black suit under a pale trench coat. Tall, straight-backed, lean. Controlled confidence in every line of him.

He was watching her.

Feeling his stare, Gabriela glanced his way more than once.

The umbrella angled just enough to shadow the upper half of his face, leaving only his jaw visible. Even with most of him obscured, his authority radiated.

A small chill passed through her. Without breaking stride, she picked up her pace and walked through the gate.

Only after she disappeared inside did Jasper speak.

“That’s Gabriela Haynes?”

“Yes, sir,” the assistant replied.

Jasper gave a slight nod. “She’s quite beautiful.”

The Howard family was known for producing striking faces, and Jasper had grown up surrounded by women who were elegant, polished, and born into money. But Gabriela was different.

She didn't move with practiced grace. She moved with force.

Even now — after being torn apart online, after being pelted with eggs and vegetables in public — she walked without a trace of collapse. There was no defeat in her. No begging. No shame.

There was life.

The assistant blinked.

In all the time he'd spent working for Jasper, he had never once heard him praise anyone's looks besides Rebecca.

Inside the villa, Gabriela had barely stepped into the living room when she heard Truett crying.

She rushed forward at once. "What's wrong with Truett?"

At the sound of her voice, Truett twisted in Farley's arms, his little face wet with tears and full of distress. Gabriela's heart tightened. She hurried over and took him.

The moment he was in her arms, Truett's sobs softened. He pressed his face against her and let out hiccuping little whimpers.

“What’s bothering you, my darling?” Gabriela whispered, rocking him gently. “You’re back.”

A deep, steady voice came from behind her, stopping her cold.

“Mr. Moss?”

Wesley was there.

So was his assistant, Billy.

Wesley answered calmly, “It’s getting cold. I brought some warm clothes for my grandmother and Miriam.”

“Mr. Moss has been here for a while,” Farley added, taking Truett from Gabriela. “You’ve had a long day, Gabriela. Why don’t you get something to eat first?”

Ken was already in the kitchen, reheating dinner.

But the instant Truett left Gabriela’s arms, he burst into another round of loud, furious crying.

With no other choice, Gabriela took him back. He quieted immediately.

Wesley's brow lifted, just slightly.

He had noticed before that Truett wasn't especially attached to Tessa, yet the child clung to Gabriela without question.

Loretta let out a laugh and teased Tessa, "You might as well let Gabriela raise Truett for you. He wouldn't stop crying and none of us could calm him. The second Gabriela walked in, he settled."