

Candy Gloss

by

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Cover design by Marci C. McHikes-Jim

*For the beauty industry:
may your profits never outshine your conscience.*

A Note to the Reader

Behind the candy gloss of a \$600-billion empire lies one of the darkest horrors of our time: children taught to hate themselves. This short story is emotionally brutal, but it carries only a fraction of the pain I felt while writing it. If it unsettles you, good. That unease is the point.

My deepest hope is that it adds one more voice to a conversation, that might, one day, help us put an end to this fucking madness.

- Marci

July

Ester

Ester pushed open the door to their cozy apartment, the scent of baked vegetables and roasted chicken wafting from the kitchen like a warm embrace. She kicked off her heels, letting the ache in her feet melt away. Tom emerged from the hallway and greeted her with a tired smile and a kiss. Ester didn't need to ask how the job hunt went. The slump in his shoulders, the faint tiredness in his eyes told her today's story. Ever since the layoffs at his company, the rejections have been piling up. Embedded software jobs are vanishing into AI systems faster than recruiters can type 'unfortunately.'

"Dinner's ready, love. Your favorite." His voice was laced with that easy affection that had brought them through five years of marriage. She stood by the worktop, watching him serve the portions with such quiet precision, an honest act that made her heart ache with love for this man who tried so hard.

They sat at their kitchen table, the candlelight making the simple meal feel intimate and special. They talked about her day. She wanted to share the big news with him, but instead she filled the space with talk of office gossip and a new intern who dressed like he was heading straight to a club, tossed in a quick update on the "SportyLine" campaign, then padded it all with a few minor wins. She watched the corners of Tom's mouth twitch upward, even if it was just for her sake. It was a comfortable rhythm, a way of keeping the real worries at bay for just a little longer.

And then she couldn't contain herself anymore.

"I got an email today."

She reached for her phone and pulled up the message, her finger scrolling to the important parts.

"Listen to this," she said with excitement.

"I wanted to share a fantastic opportunity with you, the VP of Marketing is launching project to plan the market entry for a completely new line of products, and is looking for creative people to join him for next 6 months"

"John sent you that?"

She nodded eagerly. "It says it's a high visibility assignment and a chance to influence a major growth initiative. And get this, it's working directly with Mike."

"Mike himself? That's huge"

"Yes, he needs someone with out-of-the-box thinking and my boss had recommended me."

Tom's eyes lit up "Wow. That's amazing, Ess. The timing couldn't be better."

Ester felt a wave of relief wash over her; it was a promise of a path back to a future she and Tom had worked so hard for. They were both glowing with hope. She squeezed his hand across the table.

Maria

Maria adjusted the position of the ring light for the third time. The lamp illuminated her small bedroom, which looked more like a streaming studio than a place to sleep. She checked her phone screen, applied the filter until her skin glowed flawless, and hit record.

“Hey, beauties! Maria here! Today I’ve got something sooo exciting for you!”

She paused. Her hair didn't look right. She tucked a strand behind her ear with meticulous care, then leaned closer to the camera. Perfection was key. Her 200,000 followers expected nothing less.

It was still surreal sometimes. Two years since she’d started this channel from her bedroom, fumbling with cheap drugstore mascara, posting shaky tutorials to an audience of twelve. Now, at twenty, her life was a steady stream of PR packages, sponsored posts, and affiliate links that actually paid her rent. It was more than just a job; it was her purpose.

On her desk, the GlowForce package gleamed like treasure. She’d already unboxed it twice, but her heart still skipped when she saw the metallic logo. A whole new Lip Set. Not even in stores yet. She got to show it first. She traced the caps with her fingertip, whispering, “Can you even believe this?”

Makeup had changed her life. She remembered being fourteen, shy and awkward, hiding behind baggy clothes. Then, she discovered YouTube tutorials, the magic of contour, the power a bold lip gave her. It wasn't about hiding, she kept telling her followers; it was about enhancing, about expressing the incredible person you already were. “Makeup isn't a mask, it's an amplifier!” she'd declared in her videos, and she meant every word. She wanted to give that same surge of confidence, that sense of purpose, to her followers.

She took a sip of iced coffee, pressed record, and started again with genuine excitement. “Hey, my beautiful stargazers! Maria here, and today we're unboxing something truly out of this world...” She hit her stride, the enthusiasm completely authentic for these new products and the life they afforded her. There was no hint of falsehood, only the bright, aspirational glow of a young woman living her dream and sharing her passion.

Ava

Dear Diary,

OMG, School is OVER. Year 8, done. Bye-bye boring classes and uniforms. Bye-bye science classes and penalty points. Oh, and we're moving. Mum got a new job, and okay, I get it. I'm a tiny bit nervous about the new school, but mostly I'm excited. Mum and Dad say it's a fresh start, and they are always right about this kind of stuff. I like making friends so I guess it will work out. Last night, Dad took me for ice cream (CHOCOLATE fudge, duh), and he was like, Ava, you're brave and awesome, new school's gonna love you. That was super awkward, but kind of sweet of him.

And the holidays are here. Finally! I'm so ready for a break from all the tests and homework. I'm going to that adventure camp with Lucy, which is kinda huge. We will have to survive a week with no phones :(Wish us luck. After that, I am going to Scotland. Another family trip and I can't wait to see the castles and maybe even a Loch Ness monster. And we can hike up a REAL mountain this time (not like the baby hill last year).

But the BEST news (and I seriously can't believe I'm even writing this). Mum finally said yes. I can shave my legs! I'm SOOO happy!!!! She said she has to buy me a special anti-allergic shaving cream so I don't get a rash. I was a little worried she would say no because she's always saying I'm too young for this stuff, but she actually said YES! Now I'll have super smooth legs for camp and Scotland. This is going to be the best summer ever.

Life's changing so fast, but it seems pretty perfect right now. New school, new adventures, smooth legs, and holidays to look forward to.

Cassie

“Mum?” An excited voice floated from the bathroom. Cassie pushed the door open. The air felt warm and steamy. Ava was perched on the edge of the tub, towel wrapped around her with legs stretched out.

Cassie carried the small, pink razor and the tube of hypoallergenic shaving cream. She set them down, trying to ignore the knot forming in her stomach.

“Are you absolutely sure about this, sweetie? You really don’t have visible hairs yet,” Cassie asked, her hand gently tracing the fine down on her daughter's calf.

“Please, Mom,” Ava said, gripping the razor like it was made of gold. “I don’t want people to see my hairy legs... I am too embarrassed to walk around in shorts.”

A crushing weight settled on Cassie. Her daughter was 13 with barely anything to shave, what on earth could have made her innocent child feel shame over showing her legs?

She looked into her happy eyes, forced a smile and slowly squeezed the tube of cream, letting a dollop rest in Ava’s palm, guiding her hand to spread it evenly over the skin.

"Now, gently," Cassie instructed, taking her hand and positioning the razor. She guided Ava's strokes, slow and careful, teaching her the delicate movements of blade against skin.

“Don’t press or you’ll cut yourself.”

Ava giggled with each swipe, “So smooth!”.

Cassie left her to rinse and pat dry the legs by herself. In the hallway, she leaned against the wall, and took a long, deep breath. When she walked into the living room her husband looked up from the sofa “Everything alright? You've got a grim face on.”

“I don't know Ben, I helped her shave legs for the first time. She was so happy but...” Her throat tightened. “It feels wrong. Like I’ve just pushed her through a door that won’t ever close.”

He stood up and walked over, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her close. Their foreheads touched as he held her gently. “It’s just a leg shave. She’s growing up. Nothing more to it.”

Cassie looked into his kind eyes, his voice was warm, reassuring, and utterly dismissive.

September

Ester

Ester stopped at a heavy oak door on the executive floor of GlowForce headquarters, marked 'VP Marketing'. John knocked once before pushing it open. Mike was on the phone, standing with his back to them, gesturing with his free hand. He was laughing, a loud, booming sound that bounced off the minimalist walls.

He hung up and turned around, his smile was broad and easy. He clapped John on the back. "Johnny boy! What's up, you sly fox? You make it to the match last night?"

John's face broke into a genuine smile. "I was there, Mike. Wouldn't miss it. You should have seen their defense in the second half."

Mike just chuckled. "Amateurs. That's why we bring in the big guns." His gaze landed on Ester for a second before his smile tightened. "And it's about time to finally meet the smart chick behind SportyLine's success."

Ester felt a flicker of discomfort by his words but pushed it down.

"I think you'll have much better opportunities by my side."

She was about to respond, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand and got straight to the point.

"We need to increase our eye makeup sales by 15-20% in the next financial year."

Ester blinked, stunned, before she found her voice.

"That would be \$110-150 million in new sales... The market's already saturated, customers are loyal, and introducing new products without cannibalizing existing lines is extremely hard... not to mention, new formulas can't hit the market in that timeframe."

Mike's smile thinned into something closer to a smirk. "That's all true. But we're not competing for existing customers. We're expanding demographics. We'll repackage existing products under a new campaign. Initial target: ten to fifteen percent of girls under fourteen."

He paused to take a sip from his glass. "We'll begin with twelve- to fourteen-year-olds. But the real opportunity is earlier, just before puberty. That's where your customers really are. It's all about capturing loyalty before competitors."

Ester's mouth went dry. She only managed to stammer out "I am sorry, is marketing makeup to kids even legal?"

Mike waved a hand dismissively. "Gray area, sure. But influencers do the work. Clean, risk-free, disposable. And the magic of social media handles the rest."

She could only stare as her mind struggled to catch up, each word she heard feeling like a physical blow. She pressed her hands to her temples, trying to make sense of it.

Mike settled back in his chair, hands clasped behind his head. "John, is she ok? You said she's sharp."

John showed no trace of emotion. “Ester, listen. Unless you can expand our market off Earth, go and figure out how to sell more mascara to those girls.”

At this point, her professionalism crumbled, and all she could manage was “But... why would a 10-year-old need mascara?”

Mike nodded, as if she'd finally said the magic words. “Oh, good. She's finally getting it.” He glanced at John, then back at her with a smug smile. “That’s exactly the problem you’re here to solve, Ester.”

Ava

Dear Diary,

The new school is stupid and AWFUL! It was the worst day of my life. I thought I'd look super cool with new earrings, smooth legs and uniform dress pulled higher than allowed. NO ONE CARED! I felt like an idiot. Every single girl in my class wears makeup :(Like, real makeup. Eyeshadow, mascara, lipstick. They all talk and share TikTok videos and Ellen, the leader girl, even has nail extensions with characters from the Netflix show I am not allowed to watch yet. She just called me BABY-FACE once and it stuck:(I wanted to run and hide.

Life is so unfair. Mum always says I don't need makeup, that I'm too young, that I'm pretty without it. Well guess what, Mum? It's a LIE. If you don't wear it, you don't exist. I did everything right! And I'm the WORST.

Now I'm baby-face Ava and I'm stuck with LOSERS and NERDS!!!. At lunch I sit with a boy who collects Pokémon cards (he brought his stupid binder to school and tried to trade cards with me) and a girl who smells gross. And the cool girls sit together, talking about new palettes and lip gloss drops. And they make fun of me and my childish baby face: (

Cassie

Cassie sat at the kitchen table with a worried face, while Ben was making tea. The air between them was thick with a tension that had been building over the last few days.

"She is still in her room," Cassie said without looking up, "She has been watching those videos for hours. She is hurting and it's breaking my heart."

"That nickname is killing her." Ben sighed.

"Ben, she's thirteen! Thirteen! She still has a baby face!" Cassie's hands shook as she gripped her mug. "All girls her age do. Unless someone tells them they have to look like some dolled-up influencer!"

"I hear you, babe, but it doesn't change the fact that it hurts her. And with all the other girls at school, having their nail extensions and TikTok looks, she feels left out."

"It's not all girls. I know Ava swears they all look like models, but I saw quite a few 13-year-olds today during pick up, normal kids, no makeup, just braces and backpacks. She's exaggerating, caught up in this clique's game of popular girls,"

"But the school has a policy, right? No heavy makeup?" Ben asked, grasping at a solution.

"A total joke. They are not enforcing it. I'm going to call the school on Monday and demand they do." She felt a small sense of power at the thought of taking action that might ease her daughter's pain.

"Yeah, call them," Ben said softly. "Raise hell about it. You've got the fire for that fight."

Her lips pressed into a thin line. "I will. But that won't fix what's happening here. Not with her. Then she pressed on "Can you do something about those videos? Like blocking her TikTok?"

"I could," he admitted. "But she would just use her school laptop, or a friend's phone. It's pointless, Cass. We can't cut her off from the world."

Ben kept opening his mouth like he wanted to say something else, then closing it. He rubbed his face with both hands. "Christ, Cass, maybe we just let her wear some mascara? I can't stand watching her like this."

Cassie shut her eyes. "And you think a little mascara is the answer? What happens when 'a little' isn't enough? You saw how fast it went with her legs. She enjoyed it for two months only. Ben, she'll never stop wanting more once she starts. It's a trap."

Ben exhaled. "But what's the alternative? She's miserable. We're all miserable." He ran his hands through his hair. "I don't know what the right answer is anymore." He looked at Cassie helplessly. "So what do we do? Tell her no forever? She'll just hate us."

"We need to keep talking to her," She finally said. "Even if she resists, and... maybe we find someone who knows how to help. Someone she can talk to, who isn't us."

They sat in silence for a moment, both staring at their tea. "We'll figure something out," Ben said finally, Cassie nodded, determined.

Maria

The TikTok analytics loaded, and Maria's heart skipped. 215k followers, up 15k in a week. A small, delighted gasp escaped her lips as she sat cross-legged on her bed, the laptop's glow catching the shimmer on her eyelids.

"Whoa," she whispered, grinning. The numbers for her younger demographic, the 10-14 age group, had spiked. Not just a little, it was nearly 30% of her new audience.

Her heart lifted. She pictured those girls, maybe sitting in their bedrooms, scrolling through videos, dreaming of that first swipe of mascara, that perfect lip gloss. She remembered how lost she'd felt before makeup changed everything for her at fourteen. It wasn't just confidence; it was like unlocking a secret level of herself, a bolder, brighter Maria. If only she'd had someone like her, someone who genuinely understood, and guided her back then. It felt like destiny. She was meant to help these girls shine, to guide their very first steps into the glamorous world of cosmetics.

She leaned back, propping herself on one hand, fresh content spinning through her mind. "Makeup for school photos," she mused aloud, tapping a perfectly manicured nail against her chin. "Light, fun looks that teachers won't even notice. How to build your first glam kit!" The ideas flowed, exciting and vibrant. She could genuinely give them the tools to feel amazing and unlock their inner beauty.

A ping broke her thoughts. She clicked on her DMs. Hundreds of messages. She skimmed past dozens of emojis and heart-filled thank-yous until one caught her eye.

Maria, ur vids r AMAZING! They make me feel so confident. But my parents say I'm too young for makeup. How do I convince them? Pls help!

Maria felt a familiar rush of empathy. She had been lucky; her parents had always supported her. But this girl... stuck with parents who didn't understand the modern world. "Poor thing," she whispered.

A renewed sense of purpose surged through her. This wasn't just about affiliate sales or new products; this was about empowering girls like that one. She immediately started drafting a new video outline in her head: The Ultimate Guide to Talking to Your Parents About Makeup!

She smiled to herself. "Yes. This is what they need. This is why I'm here."

November

Ester

Ester was looking at the blank screen of the text editor. The blinking cursor was mocking her. Pale-faced, eyes rimmed with red, she let a single tear trace a path through smudged makeup. She closed her eyes for a moment then opened them again, as if that gesture could change anything.

The front door clicked and the sound of Tom's steps in the hallway broke the silence. "Babe? I'm home!" he called out. "You won't believe it. Five hours straight today. The old robot crew keeps pulling me in for emergencies. It's not permanent, but it's something, right?"

His tired smile faded immediately when he entered the living room and saw her face. "Ess, what's wrong? How's the campaign going?"

She broke, tears spilled down her cheeks. "I can't do this, Tom," she choked, shoving the laptop away. "I just... I can't."

He sat beside her on the sofa, placing a hand on her arm. "Babe... we talked about this. You've got this. Just... write the campaign the way Mike asked. You can do this. You're the best at this stuff."

Ester pulled away, her eyes widened with a desperate mix of anger and pain. "You don't get it!" she cried. "How can I exploit insecurities and fears of those children, just so we can sell them makeup and make millions? All I can think of is 'buy sweets, not eyeliner'. My vision was gentle, and smart, and balanced, and Mike just... he trashed it all."

She wrapped her arms around herself, hugging her shoulders. "He said if I don't deliver, I can go work on a city hall speed limit campaign. He meant it, Tom. He'll fire me."

Tom rubbed her back. "Hey... just take it one step at a time. It's a job. If it's not you, someone else will handle it. The industry won't stop, and those girls will get makeup anyway. Better it's from us than somewhere worse, right?"

Ester looked at him, her eyes still clouded with tears. She didn't want to agree, but the alternative was a gaping void of fear and financial ruin. She let out a shuddering breath, turned back to the screen, and whispered as her trembling hands began to type:

"Experiment. Explore. Be seen."

Her fingers hovered, then tapped out the next line:

"Confidence isn't given. It's applied."

Cassie

The dim kitchen light caught Cassie's furrowed brow. A stack of school letters lay on the table. Ben placed another on top of the pile and stood silently, head bowed, leaning against the kitchen counter.

Ben finally broke the silence. "They sent us another attendance notice."

Cassie slowly opened the envelope, skimming the letter. "Those damn idiots fined us, as if that helps anyone. Two days, Ben. She couldn't get out of bed for two days and they think a fine is the answer." She paused. "I talked to the principal today, he dismissed me again. The makeup policy's under review while girls are still showing up with fake lashes and contouring like it's a beauty pageant."

Ben's jaw tightened. "It's bullshit. She's miserable there. And the other schools?"

"Nothing," she said with a short, bitter exhale. "I haven't heard back. And when I called them, they just gave me the same line about how there's a long waiting list." She felt the anger rising, a hot wave of frustration that had become her constant companion. "They don't get it, Ben. They don't see that she is falling apart."

Silence settled. The only sound was Ava's muffled music coming from upstairs.

Cassie rubbed her red, exhausted eyes. "I went back to the psychologist. He said we have to let her experiment. That makeup is how she builds confidence and expresses herself."

Ben looked at her, hesitant. "And you don't think—?"

"No," Her voice snapped and then softened into something like grief. "No, Ben. I can't. I saw her face when I took that makeup kit she bought with the stolen money. There was no shame, no guilt, just... rage. Like I'd ripped a needle out of her arm." Her eyes filled, picturing Ava's face, begging for her gloss.

Cassie's silent sob filled the space, Ben sighed, helpless. "What do we do, then?"

Her voice broke. "I don't know, but whatever we're doing, it's not enough. She hates me. She hates both of us. And I don't know how much longer we can stand between her and this... this world that wants to swallow her."

Maria

“...and that’s all for today, my beautiful stargazers! Don't go anywhere, because the raffle is next! Thank you so much for tuning in!” Maria beamed into the camera, her perfectly highlighted face glowing under ring light. She gave a final wink and tapped the screen to end the stream.

The chat was still scrolling rapidly with fire emojis and heart-eyed comments. Today’s stream had been a blast. She'd just unboxed another package from GlowForce: the pre-released BeSeen and Confidence cosmetics. She loved the names, so aspirational and on-point. This wasn't just makeup. This was eyeliner, mascara, and eyeshadow designed specifically for delicate and sensitive skin. Finally, a brand that gets it, she thought, remembering her own teenage breakouts. Like they were made for girls struggling with self-esteem. Her excitement bubbled over. She was about to give ten of these brand-new products away.

Maria clicked open her giveaway software, and the randomizer started spinning names. Her heart raced as the winners popped up one by one. She smiled, genuinely thrilled, as she saw a few familiar names, ones that had messaged her about their ‘strict parents.’ Maybe this will help them, she thought, a burst of genuine hope. She pasted a list of winners into the chat and typed “Congrats All!” then added, “DM me your shipping details, Glam Fam! Can't wait for you to try these!”

She glanced at the analytics. Another great turnout, and the engagement was through the roof. Her “Guide to Talking to Parents About Makeup” video was still trending, pulling in tons of new, younger viewers. The comments were full of positive feedback, with girls thanking her and saying her advice had actually worked. It filled her with a profound sense of purpose. She wasn't just making content; she was making a difference. She was helping those girls find their voice.

Ava

Dear Diary,

I only took 30 quid and she acted like I'd robbed a bank. She cried for a whole day. And then she found the makeup and STOLE it. She went through my bag like a thief, and just ripped it away like I was a baby. I HATE her.

It was the best thing I ever bought. The gloss, the little palette. I put it on in the toilets before class and it was like MAGIC. For the first time I didn't feel like a stupid baby-face freak. I looked in the mirror and I looked normal. Better, I finally looked like me. The real Ava, with cool makeup. I could talk to people and nobody laughed at me. I finally belonged.

And she stole it from me!

I can't look at my ugly face in the mirror anymore. It makes me sick. I don't want to go to school. Everyone stares at me like they know. I can't eat. I can't even think. All I want is my makeup back. I NEED it.

She says she's protecting me. She doesn't get it at all. I hate her. I hate him too because he doesn't say anything. I hate them BOTH for making me be nobody.

I don't want to exist anymore :(

January

Ester

Ester spotted Mike's reflection in her monitor, just as she was about to shut down the laptop and leave her cubicle. The open-plan office was nearly empty, as the workday was winding down. He leaned against her desk, standing over her with the casual confidence of someone who always wins.

"Great work, Ester," he said, clapping his hands together once. "New lines are smashing it. I have just received the early data from first-month sales and numbers blew past projections." He gave her a wide triumphant smile and winked. "We're hitting exactly the right demographics. Turns out you nailed the sweet spot with those slogans. The board is impressed. Very impressed."

Ester only managed to utter a quiet "Thank you".

Mike dropped a glossy folder on her desk. "So here's the deal. We want you to stay on the lines permanently. Senior Brand Manager. It comes with doubling your salary and a proper office."

Ester's breath caught in her throat. Her fingers hovered over the folder. This was what she'd worked so hard for. And all it cost was her soul. The knot in her stomach tightened, but she forced a shaky smile to her lips.

"I... Mike, thank you. That's... fantastic."

"Excellent. You've earned it," he said, a cold glint in his eyes. He turned to leave, then stopped, as if remembering something minor. He pivoted back with a casual, almost bored expression.

"Oh, and PR has a situation, teenage suicide, maybe tied to BeSeen. Could be nothing. Can you manage it? After all, it's your account now."

He gave a little wave, already leaving. "Congratulations again. Big future ahead of you here."

Ester sat frozen, staring at the folder. The light caught its edge, the gold letters of her new title gleamed back at her.

Maria

Maria reread the email, mouthing the words as if they might change the second time.

Effective immediately, GlowForce is terminating our partnership with you. We have learned that sample products were shared in ways that conflict with our ethical and safety standards.

As these values are at the core of GlowForce, we cannot continue our collaboration. Please refrain from representing our brand in any capacity going forward.

She read it a third time. Ethical guidelines? None of it made any sense to her. Only last week she'd received a fat cash bonus for the excellent performance of her affiliate links promoting *BeSeen* and *Confidence* lines. The affiliate dashboard still showed performance off the charts. Why would they cut her off now, when she was finally making a difference?

A small giggle broke her concentration. "Look, Auntie Maria! Look!"

She turned. Her niece, Katie, stood in the doorway, her four-year-old face smeared with uneven streaks of blush, glitter dust clinging to her cheeks, lipstick smeared far beyond her lips.

"Katie, honey, what have you done?" she shook her head with a fond smile.

"I wanted a pretty face like Auntie," Katie mumbled, shy but proud.

Maria hugged her niece tightly and reached for the makeup kit. "Oh, you sweet girl, come on," she said, setting Katie down. "Let me help you do it right. I'll fix that and show you how to make your face really pretty. Confident and seen."

Cassie

The rain fell in a cold, steady rhythm, blurring the faces of the small crowd gathered around the open grave. Cassie stood alone, far from the cluster of black umbrellas, a witness to her own private hell. She couldn't bring herself any closer. Not to the coffin. Not to the mourners' whispers and looks. She'd failed to protect her beloved child and it felt like a physical weight against her back.

Slowly, the coffin descended. Her hands clenched around the folded tissue she hadn't used. No tears left. Only the hollow ache burning inside her chest.

The priest's words blurred. What cut through was the sound of earth falling on wood. The thud that made her flinch, each one pulling her further from the girl she couldn't save.

The ceremony ended as quickly as it had begun. The umbrellas dispersed, the mourners hurrying back to their cars, their shoulders hunched against the rain. They all avoided her gaze, their eyes flicking away as if she were a ghost, a stain on the landscape.

When the mourners drifted off, Ben lingered. He approached slowly. Cassie's heart ached with hope. Finally, he would hold her. They will grieve together. She looked in his eyes, but all she found was despair. And anger.

"You killed our daughter," he choked out through clenched teeth.

Then he turned, leaving her alone in the rain, watching the last of the mourners disappear into the gray.

Epilogue

Ester stood in her top-floor office, a panoramic window overlooking the city and a silver plaque on the desk with her name engraved on it. The quarterly sales charts glowed on her screen. The numbers had not only recovered from the small PR crisis in January, they now exceeded projections thanks to expanding demographics. Dozens of influencers were already lining up to promote the new lines, ready to carry the message to millions. The new warning on the packages, *may not be appropriate for children*, had been a minor hurdle. Mike had been right: make it small enough, and no one cares.

She closed the report with a satisfied smile. Expansion was already in motion: face products, lip color, the works. The lines were growing, unstoppable.

A knock on the heavy wooden door broke her thoughts. "Come in," she called.

The door opened and a young woman in her twenties, with bright eyes and a nervous expression, stood in the doorway. "Hi. My name's Monica," she said, her voice a little shaky.

"Monica, it's so good to finally meet you, John spoke highly of you." Ester's smile was practiced and polished. "As you've probably heard, BeSeen and Confidence are expanding and we're looking for talented young people who can bring fresh ideas to our upcoming campaign."

If this story left you with thoughts or reactions you'd like to share, I'd love to hear them.

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