

His kiss 441

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Tessa forced a small smile. "I know I'm not a good mother."

In recent days, the online harassment had worn her down. The memory of her lost child hovered constantly at the edge of her mind. Her eyes glistened.

Loretta immediately backtracked. "Sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Please don't take it to heart."

Tessa shook her head with a brittle smile.

Seeing her sinking mood, Gabriela stepped in. "Tessa, if you're not feeling well, you should rest in your room for a bit."

Tessa wanted to, but with Wesley there, she hesitated.

Wesley said, "You're still recovering. Go rest."

Grateful, Tessa thanked him and went to her room.

Holding Truett, Gabriela sat down to eat and immediately noticed Wesley watching her.

She asked politely, “Mr. Moss, Billy, have you eaten? Would you like to join me?”

It was already late. She assumed they’d eaten. She was just being courteous.

To her surprise, Wesley said, “Sure.”

Billy jumped in right away. “Yeah!”

The smell coming from the kitchen had already hooked him.

But Wesley shot him a sharp look, and Billy choked, then corrected himself in a rush. “I mean, I’m stuffed. Miss Haynes, I just ate a ton.”

Gabriela blinked, a little confused. “Alright.”

Still clearly hungry, Billy hovered just outside the dining room.

Ken set a clean plate and fork in front of Wesley.

As Gabriela ate, she held Truett with one arm, feeding him tiny spoonfuls of soft mashed potatoes with the other.

He was only four months old, still toothless, but he mouthed the food seriously, his big eyes fixed on her the whole time — completely devoted.

Wesley watched them, silent.

After dinner, Gabriela excused herself, took Truett upstairs, changed his diaper, and nursed him.

By the time he finished feeding, he had fallen asleep in her arms.

When she came back downstairs, only Wesley remained in the living room.

“Where’s Farley and everyone else?” she asked.

Wesley answered in an easy tone, “Miriam’s gotten into line dancing lately. She dragged everyone out to the backyard to practice.”

Gabriela frowned.

Miriam had never mentioned any interest in line dancing.

And something else bothered her. "It's raining outside," she said.

"It's just a light drizzle," Wesley replied. "It already stopped."

Gabriela sat, unsure how to respond.

She actually wanted to ask if he wasn't worried that Rebecca would be upset about him showing up at her home so late. Brenden had mentioned that the Moss and Howard families were discussing a marriage alliance. But asking would only make her sound jealous. So she said nothing.

Wesley's gaze dropped to her clothes. A flash of ice crossed his eyes.

"Are you close with Stewart?"

She was caught off guard, still thinking about Rebecca. She answered on instinct. "He's actually a decent guy."

The air in the room went cold.

Gabriela rubbed her arms, feeling his stare.

“So you accepted clothes from him?” Wesley asked, his voice edged with contempt.

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She replied, calm and direct, “Today was chaos. Our clothes got ruined, so we had to change into new ones.”

“I don’t care about your little bonding moment,” Wesley snapped, irritation tightening his jaw. “I’m here to see my grandma.”

Gabriela fell silent.

When he had been her boss, she had learned how to endure his temper. Now that he wasn’t, she saw no reason to swallow it.

Matching his tone, she said evenly, “Mr. Moss, I wasn’t dying to talk about today. It wasn’t exactly pleasant. You asked, so I answered. Out of politeness.”

Wesley’s brow pulled tight, his eyes narrowing on her.

This woman dared talk back to him?

The tension in the room thickened.

Gabriela, who had always smoothed things over with him before, felt a flicker of nerves but held her ground.

Wesley leaned back on the sofa. "I'm thirsty. Make me a cup of coffee."

Gabriela let out a slow breath. "If you're thirsty, water makes more sense."

Coffee this late wasn't exactly great for the heart.

Wesley only lifted a shoulder. "I'm a guest. Humor me."

"Alright. Give me a second."

In under ten minutes, she came back with a steaming sugar-free latte, made exactly the way he liked it.

Wesley's gaze dropped to the cup. His eyes narrowed slightly.

So she hadn't forgotten.

He asked casually, "Does anyone in the house drink coffee?"

"No one really, but we keep it for visitors," Gabriela answered.

So she had made it just for him.

Some of the tightness in Wesley's chest eased.

As he set the cup down, his eyes flicked to the side — and his hand followed. The cup tipped. Coffee spilled.

Dark liquid splashed across Gabriela's clothes.

She shot to her feet, stunned.

This was the outfit she had just bought. It had cost over twenty thousand.

Wesley, completely calm, said, “Oops. Sorry.”

The lazy apology made heat rise in her throat. She could only think of the money she’d just spent, and how she couldn’t afford to casually replace it.

Billy, quietly observing from nearby, coughed under his breath and inched backward, doing everything he could not to get involved.

Seeing the look on Gabriela’s face, Wesley understood immediately that it wasn’t just coffee to her — it was loss.

Annoyance flickered through him.

Without a word, he grabbed a tissue from the table. The tissue was already damp from the spill, but he didn’t notice. He reached for her sleeve and started rubbing at the stain.

Gabriela went rigid.

Her new clothes were completely ruined.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to," Wesley said.

There was a faint, satisfied edge in his tone, as if some dark part of him was glad about the result. "I'm not used to serving people, so I... botched it."

Gabriela clenched her jaw.

He had ruined her outfit and still had the nerve to act like this?

Anger churned in her chest, hot and helpless.

And with his detached calm, there was nowhere for it to go.

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Though anger curled in her chest, Gabriela forced a mild smile. "It's fine. I'll find a way to get the coffee stains out."

Wesley watched her for a moment. "How much was your outfit? I'll reimburse you."

Without hesitation, Gabriela answered, "Twenty-three thousand three hundred thirty-three."

A second later, her phone chimed.

A transfer notification. Half a million.

She stared, stunned. “Mr. Moss, that’s far too much.”

“Keep it,” Wesley said flatly. “Buy yourself a few presentable outfits. You’re my former secretary and now the head of a company. Showing up in cheap, tasteless clothes makes you look like a disgrace to me.”

He leaned in slightly, his voice dropping into quiet command. “And throw away the one you’re wearing. Don’t try to wash it and wear it again when I’m not around.”

There was no winning an argument with him when he sounded like that. Gabriela nodded and replied softly, “Alright.”

Wesley continued, his tone edged with contempt. “And don’t ever buy something like that again. It’s tacky.”

Gabriela blinked.

So from the beginning... he had just been criticizing her taste?

But Stewart had picked this outfit for her. How could it possibly be tacky?

"Stewart said this outfit suited my style perfectly," she said before she could stop herself.

The instant that name left her mouth, Wesley's eyes turned to ice. "He picks your clothes now? Since when did you get so close to him?"

Exasperation flickered across her face.

All she did was ask Stewart for his opinion while buying clothes. How did that suddenly mean anything more?

Wesley's tone cut clean and absolute. "That man's character is rotten, and his judgment is worse. Stay away from him. Do you understand?"

Gabriela let out a quiet sigh. "Alright."

She took his words in. Whether she would actually listen was another matter.

After ruining Gabriela's outfit, Wesley felt an odd sense of satisfaction, appearing lighter than when he had arrived. He rose smoothly to his feet and stated, "I'm heading back. Don't bother seeing me out."

Billy hurried after him.

Once outside, Billy frowned, visibly holding back his words. Wesley shot him a sidelong glance, his tone cool and clipped. "If you have something to say, then spit it out."

Unable to contain himself, Billy blurted, "Mr. Moss, did you intentionally knock over that coffee cup?"

Wesley recalled how Stewart's gift had been spoiled by the coffee splash and allowed a crooked smirk to touch his lips. "Yes."

Seeing the rare flicker of satisfaction on his boss's face, Billy muttered under his breath, "I get it. You're jealous of Mr. Williams."

Gabriela hadn't pieced it together, but Billy had seen it clearly.

From the moment Stewart charged into the crowd to shield her, Wesley's temper had been simmering—every sharp word and calculated gesture fueled by irritation. It was nothing like his usual poised and untouchable composure.

Wesley caught the whisper, the corner of his mouth curling into a cold, knowing smile. He didn't bother to reply, simply slid into the car and shut the door with deliberate finality.

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Believing he had read Wesley's mood correctly, Billy pressed his luck and asked, "Mr. Moss, you and Miss Haynes used to work well together. Why put Miss Howard in that position instead?"

Wesley's tone was flat, almost dismissive. "It's a trivial role. Since that woman wanted it, I let her have it."

The curt reply made it clear the conversation was over. Billy kept his head down and focused on driving in silence.

During the drive, Wesley suddenly spoke up. "Billy, since you have the energy to stick your nose into my business, perhaps I should find you more tasks to keep you busy. There are some new partners who want to collaborate with us. How about you review their proposals tonight and prepare a report for me by tomorrow outlining which ones would be suitable for collaboration?"

Billy felt stunned, then he realized this was Wesley's punishment for prying into his relationship with Gabriela. A mix of frustration and resignation settled in his chest, but he couldn't voice his protest. Instead, he could only hum in reluctant agreement, feeling the weight of Wesley's authority press down on him like a heavy blanket.

When Gabriela finished her shower, a soft knock sounded at the door. She opened it to find Tessa standing there. "Tessa? Why aren't you asleep at this hour? Come inside."

Tessa stepped quietly into the bedroom. Across the room, Truett lay nestled in his crib, breathing evenly in deep sleep. Tessa's gaze softened, her lips curving into a tender smile. "Truett's growing more adorable every day. Someday he's bound to break plenty of hearts."

Gabriela's voice dropped to a murmur. "I wish he doesn't turn out like his father." Wesley's mood swings—cold one moment, warm the next—left her utterly confused.

Unaware of Gabriela's quiet murmur, Tessa leaned close and whispered, "Gabriela, I've thought it through. I've decided to move back home."

The words made Gabriela's heart jolt. "Are you out of your mind?"

To her, Fulton was nothing but a shameless, abusive man. Letting Tessa live under his roof again was like handing her to a wolf.

With a heavy sigh, Tessa responded, "What choice do I have? If I divorce him, my parents will cut me off. Worse, it might blow up online—and you'd end up dragged into the mess with me."

Gabriela instantly clasped Tessa's hand and assured her, "You're my friend. I don't care about that kind of online garbage." She wasn't just comforting Tessa—she meant every word. After years of enduring Phyllis's endless bullying and Marie's sadistic, soul-poisoning malice, Gabriela had built an armor against ridicule. No insult, no matter how vicious, could wound her anymore.

"Tessa, compared to all that meaningless noise online, figuring out what to eat tomorrow feels way more important. The dish Ken cooked today—pineapple-braised chicken—was divine, perfectly sweet and tangy. I'll get him to whip it up again tomorrow, and we're going to feast to our hearts' content!"

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Gabriela's joking seriousness made Tessa's chest tighten with warmth. "Gabriela, you're too kind," she whispered, eyes stinging. "I can't keep dragging you down with me."

Her father's slap had shifted something inside her. She didn't even feel anger anymore — just a quiet, hollow surrender.

If ruin was waiting for her, then she would walk straight into it with Fulton.

"Did you hear what happened earlier today?" Gabriela asked softly.

Tessa gave a small, solemn nod.

Gabriela had taken her in without hesitation, and Tessa hated the idea of making life harder for her.

"Tessa, look at this," Gabriela said, unlocking her phone.

On the screen, a video played: Fulton getting pelted with eggs, Raven screeching, grappling wildly with another woman. The scene was chaotic and pathetic.

“As long as we’re in the right, nothing can crush us,” Gabriela said, firm.

The sight of Raven being shoved around by a woman her own age tugged a reluctant smile from Tessa’s lips.

Gabriela’s eyes gentled, but her voice carried weight. “Promise me you won’t do anything reckless. Whatever it is, you’ll tell me first. And I’ve already asked someone to look into that attack from college — the night you were cornered in the alley.”

If they could track down those men, it might finally open a way out.

Tessa let out a crooked smile. “Alright.”

But inside, she knew it was useless.

That alley had been dim, lit by weak, patchy streetlamps. Every shadow had stretched long and warped. Every face had blurred. Those men had disappeared afterward without leaving a trace.

And even if someone found them now, what would it change?

People only wanted to repeat one thing: Fulton ruined his leg for her.

Gabriela's voice dropped, threaded with doubt. "Something about it doesn't sit right with me. Fulton doesn't seem like the type to throw himself in front of danger for a woman who'd already turned him down."

Tessa's breath caught. "Are you saying Fulton might have..." She couldn't finish.

That he'd staged the entire attack with those men — just to force her into gratitude, and then into his life.

The idea flickered across Tessa's mind, sending a chill through her. But she forced it away almost immediately.

Sacrificing a leg was far too steep a price for any staged scheme.

Gabriela answered with quiet certainty. "It's just a theory for now. Hold on and wait for me to update you."

"Alright," Tessa murmured, though her eyes dimmed with sadness.

She leaned forward and pulled Gabriela into a trembling hug, her voice thick. "Gabriela, you're incredible. Thank you."

By the next morning, Ken went to knock on Tessa's door to call her for breakfast — only to find the room empty.

Everything had been tidied with care. The bed was neatly made.

Sometime during the night, without a sound, she was gone.

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Gabriela dialed Tessa's number again and again, but it just rang and rang without an answer.

"She was acting off last night," Gabriela muttered, worry tightening in her chest. "I should've kept a closer eye on her."

Loretta, who had grown unexpectedly attached to Tessa over the past few days, felt the same unease. "That silly girl! She wouldn't have gone back to that place, would she?" Her voice trembled, dread creeping in.

Tessa's injuries were still fresh, her body nowhere near healed. If Fulton lashed out again, the damage could be worse than before.

And then there was Truett. A child like that, so soft and helpless, deserved nothing like a father like Fulton.

Unable to shake the panic rising in her stomach, Gabriela grabbed her phone and called Tyler. “Tyler, it’s urgent. We need your help right now.”

Tyler was still half-asleep, his voice rough with sleep, but the urgency in Gabriela’s tone cut straight through him. Within minutes, he was in his car, heading toward Fulton’s place.

By the time he arrived, a swarm of journalists had already gathered outside.

When Tessa appeared with a single small suitcase, they were stunned.

Then chaos erupted.

Reporters surged toward her in a wave.

“Tessa! Are you here to admit you were wrong and ask your husband for forgiveness?” one of them shouted.

“You’ve decided to call off the divorce, haven’t you?” another pressed.

“Yes,” she said, her voice calm but empty. “I’m not getting a divorce.”

For a brief moment, she had allowed herself to imagine freedom. But the price of resisting—online harassment, family pressure, public humiliation—was suffocating.

So she chose resignation.

The journalists lit up at her answer, voices tumbling over each other as they fired more questions.

“You’ve finally given up on the idea of divorce. Do you regret going to Gabriela’s house now?”

Bloodied, Tessa’s hand slipped to the knife she had hidden.

In one swift motion, she drove the blade into Fulton’s remaining good leg.

“Fulton, go to hell!” she cried, voice hoarse but unyielding.

Raven and Sigrid froze in shock, paralyzed.

Fulton’s scream tore through the house.

He seized Tessa by the hair, roaring, “You wretched woman! You’re going to regret that!”

Summoning the last of her strength, Tessa yanked the knife free and plunged it into his stomach. His howl shook the walls.

She staggered back, soaked in blood, then stumbled out the door.

The journalists outside froze for a beat, then exploded into motion. Cameras flashed. Shutters snapped. Phones lifted. Tessa collapsed onto the pavement.

“Please, call the police,” she said, her voice ragged. “He’s going to beat me to death.”

Even a police cell felt safer than the nightmare she had just crawled out of.

Better she face the fury alone.

At least no one else would be dragged down with her.

By the time Gabriela and Tyler arrived, Tessa was already in handcuffs, being led toward a police car under a storm of camera clicks.

“Tessa!” Gabriela shouted, her heart wrenching at the sight of Tessa’s blood-soaked clothes. She shoved past the officers and grabbed her friend’s arm. “Are you okay?”

Tessa managed a faint, peaceful smile. “Gabriela, thank you for everything. Please take care of Truett. Don’t let my mess drag you down.”

Gabriela’s eyes burned red. “Don’t give up. I’ll find you the best lawyer. I promise.”

Just then, an ambulance screeched to a stop. Fulton was rushed inside, leaving a grotesque trail of blood across the ground as the onlookers stared in stunned silence.

The police moved Tessa toward the car. Gabriela tried to follow.

But before she could take a single step, a reporter stepped in front of her, recorder in hand, voice sharp with accusation.

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“Miss Haynes, you lived with Tessa. You should know her best. Isn’t it true she has a violent streak? When she couldn’t get a divorce, she turned to attempted murder. Doesn’t someone that dangerous deserve to be in prison to protect society?”

Gabriela’s gaze slid toward him, cool and unblinking.

Sensing an opportunity, the reporter pressed on. "You claim Tessa was a victim of domestic violence. But was she really hurt that badly? Have you seen her body? Can you confirm where the injuries are? She's beautiful, successful, and wealthy, yet she says she was abused. Did she ever consider the problem might lie within herself? And tell us honestly. Is it true, as the rumors say, that she was unfaithful?"

Gabriela didn't flinch. She didn't dignify the questions with an answer. Instead, her voice rang out, cold and steady.

"Are you married? Does your wife use the internet?"

The reporter froze, caught off guard. Before he could recover, Gabriela's voice cut through the crowd.

"I only hope your wife won't feel humiliated and suffocated when she sees this clip of you. And if you have children, I hope they won't grow up ashamed of their father."

The man's face went red. Cornered and stung, he lashed out.

"Tessa herself said you're just ordinary friends, yet you interfered in her marriage and caused this tragedy. You're the one who should feel ashamed!"

Gabriela's eyes narrowed, her tone razor-sharp.

“Shame? For offering help to someone being beaten in her own home? No. That burden belongs to men who excuse violence, and to journalists like you who feed on it like vultures.”

Gabriela’s presence was usually soft, almost gentle. But in that moment, her eyes gleamed like blades, and the force in her voice made the reporter instinctively retreat.

Beside her, the towering Tyler stood like a wall, his glare warning off anyone who thought of coming closer.

Just like that, the chaos collapsed into a cold, heavy silence.

Wesley soon heard what had happened with Tessa.

Billy, unable to hold back his concern, finally spoke. “Mr. Moss, I’ve worked with Tessa for years. I know her character. She wouldn’t have done something like this unless she had nowhere else left to go.”

Wesley’s gaze sharpened. “Do you want to help her?”

Billy hesitated only for a breath before nodding with resolve.

“Good,” Wesley said. “Send Benedict to the police station. Negotiate with Fulton’s family. Do whatever it takes to get them to sign a settlement agreement.”

With that agreement in place, Tessa's case could be treated as a standard domestic violence incident, carrying far lighter consequences.

Billy's face lit up. "Understood."

He strode out of the office, confidence in every step.

Unbeknownst to them, Rebecca had been lingering outside, listening intently to every word.

Without hesitation, she pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"Wesley, are you seriously sending Benedict over for just a secretary? Isn't that a bit excessive?" she asked, arching a brow.

Benedict wasn't just any employee; he was the company's chief legal adviser, a man with a near-flawless record.

Wesley's gaze met hers, calm and unreadable, and a chill ran through Rebecca.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, unease creeping into her voice.

“Rebecca, it’s none of your concern,” he said, his tone low and edged with warning as he picked up his suit jacket.

As he reached the door, his voice dropped to something colder, sharper. “I know you want to marry me, but you should know I have other options.”

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Gabriela spent nearly the entire day at the police station.

Fulton’s family refused to negotiate, shutting down any hope of bail.

Soon after, Billy arrived with Benedict and assured Gabriela they were confident they could get Tessa released. Only then did Gabriela finally breathe.

Back at home, she nearly collapsed onto the velvet sofa, her mind replaying the same image over and over: Tessa’s face, smeared with blood and despair. The ache in her chest was unbearable.

Loretta appeared quietly with Truett in her arms. Her voice was soft as she asked for an update.

Gabriela straightened and forced steadiness into her tone. “Don’t worry. Mr. Moss already brought in Benedict, one of the best lawyers, to handle everything.”

But Miriam's concerns were elsewhere. Her voice trembled with unease. "The internet is going wild over this."

And she was right. Tessa's blood-soaked image had already gone viral, spreading like wildfire and feeding the bottomless appetite of the online crowd. This time, Tessa and Fulton hadn't just made headlines. They had ignited a nationwide storm.

Raven and Sigrid wasted no time capitalizing on the chaos. Riding the wave of attention, they thrust themselves into the spotlight. Night after night, they appeared in popular livestreams, parading themselves as the aggrieved family while collecting generous payouts from interview after interview.

Meanwhile, Farley and Ken tried to defend Tessa online, but their words drowned beneath a flood of jeers and poison.

Gabriela stayed composed. "Don't bother with them. The tide will turn soon enough. Those ugly words aren't worth your attention."

Tyler had already dug up the identities of the men who attacked Tessa back in college. Now, all that remained was dragging them into the light.

Meanwhile, Rebecca stormed into her home, her anger boiling over as she flung her car keys to the floor.

How could Wesley be so blind? They had once been schoolmates. Their families were equally powerful. She was just as beautiful as Gabriela, perhaps even more refined and accomplished.

Why, then, did his eyes follow Gabriela alone, as if Rebecca didn't even exist? Her resentment curdled into something darker. She regretted not having run Gabriela over when she had the chance.

"Becca? What's wrong?"

Rebecca froze, her fury interrupted by a familiar voice.

She turned to see Jasper standing in the doorway with Matthew beside him, both watching her with puzzled expressions.

In an instant, she smoothed her face into gentle sweetness. "Jasper, what are you doing here?"

"I came to discuss the Eventide Vale project with your father," Jasper said, his tone calm. His gaze lingered on her with quiet affection. "But tell me — who made you this upset?"

At his tenderness, Rebecca sank heavily onto the sofa, her voice bitter. "It's Wesley."

She snatched up her phone and pulled up a video clip. The screen lit with the image of Tessa, bloodstained and frantic, sprinting from the scene after stabbing Fulton.

"Their fight is everywhere online now," she said through clenched teeth. "Tessa's become the villain, and Gabriela's being dragged through the mud right along with her. Wesley actually thinks I orchestrated this. That's ridiculous. What does Gabriela's downfall have to do with me?"

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Her words dissolved into choked sobs, tears glittering at the corners of her eyes.

Jasper's gaze darkened. A calculating glint flickered beneath his composed expression, though his smile was soft when he reached out to ruffle her hair. "Why waste your tears on something like this? Just stay close to Wesley. In time, he'll understand your true nature."

For a moment, Rebecca's expression wavered, then settled into resolve. "You're right. I'll make Wesley see I'm far more distinguished than Gabriela."

Jasper chuckled softly. "Speaking of which, tomorrow I'll be meeting with Wesley's grandfather to bring up your engagement. We'll make it official soon."

"Really?" Rebecca's eyes lit with excitement. She clutched his arm, her lips curving in radiant delight. "You're the best, Jasper! I knew you'd never let me down."

Feigning sorrow, Jasper sighed. "You're in such a rush to marry another man. Doesn't it break your heart to leave your dear cousin behind?"

Rebecca's cheeks flushed scarlet. "Don't say that. I'll visit you often."

Jasper's grin widened. "You said it yourself. Don't you dare forget me once you're married."

Their playful closeness warmed the air. Lauren, watching from the side, could hardly contain her delight. She called for the housekeeper to prepare desserts and urged Jasper to stay longer.

Only Matthew shook his head. With a weary sigh, he muttered, "Jasper, you pamper her too much."

Jasper just laughed. "Becca is your only daughter. How could we not dote on her?"

Rebecca's heart swelled with smug pride.

She was adored as the jewel of her family. And Gabriela? That pathetic woman could never measure up.

After lingering over sweets and light conversation, Jasper finally rose and bid farewell to Matthew and Lauren with his usual easy grace.

Once he slid into the backseat of the car, he immediately pulled out his phone.

With practiced precision, he scrubbed through the video until it reached the moment where Gabriela was facing the camera.

There she was: eyes bright, posture unshaken, her voice steady with conviction. The reporter beside her looked small in comparison, as if her very presence had eclipsed him.

From the front seat, the assistant asked, “Mr. Howard, are we heading home now?”

“Shh,” Jasper murmured without looking up.

The assistant fell silent, the low hum of the car filling the quiet.

Jasper replayed that moment again and again, captivated by Gabriela’s defiance.

If Gabriela weren’t locked in this constant clash with Rebecca, perhaps he might have found a way to get close to her.

After all, he had always been a man weak to beauty. And Gabriela was dangerous in that way. Not just pretty, but dazzling, a face that lifted his mood the instant it appeared on the screen.

Across the city, Wesley was watching the very same video.

Gabriela appeared so fragile, as if the wind itself might topple her. Yet behind that delicate frame was an unyielding spirit.

She never faltered, never let fear show, always firing back with a sharpness that only grew keener by the day.

The corner of Wesley's mouth tugged into a rare smile.

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His phone buzzed, snapping him back to the moment. He answered curtly, listened for a beat, then gave his order. "Spread the word. Make sure Tyler's people hear it, but don't let it trace back to us."

Tessa's case quickly advanced to trial.

Fulton was gravely injured. Even with evidence of domestic violence laid bare before the court, the judge ruled that she had used excessive force in defending herself.

Raven put on a heart-rending performance, her sobs echoing through the courtroom. "I sacrificed everything to support his education. He fought his way into a prestigious university, but because he risked himself for Tessa, his future was destroyed. He lost his chance to graduate, and his disability kept him from being hired by any major company. And how does Tessa repay him? By treating him like a servant just because she earns more! She disrespects him daily, while I could only endure in silence, powerless and heartbroken."

Then Sigrid took the stand. Her testimony was a web of lies. She painted Fulton as a once-gentle man driven into violence by Tessa's relentless cruelty.

Tessa sat listening, her heart burning with fury. She knew their talent for deceit, but even she hadn't imagined they could so thoroughly twist truth into venom.

Fortunately, Benedict's skillful defense kept the tide from turning completely. His arguments were razor-sharp, forcing the court to delay judgment. The trial would reconvene three days later.

Since Tessa had stabbed Fulton, the backlash soon spilled over to Gabriela, turning her into a target simply because she had once advised Tessa to divorce. When Gabriela returned to the office, she could feel the shift immediately. Every glance lingered on her a little too long, every whisper seemed edged with suspicion.

The three directors, once supporters of Marie, now seized every opportunity to nitpick Gabriela's work.

Kaleb advised Gabriela to stay out of Tessa's mess and make it clear online that they were nothing more than casual acquaintances.

Gabriela simply gave a noncommittal hum, and soon accompanied Benedict and Billy to the hospital where Fulton lay.

Fulton writhed in pain, his face contorting grotesquely.

Every part of her thought he deserved every ounce of suffering he was enduring.

The moment his eyes fell on her, venom spewed from his mouth. "Settle? Don't make me laugh! I want Tessa to rot in prison for at least a decade, if not more. And when she crawls out, broken, old, and haggard, I'll be the only one left for her. Then she'll never escape me!"

His manic laughter filled the ward, chilling in its madness.

Benedict's expression hardened; any hope of reconciliation evaporated in an instant.

Once they were outside the hospital room, Benedict's voice was grim as he delivered the reality. "The situation isn't good for Tessa. Even with everything I can pull, the best outcome might be reducing her sentence. If we're lucky, perhaps no more than six months."

Just then, Gabriela's phone rang.

"We've got those thugs!" Tyler's voice came through from the other end of the line, loud and filled with excitement. "You won't believe what I found out during the investigation!"