

His kiss 271

Chapter 271

After flaunting Gabriela's triumph, Aubrey nonchalantly scooped up the so-called documents and strolled out with Nina at her side. The room was left simmering, faces burning with humiliation and rage.

Back in his office, Bryn pounded his chest in bitter frustration.

Cali, on the other hand, couldn't suppress a pang of envy. Jaylene's eyes narrowed into icy slits. "Envy? Of what? In Gabriela's world, you're nothing. Aubrey is the only one she trusts, the only one who reaps the rewards. You'll never have a place at her table."

Cali bit her tongue. She knew Jaylene wasn't wrong. For all the times she'd spoken ill of Gabriela behind her back, Gabriela had never retaliated. That alone had been more grace than she deserved.

Meanwhile, Gabriela remained oblivious to Aubrey's petty theatrics. Her attention was fixed on preparing her presentation for the upcoming meeting at Alphacom Electronics' headquarters. This time, Aaron would be at her side.

While waiting outside, he struck up a conversation with Billy. "Miss Haynes is truly remarkable."

For the Alphacom Electronics project, both Williams Group and Vasquez Group had pitched the same strategy: establish two subsidiaries, one to consolidate profitable divisions, the other to absorb losses and debts. The idea was simple yet ruthless—transfer part of the debt burden onto the public, while restructuring the profitable subsidiary and taking it public to raise enough funds to meet Mason's brazen condition.

But Mason dismissed the plan outright.

Gabriela had privately presented Wesley with an alternative. Her sharp reading of Mason's delay tactics revealed his true intent, which was to orchestrate parallel cooperation among Williams Group, Vasquez Group, Alphacom Electronics, and Apex Group. At the heart of this network would be Apex Group, serving as the hub to connect Alphacom Electronics with the other two groups.

"Alphacom is deeply rooted in manufacturing," Gabriela explained. "If they want to transition into the IT sector, their first natural partner is Apex Group. But Williams Group..." She paused, then admitted, "Williams Group has deeper reserves than we do. They're in a stronger position to provide Alphacom with sustained financial backing."

Her analysis landed with chilling clarity. Mason's intention was simply to use the project as bait to draw in investment. He didn't have the capacity to achieve it himself; instead, he was counting on Wesley to rally the Williams and Vasquez Groups into his scheme.

Aaron blinked in surprise before flashing Gabriela a thumbs-up. "Brilliant!" It had taken a team of six specialists—and even Billy lending his insights—over a month to reach the same conclusion. Yet Gabriela, after a single meeting, had cut straight to the heart of it. No wonder Wesley had been interested in her. She was truly sharp.

While Aaron and Billy exchanged words, Wesley approached, his gaze settling on Gabriela with a softness that lingered. To outsiders she might appear money-hungry, careless, even frivolous. But Wesley knew better. Beneath that mask lay a precise, calculating mind that noticed what others overlooked. That was why he had entrusted her with this project. He knew she wouldn't just succeed—she would shine.

For the first time, he also realized she was far from the fragile creature everyone assumed. The thought stirred a quiet pride in him, a smug satisfaction: this was the woman his heart yearned for.

Yet beneath his pride, a faint irritation brewed. For all her brilliance, for all her clarity, Gabriela continued to pretend to be blind to the affection he had laid bare in countless small ways. She didn't return his feelings, and that had to be the reason she kept playing the fool.

Wesley drew a long breath, steadying himself. Some truths weren't meant to be dissected; the more he turned them over in his mind, the more they burned.

Gabriela, oblivious to the storm churning behind Wesley's calm exterior, approached with her stack of neatly arranged documents.

"I'm ready, Mr. Dean," she said.

Aaron, catching the sudden shadow over Wesley's expression, forced an awkward smile. "Ah, something urgent just came up. Mr. Moss will go with you instead."

Gabriela blinked, confused. Aaron was already buried in work. But how could Wesley, his boss, take his place? The arrangement felt strange.

Wesley, noting her hesitation, felt his jaw tighten. Seriously? Was Aaron now considered more reliable than him?

Pinned beneath Wesley's withering stare for all of two seconds, Aaron caved, spun on his heel, and fled without another word. Billy, sensing the brewing storm, quickly found an excuse to slip away.

Chapter 272

Gabriela opened her mouth to speak, but Wesley straightened his collar with deliberate precision and cut her off. "Aaron and Billy are tied up, which means I'll have to accompany you myself."

Noticing his simmering displeasure, Gabriela hurried to soften the moment. "I actually know Mr. Garner quite well. I can manage on my own."

Wesley's lips curled into a scoff. "Have you ever closed a deal before? A one-billion-dollar project? Do you truly think you can handle it alone?"

Startled by his sharpness, Gabriela swallowed her protest and fell silent, trailing after him obediently to Alphacom Electronics.

The negotiation unfolded seamlessly. Wesley laid out the plan of establishing two subsidiaries within half a month, and Mason responded with heartfelt gratitude. The deal sealed without a hitch.

After the meeting ended, Whitney approached Gabriela with a bright smile, holding out an insulated food jar. "Gabriela, I made this nourishing soup for you. Drink plenty when you get home. It'll help keep your strength up," she said warmly.

Gabriela accepted it with heartfelt thanks, touched by the woman's thoughtfulness. Whitney lingered for a while, chatting animatedly before finally letting her go.

As they stepped out of Alphacom Electronics, Wesley's voice broke the momentary quiet. "You went to the hospital the other day, right? Is everything okay?"

Gabriela's fingers, hidden behind her back, twitched at the sudden question. She lowered her eyes, feigning embarrassment. "It was nothing, just my period. I had menstrual cramps all day."

Wesley said thoughtfully, "Your period came just a few days ago?"

Her cheeks burned crimson. Her neck flushed with heat as he spoke of something so intimately private. Desperate to escape the awkwardness, she quickly steered the conversation elsewhere. "Mr. Moss, let's focus on the project. Should we go to Vasquez Group first, or Williams Group?"

Wesley's eyes narrowed slightly, as though recalling something. His tone cooled. "I'll take care of Williams Group. You'll handle Vasquez Group."

Gabriela nodded without hesitation. "Alright."

News of Gabriela's triumph in clinching the one-billion-dollar deal with Alphacom Electronics didn't take long to ripple through the business world. It landed squarely at the doors of Haynes Group.

Marie's eyes flew wide at the news. Rage surged through her, and she flung the stack of documents straight at her assistant. "Are you telling me Gabriela actually sealed the deal? You're sure you didn't get it wrong?"

The assistant straightened, nodding with conviction. "Absolutely positive. There's no mistake."

Marie's nails dug into her palms as her fists clenched. It didn't matter whether Gabriela had pulled it off with her own skill or with Wesley's backing. The fact remained, and she had already carved out a solid place in the industry. If she returned now to fight for Haynes Group, her victory would be all but guaranteed.

The thought gnawed at Marie.

Ever since Gabriela had reclaimed her house, rumors had circulated within the company that everything Marie possessed had been stolen from Gabriela in the first place. If Gabriela came back for the company, plenty of people would rally to her side.

Marie's chest tightened with defiance. She couldn't allow Gabriela to rise. Driven by that thought, she rushed home at once, seeking out Dustin to plot their next move.

Even Dustin, upon hearing the news, was stunned. When Gabriela had first reclaimed her house, he had already felt the foundations of his reality begin to crack. All his life, he had believed Gabriela to be an orphan, a woman without backing. Yet now the truth struck him like a blow: the entire Haynes Group was rightfully hers.

Resentment stirred in his chest as he decided that Gabriela had deceived him. If she had told him this back then, perhaps he wouldn't have broken things off.

Phyllis, who had been quietly studying his distracted expression, gave an indignant little huff. "Dustin, do you regret marrying me?" Her voice trembled ever so slightly.

Snapped out of his thoughts, Dustin held her in his arms, forcing a gentle smile. "Don't be absurd. I chose you because of your beauty and your kindness."

Phyllis's brow eased, yet unease still shadowed her face. "But if Gabriela really returns to claim the company, what becomes of us?"

Dustin's gaze slid to Marie. After a brief moment, a sinister plan slithered through his mind. His lips curled, then flattened as he murmured, "Give me a few days and I'll find a way."

Chapter 273

Marie's displeasure was written all over her face. For all his modest beginnings, Dustin had always struck her as shrewd, cunning, and willing to play dirty when needed. She had expected brilliance from him in the form of a scheme sharp enough to turn the tide. Instead, he faltered at the very moment she needed him.

"You'd better start using that head of yours," she snapped. "The company doesn't pay you to sit idle. If Gabriela reclaims control, don't think you'll escape unscathed."

At the office, Marie treated him like a pawn to be moved at her whim; at home, she offered him even less regard. Dustin swallowed his bitterness, forcing a meek nod, resentment coiled tightly inside him like a blade yet unsheathed.

“Relax, Marie, I’ll come up with a perfect solution,” he said.

But before he could even put his thoughts in order, disaster struck. Word swept through the Haynes Group like wildfire: Marie had squandered millions at an opulent casino on Paradise Island, patching the losses with company funds—money that had been earmarked for a major new project.

The shareholders convened in outrage, demanding answers.

Marie, however, walked into the boardroom with her usual poise. “You’ve all seen my devotion to the company over the years. Do you really think I’d jeopardize the company I’ve built? This is nothing but a malicious rumor. Give me a few days, and I’ll find the real culprit and deliver you proof.”

Her calm words eased the storm, at least on the surface. Once the meeting adjourned, Marie wasted no time. With bodyguards in tow, she had her assistant hauled into a deserted alley.

“Cullen,” she said, eyes like knives. “Was it you who betrayed me?”

Bloodied and trembling, Cullen Willis collapsed to his knees, his face swollen from the beating. “Mrs. Haynes... I never wanted to. But Tyler Jordan threatened to drag Kaitlin Hussain to the police if I didn’t confess about the embezzlement.”

And there it was—the ghost from the past. Years earlier, Cullen had lured Kaitlin into a drunken trap, pushing her into a client’s bed to secure a deal.

He had paid her off afterward, certain the sordid night would be buried forever. Yet seven years later, the scandal clawed its way back at the worst possible moment.

“Mrs. Haynes, you were the one who gave the order back then,” Cullen muttered bitterly. “I kept your name out of it. But if Tyler tracks down Kaitlin and she talks to the police, we’ll both rot in prison. If we cover the embezzled funds quickly, we might just get away with it.”

Tyler Jordan?

Marie’s mind raced. He was known to be on Gabriela’s side. Fury surged through her. She kicked Cullen sharply. “You’d better learn what to say and what to swallow. Go hide in the countryside and don’t set foot in Okburg unless I summon you.”

Cullen nodded quickly.

“Now get out of my sight!” she snapped, turning on her heel.

Without another glance, Marie stormed toward Rosemont Gardens, intent on confronting Gabriela. Phyllis, catching on, hurried after her mother.

With the spare key still in her possession, Marie flung open the villa door and marched toward Gabriela, her voice ringing with rage. "You've taken the house and ruined my reputation. What more are you after?"

Tyler and Farley happened to be there. They immediately stepped forward, blocking Gabriela from Marie's fury.

Gabriela, unruffled, looked at her. "Marie, what is this about?"

"Don't you dare play innocent!" Marie spat, her eyes burning. "You sicced Tyler on my assistant. Must you push me to the brink before you're satisfied?"

Gabriela's voice remained steady. "Out of respect for Uncle Josh, I haven't handed the evidence to the police. You need to stop before it's too late." She didn't want to blow things into a spectacle. The last thing she wanted was to wound her uncle further.

Marie's eyes blazed, her voice sharp as a blade. "I've poured half my life into the Haynes Group. Do you think I'll just hand it over to you?"

Gabriela let out a cold laugh. "You squander millions at the casino every year, stealing from the company to fund your vices. And you dare claim you've poured half your life into the company? Unbelievable."

At this, Farley's body quivered with rage. He jabbed a trembling finger at Marie. "Wasting millions year after year, yet you couldn't even pay Gabriela's tuition! Marie, you are utterly heartless!"

Marie's gaze snapped to him, her lips curling into a sneer. "So it's you, Farley. You've aged miserably. I barely recognize you. You were cast out of the Haynes Group a long time ago. How dare you yap at me! Want the other leg broken too?"

Farley clutched his chest, shaking with fury. "Marie, your sins will come back to you! Karma never forgets."

Years ago, Marie had framed him for embezzlement, forcing his resignation and destroying his career. Later, she sent thugs to break his leg, leaving him crippled and scraping a living from odd jobs. Once a brilliant Rutherford University graduate, Farley had been reduced to ruin all because of her.

"Karma?" Marie's eyes gleamed with madness, bloodshot and wild. "I've lived in luxury and status for a decade, while you've scuttled in the shadows like a rat. Look at you! How pathetic!"

Gabriela steadied Farley, murmuring reassurance before stepping forward to face Marie head-on. Her tone was calm but unyielding. "Marie, I'll give you three days. Return the company willingly, or I'll take the evidence to the board myself and let them decide if you're fit to lead."

"Don't you dare!" Marie shrieked, raising her hand to strike, only to be shoved back roughly by Tyler. Phyllis watched silently as her mother was left speechless before Gabriela's unshakable presence.

For the first time, she realized Gabriela had truly become a force to be reckoned with. Gabriela was no longer the timid girl who could be dragged from her room at midnight and shoved into the doghouse

without protest. She was no longer the naive high schooler who endured every humiliation and bullying without daring to fight back.

Phyllis trailed after Marie in silence until they reached home, where Dustin was waiting. He stepped toward them. "How did it go?"

He knew they had gone to bargain with Gabriela, yet for reasons of his own, he hadn't joined them.

Phyllis lifted her eyes to him. His face—once dazzling to her, as striking as any star on a magazine cover—now filled her with nothing but disgust.

She shoved him away. "We're finished. Gabriela will crush us. It's only a matter of time."

She could already see it: Gabriela reclaiming the company, and her own head on the chopping block. She rounded on Dustin, her voice sharp as glass. "Useless! That's what you are. I married you hoping for a good life, and all you've ever done is leech off the company. Look at Gabriela's man! With a flick of his hand, a billion-dollar contract falls into place. He rules the business world like a king, and you? You're nothing but a parasite. Don't you feel even a shred of shame?"

Battered by online attacks, shunned by her friends, and crushed beneath unrelenting stress, Phyllis was already fraying at the seams. Learning there was no fortune left sent terror clawing through her, the terror of losing the gilded life she had always taken for granted. Unraveling, she lashed out with venom, each word sharper than the last.

Marie, fuming, refused to dignify the quarrel with a response.

Josh descended from the study, his tone calm but edged with authority. “What’s all this shouting the moment you step inside? We’re family. Sit down. Talk it through.”

Phyllis collapsed onto the sofa, sobbing uncontrollably.

Dustin’s jaw tightened as bitterness burned inside him. He despised Gabriela’s triumph. Every man longs to see his ex fall into ruin; it soothes the ego and proves superiority. But when an ex soars higher instead—when she stands at the side of someone better, richer, and stronger—the humiliation is unbearable. Wesley’s shadow loomed over him, making Dustin feel smaller by the second. And the knowledge that Gabriela was the rightful heir to the Haynes Group only deepened his torment, regret chewing at him like a swarm of ants.

Unable to endure another moment, he turned and stormed toward the door.

“Stop!” Phyllis’s voice was cold, cutting through her sobs. “Where are you going?”

Dustin’s fist clenched, his eyes hard as ice. “I’m going out—to find a way to fix this.”

Chapter 275

Dustin pulled up in front of Rosemont Gardens.

He knew this place well. After marrying Phyllis, he had lived here briefly, savoring the comfort and extravagance. But less than a month later, he had been thrown out.

If he hadn't ended things with Gabriela—if he had known she was the true heir to the Haynes Group—he could have stood beside her, helping her reclaim her home and the company. Then she would have had no one to rely on except him. The Haynes Group itself could have been his.

The more he dwelled on it, the deeper the regret carved into him. Desperation rising, he pulled out his phone and dialed Gabriela's number.

At that moment, Gabriela was seated at the dining table with Tyler and Farley, enjoying a warm dinner. When she saw Dustin's name flash across the screen, her brows knit in distaste. She hung up immediately.

The phone buzzed again. Reluctantly, Gabriela accepted the call.

Her tone was guarded. "What do you want?"

She couldn't help but wonder what scheme he was plotting this time.

"Gabriela, I am so sorry," Dustin said, his voice trembling with what he believed to be sincerity.

Her vigilance did not waver. "What are you trying to say?"

"I'm outside your house," he whispered, almost pleading. "Please... can we talk?"

"No," Gabriela cut him off coldly. There was no hesitation in her voice. What kind of fool did he take her for? Outside, the wind howled, the night was bitter with cold. And here she was, warm and content, enjoying a delicious meal. Trade comfort for misery just to stand shivering in the dark with Dustin? Not a chance.

"I know I screwed up!" Dustin's tone dropped into a plea, his voice thick with feigned remorse. "I finally understand how terribly I treated you. Just give me a chance. Let me make it right."

"Make it short," Gabriela muttered flatly.

Farley had just handed her a perfectly seared slice of beef, and her attention lingered on the food, not on Dustin's pitiful voice. His words only made her skin crawl.

"Gabriela, I know you despise me," Dustin pressed on, his desperation leaking through every word. "But we can start over. I'll divorce Phyllis immediately! The moment it's finalized, we'll get married. What do you say?"

Her lip curled in disgust. "You are out of your mind," Gabriela spat before hanging up without hesitation.

If he had been standing before her, she might have slapped him just to silence his shameless mouth. Although honestly, hurting her hand on his face wasn't worth the effort. Eating was far more rewarding.

Tyler placed a piece of tender fish on her plate. But the moment the scent hit her, Gabriela's stomach lurched violently. She bolted to the bathroom and retched until her throat burned.

When she finally emerged, pale and shaken, Farley was waiting just outside, his expression grave.

"Gabriela," he said, studying her closely, "tell me the truth. Are you pregnant?"

The signs were unmistakable. He had seen her mother go through the same thing.

Gabriela lowered her gaze, unease tightening her chest. "Farley, Tyler... please. Don't tell anyone."

Tyler froze, his mind reeling, before fury surged through him. Rolling up his sleeves, he growled, "Who's the bastard? Tell me his name, and I'll kill him!"

Gabriela rushed forward, grabbing his arm. "No, don't do anything reckless."

Tyler snapped, eyes burning, "Tell me, Gabriela. Who is the father?"

Her throat tightened. The last thing she wanted was another chain tying her to Brenden. With quiet desperation, she begged, "Tyler, please... I don't want to say. Don't force me."

Seeing her fragile expression, Tyler's anger melted into helplessness. He clenched his fists, but in the end, he let it go.

Inwardly, Tyler cursed that man. Whoever the father was, he must have been a scoundrel, too cowardly to take responsibility.

Meanwhile, at the manor, Wesley was in the middle of dinner when an unexpected sneeze shook him. The sound startled Loretta.

"Are you sick?" she fussed immediately. "I told you, Wesley, things aren't right without Gabriela here. Only she knows how to care for you properly."

Miriam added her agreement without hesitation. "We have to find a way to bring Gabriela back. She belongs in this house."

Wesley had no answer. He sat there in silence, cornered by their accusations. To them, he was the reason Gabriela had left. And yet, deep down, the truth was that he was the one who longed for her most.

Elsewhere, Dustin lingered outside Rosemont Gardens, the night air heavy with smoke. Half-burned cigarette butts lay scattered at his feet, the hours slipping by as regret gnawed at him.

At last, a security guard approached, baton in hand. “What are you doing here? Leave.”

“I used to live here!” Dustin barked.

The guard’s expression hardened. “Exactly. You used to. Are you leaving on your own, or do I need to call someone to escort you out?”

Dustin’s face darkened, his pride in tatters.

Marie’s newly purchased house lay on the edge of the suburbs. It was a decent enough home, certainly better than the cramped place Dustin had lived in before, but compared to the opulent villas of Rosemont Gardens, it was pitiful. The more Dustin dwelled on the downgrade, the hotter his anger burned. Every twist of misfortune, every humiliation—it was all Gabriela’s fault.

Out on the balcony, Marie paced with her phone pressed to her ear. Over the years, she had built connections with plenty of wealthy acquaintances, and now she was desperately trying to borrow money to cover the company funds she had embezzled. But her reputation had sunk so low that the moment her acquaintances realized she wanted a loan, they hung up without a word.

Her fury boiled over. With a sharp growl of frustration, she nearly hurled the phone across the balcony.

That was when Dustin returned home, walking straight into the storm of her bad mood. She whirled on him, her face twisted with disdain. “You’ve been leeching off me for so long. And when the time comes to actually do something, you’re utterly useless!”

Dustin's eyes darkened as he stared at Marie's heavily painted face, her lips curled in mockery. Something in his gaze made her falter; a prickle of unease ran down her spine. Still, she couldn't resist a parting jab, muttering under her breath, "Phyllis must've been blind to fight so hard to marry someone like you."

Before Dustin could respond, Marie's phone rang again. She snatched it up instantly, her tone switching to eager sweetness. "Hello? What? You're willing to lend me money? And you want to meet in person? No problem, I'll be right there!"

Snapping the call to an end, she rushed to her room, grabbing her coat and bag in one smooth motion. Without sparing Dustin another glance, she swept out the door.

Dustin's eyes lingered on Marie's retreating figure, his thoughts curdling into malice. He stayed in the living room the entire night, his mind consumed by poisonous schemes.

By the time dawn broke, Marie finally returned. Her face was glowing, lips curved in satisfaction, as though fortune had smiled on her at last. But her triumph froze the moment she caught sight of Dustin sitting rigidly in the dim light.

"Dustin?" she asked, startled. "Why are you up so early?"

"I wasn't up early." His lips curved into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I've been waiting for you all night." He continued smoothly, his voice almost gentle, yet threaded with something unsettling. "I've thought of a way to stop Gabriela from ever coming back for the company."

Marie waved her hand dismissively, her good mood making her careless. "There's no need. I've already taken care of things."

But Dustin wasn't going to let his plan go unheard.

"Maybe you've managed to patch things up this time. But what about next time? Can you guarantee Gabriela won't return? Can you guarantee she won't crush us in the future?" he pressed.

Marie's smile wavered, hesitation creeping into her eyes.

Dustin leaned forward, his voice low and deliberate. "I have a way to make sure Gabriela never dares to stir up trouble again."

Marie's brows knit together in suspicion. "What are you talking about?"

With a deliberate flourish, Dustin pulled a small bottle from his jacket. It was some kind of poison.

Marie's blood ran cold. Her face drained of color. "Where did you even get that? What are you planning, Dustin?"

His smile spread slowly, unnervingly, never touching his eyes. "Don't you want the Haynes Group to be yours forever? Don't you want to ruin Gabriela's reputation completely?"

Marie swallowed hard, caught between fear and temptation.

“What are you implying?” she pressed, though part of her already knew.

Dustin leaned closer, his voice curling like poison in her ear. “Gabriela won back the house and sympathy with her little sob story. If she can play that card, so can you.”

Marie’s face stiffened. Dread and curiosity warred in her expression. “What trick are you talking about?”

Dustin sneered, drawing out each word like a knife. “A suicide livestream.”

Chapter 277

Even though Marie had seen it coming, hearing Dustin lay out the plan still sent a shockwave through her entire body.

“Dustin, you expect me to stage my own suicide? Come on, it won’t work. Gabriela will pierce through our deception without hesitation.”

“Then we’ll transform the suicide into reality!”

Dustin's declaration rang out as he uncapped the poison and swallowed a draught of the dark brown liquid.

"Have you lost your mind completely?" Marie lunged forward, grasping him desperately. "That poison will destroy you!"

"Did you believe I would actually consume genuine toxins?" Dustin's laughter filled the space around them. He extended the bottle toward Marie's trembling hands. "I replaced the contents with cola hours ago."

Marie accepted the bottle and inhaled deeply. The familiar sweetness of cola greeted her senses.

The revelation struck her like lightning, and Dustin's masterful strategy crystallized in her mind. Her eyebrows arched with mounting excitement.

Dustin pressed forward with his explanation. "When our moment arrives, you'll drain the entire bottle before everyone's watchful eyes, wearing an expression of absolute desperation. If your tears convince them, every witness will believe you consumed actual poison. Should Gabriela dare challenge your performance, the online masses will devour her mercilessly on your behalf."

Marie absorbed every word, her eyes blazing with newfound enthusiasm. "Dustin, your brilliance astounds me!"

This scheme would redirect all the criticism previously aimed at Marie straight toward Gabriela's doorstep. Gabriela would become the focal point of universal public fury. The mere thought of this scenario flooded Marie with overwhelming satisfaction.

"I'm glad you approve of the plan," Dustin said, his smile radiating fake warmth.

Marie's eagerness bubbled over as she asked, "When does our live broadcast commence?"

Her patience had evaporated completely; she craved the moment when Gabriela would become the internet's primary target, hoping the woman would never find the courage to appear publicly again. That outcome would ensure Gabriela could never steal the Haynes Group from her grasp.

"Within three days," Dustin responded. "I must first establish contact with the medical team. The financial requirements will demand your assistance."

Marie's expression darkened with displeasure. "Fine, expedite this process immediately. Whatever sum you require, name it without hesitation." As long as this scheme demolished Gabriela's reputation completely, Marie would gladly spend whatever fortune necessary.

"At minimum, one million dollars," Dustin said.

Marie recognized that such elaborate deceptions commanded steep prices. She clenched her teeth and authorized the transfer to his account. Her recent gambling victories had enriched her considerably, making one million feel insignificant.

Gabriela remained completely unaware that Marie would sacrifice a million dollars and risk her own life to orchestrate her downfall.

At that precise moment, Gabriela occupied the Vasquez Group's reception area, awaiting their CEO, Adolf Vasquez. He had expressed considerable interest in the Alphacom Electronics project. However, Gabriela's proposal positioned Apex Group as the primary partner, relegating the Vasquez and Williams Groups to secondary roles.

Adolf thought the whole arrangement was utterly ridiculous. Given the current marketplace dynamics, Apex Group's commercial influence matched the Vasquez Group's power exactly. Accepting a subordinate position would essentially allow Apex Group to surpass the Vasquez Group and claim supremacy. He would never consent to such an arrangement.

Gabriela waited for several hours with remarkable composure and tranquility. Finally, Adolf's secretary returned bearing disappointing news. "I apologize sincerely, but Mr. Vasquez's conference has extended beyond schedule. You should return home now, Miss Haynes."

Gabriela had anticipated this difficulty and smiled gracefully. "That's perfectly acceptable. I'll continue waiting here."

Her persistence meant darkness had already fallen by the time she was still waiting there.

Just then, Vivian arrived to meet her brother for dinner. She spotted Gabriela, asked the secretary what was going on, and quickly understood the situation. A peculiar discomfort stirred in Vivian's chest. She and Gabriela were the same age: Gabriela had already secured a billion-dollar contract and earned recognition across their social circle, while Vivian still depended on her brother's generosity for spending money.

Vivian slipped into the office, wrapped herself around Adolf's arm, and whined, "Adolf, it's already dark. Stop working now. Let's go to dinner."

Adolf set aside his documents and left with Vivian at his side.

Gabriela hurried forward to greet him. "Good evening, Mr. Vasquez. I'm Gabriela Hayes, representing Apex Group."

He frowned, his tone cool. "Business hours have concluded. No professional discussions now."

"Exactly—my brother is off work now!" Vivian shot Gabriela a contemptuous look. "Isn't Mr. Moss supposed to be your greatest advocate? Why did he abandon you to wait here all day alone? How pathetic."

Her gaze fell to Gabriela's injured foot. "Wounded, huh? What a pitiful sight."

Adolf's frown deepened, and he delivered a soft reprimand. "Vivian, enough."

"I'm not done," she snapped. "Who does she think she is? An orphan without wealth or connections, trying to negotiate with you? She's living in a fantasy!"

Adolf's reputation for pleasantness was nonexistent; though he smiled often, everyone knew his calculations ran deep. Initially, his impression of Gabriela had been unfavorable, but seeing her wait all day on an injured foot and endure his sister's cruelty stirred an unexpected twinge of guilt.

"Do you wish to forfeit your monthly allowance entirely?" he asked coldly.

Vivian fell silent at once.

Adolf then redirected his attention to Gabriela. "Miss Hayes, your proposal lacks merit. Please refrain from future visits."

Disappointment flickered briefly across her features, yet her smile held. "I understand completely, and I appreciate your time nonetheless, Mr. Vasquez."

Her graceful acceptance, free of persistence or pleading, softened his rigid expression. "Do you require transportation home?"

"No, thank you." She hesitated for a beat, then ventured, "Might I request your WhatsApp contact? I promise not to disturb you with unnecessary messages."

Under ordinary circumstances, someone of her standing would never earn the privilege of speaking with Adolf directly. But she represented Apex Group, and her day-long vigil despite her injury created an unusual exception.

Though mild irritation stirred within him, Adolf retrieved his phone. "Very well."

Gabriela quickly saved his contact and offered her farewells before departing.

Watching her retreating figure, marked by that distinctive limp, Vivian released a contemptuous snort. "I thought Mr. Moss treasured her above all others. Yet here she is, wounded and abandoned to conduct business alone."

Adolf's frown returned.

Vivian's eyes sparkled with calculated sweetness as she clung to his arm. "Adolf, you remain unparalleled, always indulging me with endless generosity and spending money."

A wave of frustration crashed over him. "Silence."

Their car pulled away from Vasquez Group headquarters, and through the window they glimpsed Gabriela at the curb, waiting for a ride. As she took a call, she gestured with animated enthusiasm, showing no trace of defeat.

Adolf found himself unexpectedly amused. Business required no sentiment.

He looked away. "Continue driving."

Their vehicle accelerated swiftly into the night.

Gabriela's true objective in visiting the Vasquez Group headquarters had been to secure Adolf's WhatsApp contact. Her original strategy had anticipated several days of persistent attempts before gaining access to him, yet encountering Vivian on this first visit turned everything into an unexpected stroke of fortune. Vivian's cutting sarcasm had inadvertently made refusing Gabriela's request impossible for Adolf.

Gabriela delivered her exuberant report to Wesley over the phone. "Mr. Moss, mission accomplished. How did your endeavors progress?"

Her triumphant tone conjured vivid images of her delighted expression, and Wesley's lips curved despite himself. "Same here."

"That's great!" Gabriela exclaimed. "I'll visit the Williams Group with you tomorrow and try to get Mr. Williams's WhatsApp contact."

The prospect of Gabriela's upcoming Williams Group visit drained all warmth from Wesley's demeanor. His response carried unmistakable frost. "That won't be necessary. I will take care of it."

Chapter 279

The abrupt click of the call ending left Gabriela momentarily unsettled. Wesley clearly wasn't fond of her mingling with the CEO of the Williams Group.

Just then, Trey Wilcox's car pulled up beside her. She eased into the passenger seat with a small smile. "Appreciate it, Trey."

Her ankle, more swollen this time, had kept her limping for days. Wesley had insisted his driver take charge of her transportation. As the car glided forward, Gabriela turned to Trey with quiet curiosity. "Trey, do you know if Mr. Moss holds any grudges against the CEO of the Williams Group?"

His hands stayed steady on the wheel. "I'm just the driver, Ms. Haynes. I don't dare pry into Mr. Moss's business."

Sensing his unease, Gabriela let the question drop.

Back at Apex Group, she headed to the CEO's office. Despite his reluctance, Wesley had managed to secure exactly what she needed: a series of photos capturing him in polite conversation with the CEO of the Williams Group, even shaking his hand.

Gabriela carefully chose nine shots and uploaded them to her social media. Her caption, coolly professional, praised Alphacom Electronics' project. She made no mention of the Williams Group's leader, but the images spoke for themselves.

Wesley and the CEO appeared in easy dialogue, their handshake hinting at a partnership already in motion.

The moment Gabriela's post went live, Wesley's name appeared among the first likes. As he tapped the screen, his gaze lingered on her. "Gabriela, are you certain Adolf will bite?"

"Very likely," she answered without hesitation. "Mr. Vasquez is sly, convinced of his own brilliance. He won't sit back and let the Williams Group outmaneuver him."

As Wesley studied her, he felt a surge of admiration for the sharpness of her strategy.

He pressed, "But we risk making an enemy of the Williams Group."

She tilted her chin with quiet pride. "That's fine. By then, Mr. Vasquez will already be in the same boat as us, and he'll have no choice but to defend us."

Her lips curved, eyes narrowing with a playful sharpness, like a little fox basking in triumph. Wesley felt an urge to kiss her eyes.

A dangerous thought stirred in his chest: if it meant keeping her this confident, this luminous, he would defy the whole world for her.

He asked another question. "Are you certain Adolf will see the post?"

Gabriela gave a firm nod. "He will."

After relaying the day's intelligence from Vasquez Group, she rose gracefully. "Mr. Moss, I'll take my leave."

Wesley wanted to drive her home, yet the memory of her gentle refusal of his confession lingered. Pressing too hard now might only push her further away. He held himself back, saying instead, "Make sure you rest once you're back."

Gabriela gave a polite nod. "You too."

At Seasons Restaurant, Vivian scrolled through her phone between bites.

Adolf's brow creased. "No phones at the table."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. You're stricter than a parent, Adolf."

Just then, a post caught her attention. Her eyes widened. "Look at your feed now! It seems Apex Group and Williams Group have already struck a deal."

Adolf pulled out his phone, his expression hardening as he found Gabriela's freshly uploaded post. Beneath it, Mason from Alphacom Electronics had already left a like.

Could Williams Group have conceded so quickly? Had Wesley offered them something to sweeten the deal?

Adolf tapped the table absently, thoughts churning.

Vivian smirked at his reaction. It looked like Gabriela's plan had worked. She sent a discreet message to Gabriela. "It's done. Consider us even."

Gabriela's message came instantly. "Thanks."

Vivian's lips curled in a sneer. She was actually surprised at Gabriela's brazenness, daring to call in a favor over a casual promise made back at the hotel.

Meanwhile, Gabriela, having completed her first maneuver, slipped into the shower and fell asleep with an untroubled mind.

The next morning, the moment she stepped into the office, Billy rushed over. "Ms. Haynes, please get ready. We're heading to Vasquez Group for a meeting."

Not long ago, both Williams and Vasquez Groups had rejected them, holding out for better terms from Mason. But Williams Group's sudden change of heart had broken the stalemate, leaving Vasquez Group cornered. Wesley's influence alone was enough to make Adolf wary. And now, with Wesley standing shoulder to shoulder with Williams Group's CEO, Vasquez Group could fall behind.

Chapter 280

Adolf had tossed and turned all night, anxiety gnawing at him, until finally, before dawn, he made his choice.

The meeting unfolded seamlessly. Adolf laid out his condition, demanding more benefits than the Williams Group. Gabriela backed him without hesitation, even presenting a clear division of shares in Alphacom Electronics' subsidiary: Apex Group—30%, Alphacom Electronics—24%, Vasquez Group—24%, Williams Group—22%.

Adolf felt a faint unease, but the contract had been meticulously reviewed by his legal team. Finding no flaws, he forced down his misgivings and signed his name. Within a single day, Williams Group followed suit and signed a contract with Wesley.

In less than a week, Gabriela made Alphacom Electronics' ambitious idea—to bring four companies together—a reality.

Mason was in awe of Gabriela. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined his daring concept would be pulled off. His throat tightened as he clasped Gabriela's hand, his voice breaking with gratitude. "Gabriela, I speak for every employee when I say thank you. What you've done goes beyond saving our company; you've secured the futures of many families."

With three major companies on board, Alphacom Electronics stood steady once more, its employees no longer haunted by the shadow of unemployment.

Gabriela's smile carried both warmth and restraint. "Don't thank me too much. None of this would have happened without Mr. Moss. His presence made Williams and Vasquez Groups reconsider."

The success of this landmark project—which captivated all of Okburg—was due to Gabriela’s bold strategy of turning information gaps into an advantage. Even Billy and the think tank marveled at her cunning.

Such audacity, they admitted, they would never dare attempt. But in Gabriela’s hands, it appeared not shameless, but ingenious—even entertaining.

Across the city, when Adolf realized how he’d been played, his rage erupted. He smashed his prized cup against the floor as his disgust toward Gabriela deepened into something darker.

“Wesley’s a fox, no doubt,” Adolf muttered, his jaw tight. “But who would’ve guessed the woman orbiting him was even craftier, pulling off the swindle with deceptively sweet smiles?”

Vivian, watching her brother’s stormy expression, couldn’t resist a smirk. “Adolf, come on. Even without her little trick, you liked the project enough and would’ve signed sooner or later. And let’s not forget, she offered you more benefits than the Williams Group. What’s eating you? The fact you were outplayed by a woman?”

Adolf’s glare cut across the table, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Weren’t you the one who used to rail against Gabriela? Since when did you start conspiring with her—against your own brother, no less?”

Vivian’s smirk faltered. “That’s a heavy accusation. You don’t have a shred of proof, so don’t pin this on me.”

His voice dropped to an icy growl. "If you hadn't whispered in my ear that night, I wouldn't have looked at that damned post."

If he hadn't seen it, he wouldn't have spent a sleepless night, let alone sealed the deal with her the next morning.

Vivian shuddered under his cutting stare. "I only told you what I saw. That's it. Believe what you like. I'm going to my room."

Adolf's gaze lingered on the contract. On paper, it was a fair deal—one any executive would sign without hesitation. Yet the sting of being maneuvered by a young woman left him simmering with frustration. He etched the slight into memory, a grievance not easily forgotten.

Unaware she had provoked a dangerous adversary, Gabriela spent the evening celebrating the hard-won victory with Wesley and the others. Later, she returned home, eager for nothing more than a hot shower and a night of peace. Her phone rang sharply. Once she answered, Aubrey's voice broke through in a panic. "Gabriela, I've got some bad news. Check WhatsApp. I just sent you a link. It's Marie. She's livestreaming her suicide attempt!"

Gabriela's stomach dropped. Her fingers fumbled as she opened the message. The link lagged under the crush of more than a million viewers already tuned in. Her screen froze, then flickered to life.

Marie's face filled the frame, gaunt and streaked with tears. Beside her sat a bottle labeled as poison, the letters stark under the light. Her voice cracked through sobs but burned with venom. "Gabriela! You pushed me to this!"

With a savage twist, she tore off the cap.