

His kiss 571

Chapter 571

The water crashed over Brenden's torso, yet the flames clinging to his leg stubbornly refused to die out.

Spring's gentle chill still lingered in the air, wrapping the world in coolness.

The shock of the frigid deluge sent Brenden reeling. He was caught between bone-deep cold and scorching heat. Despair settled into his bones—his misfortune had surely reached its crescendo.

Brenden's anguished howls echoed through the courtyard as he writhed across the stone ground, his desperate thrashing carrying him to the ancient cypress, where his skull met bark with a sickening crack.

The impact nearly dragged him into unconsciousness.

"Brenden, stay away from there! Wait, I'm coming to help you!" Fiona's voice cracked with panic as she scrambled to find anything that might battle the flames.

Samuel stood frozen, his mind struggling to process the chaos unfolding before him.

Within heartbeats, hungry tongues of fire began devouring Brenden's clothing.

Samuel's quick thinking saved the moment as he retrieved the household fire extinguisher.

At last, the flames yielded to defeat.

White powder coated Brenden from head to toe, transforming his once-handsome features into a ghostly mask where only his eyes remained visible. His left pant leg had vanished entirely, consumed by fire, leaving behind the tattered remnants of his former confidence and charm.

He appeared both pitiful and absurd.

Silence stretched between them like a taut wire.

Fiona crept closer with tentative steps. "Brenden, are you hurt?"

"Of course I'm hurt!"

Brenden's mind replayed Fiona's earlier assurances that failure would cost him nothing at all.

What ridiculous nonsense about having nothing to lose.

His losses felt mountainous.

Fiona approached with a towel, hoping to wipe the chalky residue from his face.

Brenden jerked away from her touch, his glare sharp enough to cut glass.

Fiona retreated at once, her voice dropping to a fragile murmur. “I’m really sorry.”

Rage burned through Brenden’s chest like wildfire.

Yet he knew Fiona’s intentions had been sincere—he could only curse his own wretched luck.

Samuel let out a long, heavy sigh from the sidelines. “Mr. Saunders, your misfortune runs deeper than anything I can fix.”

Brenden pressed his palm against his throbbing skull, then scraped a handful of white powder from his skin. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes.

“Fiona, I swear I’ll never set foot in a place like this again!”

His voice cracked as he limped away from Samuel's villa, every step a raw reminder of his suffering.

Fiona hastily said goodbye to Samuel and rushed after Brenden.

Back at the hospital, Brenden returned with fresh injuries barely days after his last discharge, drawing sympathetic glances from the nursing staff.

In recent weeks, he had practically become a fixture in those sterile halls.

His earlier rescue of Daisy—and the daily roses she sent afterward—had already turned him into something of a legend in the hospital.

The doctor stared at him in stunned disbelief as he took in Brenden's charred, swollen left leg, the sizable bump on his forehead, the dusting of white powder on his skin, and his wild, disordered hair.

"Mr. Saunders, were you attacked?" the doctor asked.

Brenden shot a meaningful look at Fiona. "She can explain."

Fiona recounted the day's disasters, her cheeks burning with embarrassment.

The doctor listened, his expression shifting through a range of emotions that words could hardly capture.

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At last, he sighed. "You would be wise to rely on medical science and avoid such superstitious methods in the future."

"Understood," Fiona replied, her tone earnest. "Doctor, how serious are Brenden's injuries? Will there be any lasting effects?"

After a thorough examination, the doctor gave his assessment. "His face was spared from the flames, so there will be no disfigurement. The burns on his left calf are more severe. As long as we treat them properly, there should be no permanent damage."

The worst damage is on his left calf, but it is only a superficial burn. In a few days, the skin will start to peel, which will be quite painful, and he must strictly avoid cold water."

The doctor finished with a tone of firm authority. "Given your current condition, I strongly recommend that you stay in the hospital for observation for a few days."

Fiona immediately arranged for his admission.

Brenden wanted nothing more than to be rid of her. He lay back on the hospital bed, closed his eyes, and refused to speak.

Knowing how responsible she was for his situation, Fiona sat quietly in the chair by his bedside, keeping silent watch.

Before long, Loretta and the others arrived, breaking the heavy stillness.

Loretta rushed in, her face full of distress as she showered Brenden with sympathy.

Brenden, resigned to his cursed fate, managed a weak attempt at reassurance. "Loretta, please don't cry. I'll do my best to stay out of trouble from now on."

Gabriela, having heard about his latest accident, also came to check on him.

Even Aubrey and Tessa showed up, each carrying carefully chosen baskets of fruit.

Brenden was deeply moved, though embarrassment tinged his gratitude.

Now everyone knew just how horribly unlucky he had been.

How mortifying.

They stayed with him for quite some time before finally taking their leave.

Afterward, they planned to stop by the supermarket to buy supplies.

Today was Tyler's birthday. With no family of his own, Gabriela had arranged a special celebration for him.

When Aubrey and Tessa found out about it, they eagerly offered to help. After visiting Brenden together, they headed out as a group.

As they left the hospital, Aubrey could not shake the image of Brenden's handsome yet exhausted face. Compassion stirred quietly in her chest. "Why does Mr. Saunders have such relentless bad luck and get hurt all the time?"

So strikingly handsome, yet suffering like a tragic hero out of some classic play.

Tessa sighed. "We should help him more at the office."

Aubrey nodded at once. "I agree completely."

The women entered the supermarket, chatting as they chose ingredients, filled their cart with treats, and eventually left the store carrying several heavy bags. Finally, they descended into the underground parking structure to find their car.

The supermarket was unusually quiet that day, and as Gabriela's group stepped into the garage, an eerie stillness wrapped around them.

Gabriela immediately sensed something was wrong. Her childhood had taught her to stay on guard at all times, never fully relaxing, not even in her sleep.

Her instincts screamed that danger was lurking somewhere in the dim parking level.

She stopped short, her free hand sliding toward the pepper spray in her bag with practiced ease.

Just as she opened her mouth to warn Aubrey and Tessa not to move forward, the sound of footsteps approached from behind.

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Her trained ears counted three of them.

"Stop right there!"

The voice was laced with menace, oozing the unmistakable malice of someone who thrived in the shadows.

Gabriela spun around without hesitation and sprayed the pepper spray directly into their faces.

Agonized screams tore through the air as the three men clawed at their burning eyes, curses echoing through the concrete space.

Understanding hit Aubrey and Tessa like a bucket of ice water.

“Run!” Gabriela shouted, hurling her shopping bag at the attackers with fierce determination. “Drop everything!”

Aubrey and Tessa let go of their bags at once, groceries scattering across the floor as they bolted after Gabriela.

But three unarmed women could never truly outrun determined men.

The tallest of the attackers recovered quickly and stepped in front of them, cutting off their escape like a predator cornering its prey.

“Do you really think running will help?”

These three thugs had been hired by Rebecca's driver.

They had tailed Gabriela for days, watching her every move with patient malice.

Her routine trips between work and home had offered them no real opportunity—until now.

Finally spotting her at the supermarket, they decided to act, despite the open layout of the vast parking structure.

Gabriela's jaw tightened as she raised the pepper spray toward the leader's sneering face.

She never got the chance to use it. His makeshift club slammed into her wrist with bone-crushing force, sending a bolt of pain up her arm and draining the color from her cheeks.

The canister flew from her numb fingers.

The thug's hand clamped around her like a vise as he roared to his companions, "I've got Gabriela! Forget the others—just knock them out and get rid of them!"

Their intentions became horrifyingly clear as they began dragging her toward a shadowed corner.

Rebecca's twisted orders echoed in their minds while they imagined taking turns with their captive, then recording everything in photos and videos.

A woman this beautiful meant pleasure and profit in one. The thought alone sent a sick thrill through them.

Even ten years behind bars felt like a price worth paying.

Gabriela fought with desperate fury, driving her heel down on her captor's foot with all her strength.

His determination was monstrous. Pain contorted his features, but his grip on her never slackened.

"You defiant little witch, I was going to show you mercy, but you chose suffering!"

His hand rose, ready to smash across her face.

But before the blow could land, another hand shot out and caught his wrist mid-swing, iron fingers tightening until he could no longer move.

Gabriela's head snapped around, and relief flooded her voice like sunlight breaking through storm clouds.

"Tyler, you came!"

Tyler had heard that Gabriela and her friends had gone out to buy groceries for his birthday. He had come to help them carry the bags and give them a safe ride home. His timing could not have been better.

Tyler's towering frame radiated raw power, his muscular build casting an intimidating shadow that seemed to swallow the harsh fluorescent light.

"You dare lay a hand on my friend? Do you have a death wish?"

His single punch turned the thug's face into a canvas of dark bruises, the impact echoing through the parking structure like thunder.

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The other two thugs lunged, fists cocked and ready.

Tyler met them head-on, dropping each with a single, bone-rattling punch.

In seconds, all three were sprawled on the floor, groaning and writhing in defeat.

Aubrey and Tessa finally snapped out of their stunned silence.

Aubrey's gaze lingered on Tyler, equal parts awe and relief. Then she snatched up the cookie tin she'd tossed earlier and flung it toward the downed men.

"You idiots must have a death wish, messing with my friend!" she barked, stepping forward, her voice sharp as a whip. "Did you not know? I'm a high-ranking black belt in Taekwondo! If Tyler hadn't shown up when he did, I'd have handled you myself. You'd be begging for ice packs and crutches right about now!"

She tightened her grip on the dented tin, brandishing it like a weapon, and the thugs scrambled, crawling backward and pleading for mercy.

Off to the side, Gabriela's eye twitched in disbelief.

She wasn't entirely convinced Aubrey had a Taekwondo black belt, but she knew her friend packed a punch. She darted forward, grabbing Aubrey's arm. "Alright, that's enough! You're going to kill them at this rate!"

Even as Gabriela pulled her back, Aubrey made sure to grind her heel into a thug's side, drawing a strangled scream.

Who said women were easy targets?

The thugs deeply regretted their initial scorn; these beautiful women were a force to be reckoned with.

Tyler stood beside them, calm and unshaken, a towering presence that radiated quiet menace. The thugs, cowed by his sheer size and strength, didn't dare fight back.

Gabriela, still simmering with rage, stooped to pick up the pepper spray and leveled it at the largest of the bunch, her voice cold as steel. "Who sent you?"

The burly thug, Osiris Morales, flinched at the venom in her gaze, throwing up a hand to shield his face.

"Hey, bro," he stammered, turning to Tyler. "Which gang are you with? You think you can just throw your weight around? If you're really tough, let me make a call and bring some people here."

Gabriela almost laughed at the absurdity. Really?

They had started the fight, gotten their asses handed to them, and now they wanted to call reinforcements. The nerve of these clowns.

Gabriela pulled out her phone, ready to dial the police, but Tyler's voice cut through her fury.

“Go ahead,” he said evenly. “But this is a supermarket parking lot. There are too many eyes here. We should take this somewhere quieter.”

Gabriela gaped at him. “Tyler, are you out of your mind? Just call the cops and be done with it!”

But Tyler only patted her shoulder, his calm laced with unshakable confidence. “Not yet. We’ll play by their rules and see what they’ve got.”

Minutes later, they were at a derelict building on the far side of town, paint peeling and shadows stretching long in the dim light. Osiris barked into his phone, rattling off the address.

“Yeah. Bring everyone.”

When he hung up, he smirked. “Look, Tyler... you seem like a decent guy. Just admit defeat now, and we can show you some mercy.”

Tyler didn’t even blink. His silence was louder than any threat.

It didn’t take long for Osiris’s backup to storm in.

Armed with sticks and pipes, seventy men poured into the building with menacing violence in their eyes. Aubrey and Tessa exchanged anxious glances.

No matter how powerful Tyler was, there was no way one man could take on an army, right?

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Gabriela, however, stayed composed. She knew Tyler too well. Behind that unassuming demeanor was a man who never picked a fight he couldn't finish.

Osiris, emboldened by the sight of his reinforcements, puffed up like a rooster.

"My boys are here!" he cried out, flashing a smug grin at Tyler. "Kneel now, beg for mercy, and leave Gabriela behind. Maybe, just maybe, I'll let you walk."

Tyler's gaze was ice. "Yeah, that doesn't sound tempting."

The shift was instant. Osiris froze, his grin faltering as he realized Tyler wasn't intimidated.

Osiris shouted, waving his hand, "Guys, teach him a lesson! Beat him down!"

But instead of charging, the mob froze.

Then, like a synchronized tide, they dropped to their knees, voices trembling in unison.

“Tyler, we’re sorry! Please, forgive us!”

The stunned silence that followed was deafening.

Osiris’s jaw went slack as he stared at his men kneeling in submission. Aubrey, Tessa, and even Gabriela blinked, struggling to process what they were seeing.

Tyler did not flinch. “Get up,” he said coldly. His chin lifted slightly toward Osiris and his two lackeys. “Drag those three over here and make them talk.”

The men hesitated, fear flickering in their eyes. None of them dared to move, as if some unspoken warning had frozen them in place.

Tyler’s expression did not change. With calm precision, he pulled out his phone.

“Alright then,” he said flatly, “come in.”

Within minutes, the sound of boots filled the air as his own reinforcements arrived.

Hundreds of men flooded the area, their presence a tidal wave of power that swallowed the space whole.

Gabriela stared at Tyler, utterly stunned.

She had always dismissed Tyler's talk of his three hundred men as a joke.

It turned out it had never been a joke.

Under Gabriela's astonished gaze, Tyler straightened slightly, a hint of pride flickering in his eyes as the air seemed to thicken with the presence of his army.

Across from them, Osiris's men, once loud and brash, were now pale with fear. A few inched forward.

"Osiris... we're sorry. But we have to do this."

The next second, a fist cracked across Osiris's jaw.

"How dare you hit me!" Osiris roared, clutching his face, anger and humiliation burning through his pain.
"Do you have a death wish? You—"

Another blow silenced him mid-sentence. Then another.

One by one, more fists and boots joined in, the tension exploding as the gang turned on their leader. No one wanted to be the last to act, terrified that hesitation might make them Tyler's next target.

By the time the chaos died down, Osiris and his two cronies were a bruised, groaning mess on the floor.

"Stop! Stop!" Osiris wheezed, raising his hands in surrender. "We'll talk! We'll tell you everything!"

Through split lips and swollen cheeks, he spilled the truth, naming the man who had set them on this path.

Expression cold, Tyler tossed his phone onto the floor near him. "Call him," he said, his voice calm but sharp enough to slice through the tension. "Or do you need me to show you how?"

Hands trembling, Osiris grabbed the phone and dialed.

Moments later, Rebecca's driver was on his way, oblivious to the storm waiting for him.

When he finally arrived at the abandoned building, he barely had time to step out of his car before he found hundreds of men standing before him, silent and watching.

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His knees buckled before his mind could catch up, and he dropped down hard.

Tears streaked down Osiris's bruised face as he crouched beside the trembling driver. "Spare yourself the pain. Just confess what you know."

The driver hesitated until his gaze darted past Osiris and into the building.

Gabriela stood there, calm and lethal. And in that instant, the truth hit him like a sledgehammer.

She wasn't just some woman he could push around.

His fear cracked him open. Words tumbled out in a desperate rush, everything laid bare.

Gabriela listened, silent but seething, as Rebecca's name spilled from his lips.

She wasn't shocked, because deep down, she had always known Rebecca saw her as a rival, a thorn in her side. But hearing it confirmed lit a spark in her chest.

The fury burned white-hot as she strode toward the driver, each step sharp and deliberate.

Before he could even flinch, her heel connected with his face, the crack echoing through the hollow building.

Aubrey and Tessa exchanged one look, their hesitation burning away.

They surged forward, ready to unleash the frustration that had been simmering for far too long.

“Stop! I already told you everything! What more do you want?” the driver wailed, his voice breaking.

The three women showed no mercy. Scratches streaked his face, chunks of his hair clung to their nails, and by the time they stepped back, he looked far worse than Osiris and his battered crew.

Even Osiris and his cronies winced, a flicker of pity crossing their faces.

Gabriela fixed the driver with a cold, unflinching stare. “You’re coming with me to the Howards’ house. We are confronting Rebecca right now.”

The driver’s eyes brimmed with tears, his voice trembling. “That wouldn’t be good for me.”

Offending someone like Rebecca would mean the end of his days in Okburg.

Tyler stepped forward, his towering frame casting a shadow that swallowed the man whole. "Are you going or not?"

The driver's body shook with uncontrollable fear at the menacing figure before him. "I'll go! I'll go!"

Tyler nodded with satisfaction, then commanded his men to commit Gabriela's appearance to memory.

"Remember, she is like a sister to me. Treat her with the same respect you treat me."

In unison, the hundreds of men bowed deeply to Gabriela, their voices ringing out together. "Miss Haynes!"

Gabriela froze, astonished.

Only now did she grasp why Tyler had gone to such lengths to gather so many people. It was to establish her authority.

After today, no one would dare cross her again.

Her heart swelled with gratitude for Tyler as she spoke. "I truly appreciate all your efforts today. I promise to throw a small gathering for everyone in the near future."

"Thank you, Miss Haynes!"

Tyler's gaze swept over the dozens Osiris had summoned, sharp and commanding. "Do you all understand your instructions?"

A chorus of voices replied promptly, confident and clear. "Understood!"

Tyler narrowed his eyes, his tone hardening. "And if anyone dares to lay a hand on her in the future, what will you do?"

"We will report it immediately, Tyler!" the group shouted, their resolve unmistakable.

Tyler's lips curved into a smirk. With a single wave, the crowd dispersed efficiently.

He turned to Tessa and Aubrey, asking them to go to his place first.

Finally, his gaze settled on Gabriela, firm yet protective. "Gabriela, you and I are going to pay the Howards a visit."

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It was Tyler's birthday, yet instead of celebrating, he chose to accompany Gabriela to confront Rebecca.

A twinge of guilt pinched Gabriela's chest, but she truly needed his help.

"Tyler, thank you," she said, her voice soft with sincerity.

He scowled and flicked her forehead lightly. "You're practically family. Don't mention it."

"Alright, alright!" Gabriela laughed, quick to appease him. "Once this is all over, I'm making you the kind of birthday dinner you'll never forget."

Tyler smirked. "I'm holding you to that."

By the time they arrived at the Howards' house, night had already settled in.

Inside, Rebecca was at the table, sharing dinner with her parents when the butler burst in, visibly flustered. "A young woman named Gabriela Haynes is outside. She says she is here to look for Miss Howard!"

A sharp chill ran through Rebecca's veins.

It hadn't been long since the driver informed her the men she'd paid to teach Gabriela a lesson were about to make their move. So how was Gabriela here, standing on their doorstep?

Rebecca set her fork down with deliberate calm and fixed the butler with an icy stare. "Do you think the Howards' house is a public square where anyone can just stroll in?"

The cold rebuke was an implicit order: get Gabriela out of there, and do it quietly.

The butler hesitated, uncertainty flickering in his eyes. "Who is Gabriela Haynes?"

Matthew's voice broke the tension, low but firm. "And what does she want with Rebecca?"

The butler swallowed and answered quickly, "She brought several injured people with her. She says she demands an explanation from Miss Howard."

Rebecca's expression faltered for a split second, but she swiftly smoothed it over. "I barely know her," she said coolly. "Send her away."

"Understood," the butler murmured, bowing his head as he turned to leave.

“Wait.” Matthew’s sharp tone froze the room. His eyes darted to Rebecca, catching the subtle tremor in her clenched fists.

“Bring her in,” he said, his voice leaving no room for argument.

Moments later, the butler ushered Gabriela into the side hall. Gabriela stepped in first, her stride purposeful, Tyler matching her pace like a silent shield at her side.

Four battered figures followed behind them, their injuries stark in the dim light.

Though the Howards hadn’t yet caught sight of Gabriela’s face, the quiet storm of her presence rolled through the space, tightening the air and setting every nerve on edge.

As Gabriela stepped closer, Matthew froze, his gaze locked on her.

How did this woman look so much like someone he had known?

But Gabriela didn’t notice his stunned expression. The moment she crossed the threshold, her eyes zeroed in on Rebecca.

“Did you send someone to assault me?” her voice was sharp, unwavering. “And you even asked them to take photos, huh?”

Rebecca stiffened. If someone displeased her, she'd discreetly have her driver hire thugs to teach them a lesson. But never, not once, had anyone dared to confront her here, in her home.

Fearing the delicate facade of the polished Howard heiress might crack, Rebecca lashed out first. "Are you insane, Gabriela? The nerve of you to try to steal my man, and now you show up here with your thugs to frame me?"

"That's your driver," Gabriela retorted, her tone as sharp as glass.

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She tilted her head toward one of the bruised men standing behind her, then flicked the bank card the driver had once given her onto the floor between them.

"This is the card you gave him. Did you really think a little pocket change was enough to ruin me? If I take this to the police, how many years do you think you'll get?"

Rebecca's confidence faltered as her eyes darted to her driver—his face battered, his shirt torn. But pride kept her spine rigid.

"I pay my driver a salary. That doesn't make it evidence."

Tyler's boot connected hard with the driver's ribs, sending him sprawling. His voice was ice. "Tell the truth. Expose her."

The driver crawled forward, trembling. "Miss Howard... you gave me money to have someone assault Gabriela. You said you'd pay me another two million when it was done."

Rebecca recoiled, disgust twisting her features. "Get away from me."

But before she could say more, Osiris and the other thugs lunged at the driver.

"So that's it?" Osiris snarled, his voice cutting through the tense air. "Four million for you, and one hundred thousand for each of us?! We trusted you—we shed the blood and did your dirty work, while you sat back and reaped the rewards!"

Before anyone could react, fists flew. The thugs turned on the driver with a vengeance, blows landing heavy and fast. The living room dissolved into chaos, violence echoing through the once-pristine household.

Matthew's expression hardened, his voice a cold command that cut through the noise. "Enough. Break it up, now."

The butler scrambled to obey, summoning staff to drag the brawling men apart.

Matthew turned, his gaze like a blade as it fixed on Rebecca. "Tell me the truth. Now."

Rebecca's lip trembled, but her eyes burned with defiance. "Dad, you can't seriously believe this nonsense. She's framing me!" She jabbed a shaking finger in Gabriela's direction. "She's obsessed with Wesley. And now, because he won't look her way, she's here making a scene and trying to drag my name through the dirt!"

For a fleeting second, Matthew wavered. His daughter's tearful, trembling voice tugged at the protective instinct in him.

Gabriela's laugh, sharp and bitter, cut through the air. "Save your lies, Rebecca."

Her gaze shifted to Matthew, her voice rising with quiet fury. "Mr. Howard, I have witnesses and evidence to back up what I'm saying, and you still hesitate. So what is it? You want to protect your precious daughter and let her walk away from what she's done?"

Matthew stiffened, the accusation sinking deep, guilt etching faint lines across his face.

Lauren, sensing the storm building, stepped in smoothly, her tone velvet over steel. "Miss Haynes," she said with measured calm, "what exactly are you after?"

Gabriela didn't flinch. "Two options," she said coolly, each word deliberate. "Call the police. Or we settle this quietly."

She held Lauren's gaze, her confidence like a loaded gun on the table. She knew the truth: the Howards could bury a criminal case with a single phone call.

But a private settlement? That would hurt—and it would make them think twice before targeting her again. It would also force them to compensate her properly.

Lauren's lips curved in something that wasn't quite a smile. "So that's what this is about. A payout?" She tilted her head, eyes glinting with disdain. "Then name your price."

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Gabriela's answer was as swift as a gunshot. "One hundred million."

She knew that for families like the Mosses and the Howards, a hundred million was a figure that stung, but would not cripple them.

Lauren's gaze sharpened the moment the figure left Gabriela's lips. To her, the woman standing there wasn't brave—just a greedy little vulture.

Her tone dripped with contempt. "A hundred million dollars. And then you'll drop this?"

Gabriela's laugh was cold, slicing through the tension. "Of course not. You'll also make sure Rebecca stays out of my life. Because if she so much as breathes in my direction, this evidence goes public." Her voice did not waver. "I know you have money and power—the kind of influence that can crush people without a second thought. But I've got nothing to lose. No parents. No family. So if you think I won't burn with the match I'm holding, try me."

Her words rang out like steel on marble, but deep down, Gabriela's pulse hammered.

She couldn't truly afford to antagonize them, not with Truett in her life.

Still, she clung to the one truth she knew: people like the Howards hated scandals more than anything.

Matthew flinched at the words "No parents." Something cold and unsettling coiled in his chest, a possibility he didn't dare name. It left a bitter sting at the back of his throat.

Lauren, meanwhile, wore her disdain like a crown, but her eyes flickered with unease. This woman was dangerous.

"Fine," Lauren said at last, her voice tight with reluctant authority. "You'll have your money. Now hand over the evidence."

"Not so fast." Gabriela shook her head, her tone razor-sharp. "I don't trust people like you. Wealthy, powerful, and utterly untrustworthy. The evidence stays with me. As long as Rebecca keeps her distance, it never sees the light of day."

Lauren's eyes narrowed, calculating. She wanted to push back, to cut the demand in half, anything to make this sting less.

One hundred million for nothing burned her pride like acid.

Before she could speak, Matthew cut in. "You'll get the money. Give me your account number," he said, his voice softer now. "I'll have the transfer made immediately."

Rage painted Rebecca's cheeks crimson.

Her voice pitched high, sharp with disbelief. "Gabriela, you haven't even been hurt, and you want a hundred million? That's ridiculous!"

She whirled toward Matthew, frantic. "Dad, please, don't! This is insane. It was just a harmless scare, barely anything happened. Why should she get a hundred million for that?"

Gabriela's brow arched, her silence laced with mockery, while Rebecca trembled with frustration, still convinced she held the upper hand.

After all, even if Gabriela went to the police, what could they really do?

A fine? Maybe a warning. Nothing more.

“Shut up!” Matthew snapped. His glare bore into Rebecca, sharp enough to strip her to the bone. “Haven’t you humiliated this family enough? Not another word.”

Rebecca finally fell silent, not daring to protest further.

Moments later, Gabriela’s phone chimed. The transfer was complete.

Without another glance, she turned on her heel and walked out, Tyler falling into step beside her.

She was almost at the gates when Matthew’s voice rang out behind her.

“Miss Haynes.”

Gabriela stopped and turned slightly, her expression guarded.

“Mr. Howard,” she said evenly, “is there something else?”

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Matthew hesitated, wanting to ask Gabriela about her mother’s name.

Was she the same woman he knew?

But her distant, icy demeanor stopped him. Instead, he said, "I apologize for Rebecca's actions."

Matthew, a calm and refined gentleman, radiated quiet dignity. He felt profound shame over his daughter's behavior.

Gabriela replied coolly, her tone detached, "Rebecca is the one who messed up. I won't accept your apology."

Rebecca, watching Gabriela walk away with a hefty sum, seethed with resentment.

Gabriela's dismissive attitude toward her father only stoked her fury.

"Gabriela, don't get cocky. You weren't even hurt, and you got the money. How dare you brush off my father's apology?" Rebecca snapped.

Gabriela spared her a fleeting glance.

Having secured a hundred million and achieved her goal, she saw no point in engaging further. Turning to Tyler, she said, "Let's go."

They swiftly exited the living room.

Meanwhile, the thugs cowered in a corner, hoping to slip away unnoticed.

Irritated, Lauren instructed the butler to kick them out.

Rebecca, too consumed by her anger, barely noticed them.

Ignored by Gabriela, she turned to Matthew, her voice thick with grievance. "Dad, why did you give her so much money? Paying her implies that you believe I really sent someone after her."

"Shut up!" Matthew's voice boomed as he slapped her sharply across the face.

The sound echoed in the quiet room.

Rebecca clutched her stinging cheek, stunned. "Dad, how could you hit me because of a stranger?"

"You still think you are blameless?" Matthew's eyes burned with disappointment. "Do you understand how grave it is to send

Those thugs to assault a young woman? She came with proof, and you still blame her?"

"But she is totally fine!" Rebecca protested.

Still livid, Matthew raised his hand again, but Lauren quickly stepped in.

"You're too upset to think clearly," she said softly. "You can't discipline her like this. Let me handle it."

"I have failed as a father," Matthew muttered wearily, lowering his hand. "Do what you must."

With a heavy sigh, he retreated to his study.

Settling into his chair, he stared blankly for a moment before reaching for a wooden box atop his bookshelf.

The study, untouched by the maid, bore a thin layer of dust on the box.

He brushed it away and lifted the lid, revealing aged keepsakes inside.

At the top lay a photograph of a young woman, her smile radiant, her eyes gleaming like constellations, dressed in a white shirt.

If Gabriela were present, she would recognize the woman as her mother, Alanna.

Matthew's fingers grazed the photo, his eyes misting with nostalgia.

Gabriela, who shared Alanna's last name, bore an uncanny resemblance to her.

He pressed the photo to his chest, lost in thought.

If the daughter he and Alanna once had were still alive, she would be about Gabriela's age now.

Lauren pulled Rebecca into the bedroom and locked the door.

"Rebecca, when did you start resorting to such tactics?" she demanded.

Lauren had always seen her daughter as a refined, poised heiress.

She never imagined Rebecca would hire thugs for something so ruthless.

Her stern gaze unnerved Rebecca, who mumbled, “I just wanted to put Gabriela in her place, to keep her away from my man.”

Lauren snapped, “You’re a Howard, a woman of status. Stooping to such shameful acts over someone like Gabriela—is she worth it?”

“I can’t stand her!” Rebecca shot back.

Though she had to scold Rebecca, Lauren’s deep adoration for her daughter made her soften almost immediately.

Sighing, she said, “If you’re going to act, do it discreetly. Look at today—you got caught, and she had evidence.”

Hearing her mother’s tacit support, Rebecca’s defiance eased. “Mom, what do I do now?”

“You don’t need to do anything,” Lauren said firmly. “You are Miss Howard, the sole heir to the family fortune. The entire Howard Group will be yours one day. You need to stay out of anything illegal.”