

His kiss 611

Chapter 611

The electrician quickly restored the circuit, much to everyone's relief.

Gabriela sifted through the documents on the computer. Most files had been auto-saved, with only a handful lost to the outage.

Matthew spoke cautiously, his tone earnest. "The weather's turning sweltering, and I thought a new air conditioner might help you stay comfortable."

Fearing a misunderstanding, he hurried to clarify. "What Rebecca did was wrong, Gabriela. I'm here to make amends on her behalf."

Gabriela drew a steadying breath. "Mr. Howard, if your daughter offends me, I will deal with the matter personally. I appreciate your gesture, but please don't trouble yourself further."

"It's no trouble at all!" Matthew sensed her irritation and pressed on. "I had no idea the company's wiring was so outdated."

"There's a lot you don't know," Gabriela replied, striving to keep her composure. "Mr. Howard, I've said it before—just keep your daughter in line. If she stays out of my way, I'll be grateful."

Matthew opened his mouth to respond, but Gabriela cut him off. "I'm swamped with work. Please leave."

Her cold tone stung, and Matthew's eyes brimmed with hurt. All he wanted was to make things right for his daughter—why was that so hard?

"I'll go, then," he said.

As he turned to leave, Gabriela's voice stopped him. "Wait."

His heart lifted, hope flickering as he spun around, eyes alight with expectation.

Under his eager stare, Gabriela shifted uncomfortably, her words tumbling out quickly. "Mr. Howard, please take the breakfast with you. And... please stop sending things." She feared the Howard family's reaction if they caught wind of this.

Matthew's brief spark of hope faded, replaced by a quiet ache as he slowly gathered the breakfast.

Before he could finish, a voice suddenly rang out. "Gabriela, I'm here to see you! Oh, who's this?"

Matthew turned.

Stewart, recognizing Matthew, blinked in surprise. “Mr. Howard?” They moved in the same elite circles, so Stewart easily placed the man in front of him.

Matthew gave a curt nod. “Stewart.”

“Why are you here, Mr. Howard?” Stewart asked, then slowly pieced it together.

Gabriela’s bold confrontation with the Howard family was no secret in Okburg. Her name was now a fixture among the city’s elite.

“I’ve heard about the trouble between Gabriela and Rebecca,” Stewart continued. “Since your daughter was in the wrong, Mr. Howard, would you please let Gabriela off the hook?”

Matthew’s brow creased.

Gabriela shifted awkwardly.

She stepped closer to Stewart, tugged his sleeve, and whispered, “You’ve got it wrong. Mr. Howard just came to drop off breakfast.”

Matthew caught the subtle gesture, and his brows furrowed.

It appeared that Stewart and Gabriela were close.

And from the way Stewart looked at her, Matthew could tell—he was yet another suitor vying for her affection.

Yet, to Matthew, Stewart wasn't even as remarkable as Wesley.

Stewart's face stiffened at Gabriela's words, but he quickly flashed a smile. "Oh, delivering breakfast, Mr. Howard? Quite the gesture. Funny enough, I'm here to deliver lunch."

Stewart's visit was no accident—he was here to win Gabriela over.

After taking her to see the sea and catching a cold, he'd posted about it online, hoping she'd notice.

Days passed, and not only did Gabriela miss his hints, she seemed to have forgotten him entirely.

So, he'd shown up, lunch in hand—a perfect pretext.

Matthew, hearing Stewart's words, resolved to stay put. He wanted to know just how many suitors were chasing after his daughter.

“Perfect timing,” Matthew said. “I’ve been here half the day, and I’m starving. Stewart, mind ordering something for me too?”

Gabriela frowned. She couldn’t fathom Matthew’s motives and didn’t dare provoke him, so she let the two men bicker and returned to her work.

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Though GD Fashion had eased its stance toward Haynes Group, she couldn’t afford to slack off.

She needed to finalize the planning details by four that afternoon.

Seeing Gabriela buried in her work, Stewart lost the will to keep arguing with Matthew.

Gabriela was juggling work and Rebecca’s drama, looking even more worn than before.

Meanwhile, he had been sulking over Gabriela not noticing that he had caught a cold.

How small he’d been.

Determined to make up for it, Stewart ordered another extravagant lunch to ensure Gabriela was well-fed.

At twelve-thirty, the meal arrived right on schedule.

Gabriela pushed it aside. "Stewart, I'm really swamped."

Though she and Stewart were on good terms, something still felt off.

Matthew's unprompted kindness, like Stewart's attentiveness, left Gabriela deeply unsettled.

"No matter how busy you are, you have to eat," Stewart urged softly. "Gabriela, Loretta knows you've been swamped and worries you're not eating properly. She made me promise to ensure you do."

At the mention of Loretta, Gabriela reluctantly accepted the meal.

Matthew, listening closely, caught every word.

Who was this Loretta?

Clearly, he still had much to learn about the people in Gabriela's orbit.

Eager to stay, Matthew chimed in, "Gabriela, I've been here half the day and haven't eaten a thing."

His intent to crash their meal was unmistakable.

Gabriela shot him a weary glance.

Why was Matthew still here?

The Howard Group's major shareholder lingering at her small company to join an uninvited lunch? What kind of absurd situation was this?

Unable to outright refuse, she offered a polite smile. "Mr. Howard, care to join us?"

"Thank you," Matthew replied.

He immediately grabbed the tableware, nudged Stewart aside, and sat down right next to Gabriela.

Stewart froze, incredulous.

This was his lunch order.

Matthew's audacity was beyond comprehension.

Stewart had planned a cozy lunch for two with Gabriela, but Matthew's intrusion ruined it, sparking his irritation.

His tone sharpened. "Mr. Howard, don't you have a world-class chef at home, crafting perfectly balanced meals? Isn't this fast food beneath you?"

Matthew responded coolly, "Not at all."

Stewart pressed further. "Your daughter Rebecca is always harassing Gabriela. With all your free time, why not focus on reining her in?"

Matthew's face darkened.

Rebecca could be in the wrong, but she was still his daughter, and Stewart had no right to lecture him.

Stewart was even more insufferable than Wesley.

Matthew suddenly inquired, "Stewart, didn't you partner with Moss Group last year?"

Stewart opened his mouth to respond, but Matthew barreled on. "And that left you playing second fiddle to Wesley, didn't it?"

Stewart went quiet.

Matthew's jab stung as much as Wesley's ever did. If they weren't in the same social circle, Stewart wouldn't have bothered with civility.

Forcing a tight smile, he replied, "In business, it's all about mutual benefit."

Matthew didn't relent. "Second fiddle means a smaller share and still bowing to the top dog..."

Their exchange escalated, a flurry of veiled barbs and biting sarcasm.

Gabriela paused, fork in hand.

All she wanted was to focus on her work, not endure their petty squabble.

It was surreal—two prominent men bickering like petulant children.

She tried to intervene. “Can we just eat?”

But the pair, now fully engrossed in their spat, turned to her in unison. “Stay out of it!”

Gabriela’s patience snapped.

Today had been grueling enough—Matthew’s meddling caused a company-wide power outage, leaving her files unfinished. Then Stewart arrived, clashing with Matthew and giving her a splitting headache.

Setting down her fork, she stood. With unyielding firmness, she asked them both to leave.

Stewart protested, “But I haven’t eaten!”

Gabriela thrust the lavish lunch into his hands.

Ushered out, Stewart and Matthew stood outside Haynes Group, glaring at each other in stunned silence.

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Caught under Matthew's simmering glare, Stewart jolted back to reality.

As a Howard, Matthew's family wielded the second-most daunting influence in Okburg after the Mosses, far surpassing Stewart's family.

How could he have been so reckless, lacing his words with sarcasm toward Matthew?

If his father caught wind of this, he'd be livid.

Desperate to smooth things over, Stewart extended the lunch with a conciliatory smile. "Mr. Howard, why not share this meal here with me?"

Matthew eyed him critically.

This young man was trouble—nowhere near Wesley's caliber. "I've got matters to handle at home, so I'll take my leave. Enjoy your meal, Stewart," Matthew said.

With that, he turned and left.

Stewart sighed, realizing he'd unwittingly crossed the Howard family. Resigned, he carried the lunch downstairs.

Erik, curious, glanced at him. "Mr. Williams, didn't Gabriela like the lunch?"

Stewart shot him a sharp look and shoved the lunch into his hands. "You eat it."

Erik stared at the stack of lunch boxes, his stomach sinking.

"Mr. Williams, I just ate."

"You ordered this yourself," Stewart snapped. "Don't waste it."

Erik fell silent.

Why did Stewart always take out his frustrations with Gabriela on him?

With a grimace, Erik opened the boxes.

As Gabriela had feared, word of Matthew's visit to her company spread like wildfire.

Cindy, ever the embellisher, regaled Lauren with a dramatic tale. “Gabriela’s a total vixen! She didn’t just steal Rebecca’s fiancé—she’s got Uncle Matthew wrapped around her finger too. He brought her breakfast, arranged for an air conditioner installation, and even clashed with Mr. Williams before Gabriela kicked him out!”

The more Cindy spoke, the wilder her exaggerations grew, turning Lauren’s expression thunderous.

Lauren could guess Matthew’s repeated visits stemmed from his lingering attachment to Alanna. She knew Cindy’s words were overblown.

But her deep-seated resentment toward Alanna spilled over to Gabriela.

If Cindy said it happened that way, then so be it.

It was the perfect chance to let Cindy’s loose lips paint Gabriela as a homewrecker.

Cindy, sensing an opening, offered eagerly, “Aunt Lauren, Gabriela’s using her charm to toy with men left and right. Should I teach her a lesson for you?”

Despite her fury, Lauren recalled Cindy’s fiasco with the homeless at Gabriela’s hotel and dismissed her as a fool.

She'd handle this herself.

"Come with me to Haynes Group," Lauren commanded.

Cindy, thrilled to have swayed her, scurried after Lauren, carrying her bag and opening the car door with fawning devotion.

Lauren regarded Cindy with disdain—a distant, impoverished relative who'd wormed her way into Rebecca's circle, incapable of anything worthwhile.

How could her parents have raised such an incompetent?

They soon arrived at Haynes Group.

Lauren, draped in an elegant dark green dress, radiated refined poise.

The young receptionist, flustered by the parade of high-profile visitors today, politely requested Lauren to register.

Cindy snapped instantly, "Do you even know who she is? This is Mrs. Howard! It's an honor for your pathetic little company that she's here, and you dare ask her to sign in?"

The receptionist, freshly rewarded with a raise and fiercely loyal to the company, bristled at the insult. Her tone cooled. "I'm sorry, but per company policy, all unannounced visitors must register," the receptionist said firmly.

It was Gabriela's rule, and she'd uphold it.

Lauren's expression darkened as she reached for the guest log. Her eyes landed on the name of the last visitor: Matthew Howard.

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Her face grew stormier.

Even after all these years, her husband was still pining for that dead woman.

With a frosty demeanor, Lauren signed her name and strode in, her steps regal, like a queen making her entrance.

The secretary escorted Lauren to the lounge and immediately phoned Gabriela. "Miss Haynes, Mrs. Howard is here."

Gabriela remained unruffled. "Got it."

The secretary lowered her voice. "Mrs. Howard seems... hostile. Could she be here to stir trouble for the company?"

Trouble, was it?

A glint of amusement flashed in Gabriela's eyes. "Just serve her two cups of that stale coffee."

The secretary hesitated. "But that batch of coffee beans is nearly expired."

"I'm aware. Proceed," Gabriela said smoothly. "Oh, and unplug the air conditioner."

The secretary broke into a nervous sweat.

Gabriela's audacity—daring to provoke a Howard—was staggering.

But with Wesley's backing, she supposed it didn't matter.

The secretary offered the coffee to Lauren and Cindy, apologizing. "Miss Haynes just stepped out. Addie from GD Fashion Week needed her to finalize next month's show details. She may not be back until evening. Mrs. Howard, perhaps you could return later?"

"I'll wait," Lauren replied.

She wouldn't leave without answers.

The secretary turned to leave but spotted Brenden.

She smiled. "Hello, Mr. Saunders. What brings you here?"

Brenden grinned. "My company's quiet today, so I thought I'd drop by to see Gabriela."

Lately, he'd been worn down. Wesley dragged him into endless projects; Fiona left him bruised or battered.

Only at Gabriela's side did he find peace—easy on the eyes, free of trouble.

The secretary moved to fetch him water, but Brenden grabbed the coffeepot. "I'll take this. No need to fuss over me."

She watched, uneasy, as he took the pot, unable to intervene.

Brenden poured himself a cup and only then noticed the others in the lounge.

“Mrs. Howard?” he said, surprised. “You’re here for Gabriela too?”

Lauren’s brow creased. She held Brenden in low regard.

With divorced parents and shunned by both the Moss and Saunders families, he clung to a mere manager role under Wesley’s wing, with no real prospects. Without Wesley’s protection, he’d be nothing in their circles.

To her, he was just another idle hanger-on.

She gave a cold nod and closed her eyes, dismissing further conversation.

Unfazed by her aloofness, Brenden didn’t press.

He texted Gabriela, then settled in, scrolling on his phone while sipping the coffee.

The lounge, facing west, grew stifling as the afternoon sun blazed.

Lauren, unaccustomed to discomfort, felt her dress cling to her sweat-dampened skin.

Luxury had long insulated her from any form of discomfort.

Cindy, ever attentive, confronted the secretary. "What's going on? It's swelteringly unbearable, and the air conditioning's off?"

The secretary explained quickly, "I'm so sorry. Earlier, a Mr. Howard arranged an air conditioner installation, which triggered a company-wide blackout. The lounge's unit was damaged in the process..."

Cindy's temper flared.

They couldn't even replace a broken air conditioner?

"You let guests roast in this heat?" she demanded.

The secretary hesitated, then reluctantly offered her cherished personal fan to the lounge.

Lauren's expression soured at the sight of the fan.

In their elite circle, appearances were paramount—perfectly styled hair a must.

That fan's gusts would ruin her look.

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Lauren, drenched in sweat, could no longer maintain her composure. With a stern expression, she ordered the secretary to plug in the fan.

The fan whirred to life, its breeze cutting through the stifling heat.

But its force was relentless—within ten minutes, Lauren's meticulously styled hair was a tangled mess.

Her polished image crumbled, and her face darkened with every passing second.

Cindy, seizing the moment, confronted the secretary. "When is Gabriela getting back? Who does she think she is, making Mrs. Howard wait like this?"

The secretary offered another apology to diffuse the tension.

Brenden, taking pity on the flustered secretary, spoke up. “Gabriela’s tied up with something unavoidable. Why take it out on her? Just have some coffee and cool off.”

With that, he took a sip of coffee.

Though initially dismissive of the coffee, Lauren’s thirst now compelled her to lift the cup to her lips.

Mid-sip, her stomach churned ominously, signaling an urgent need for the restroom.

With a grim expression, she rose to head there.

Brenden, clutching his own stomach, suddenly bolted past her like a whirlwind, nearly knocking her over.

Lauren found him utterly boorish.

Brenden was Wesley’s cousin—how could their poise, demeanor, and competence be so starkly different?

Reaching the restroom, Lauren discovered two stalls out of service, forcing her to wait for the third.

Cindy, who'd drunk even more coffee, began squirming uncomfortably.

But the occupied stall remained stubbornly silent, its occupant showing no sign of emerging even after ten minutes.

Lauren's stomach pain surged, pushing her to the brink.

Her face darkened to a terrifying shade.

Unable to bear it any longer, she staggered out and snapped at the secretary. "Is it normal for your company to let someone hog a restroom this long without doing anything?"

The secretary murmured apologies again.

Brenden emerged from the restroom, looking refreshed and unburdened.

Noticing Lauren's contorted expression, he inquired, "Mrs. Howard, still waiting? How are you holding up? The men's room has an open stall right now."

Lauren, a woman of refinement and stature, had never heard such an outrageous suggestion.

Her face blanched with fury as she shot him a withering glare, ignoring him entirely.

Brenden shrugged, muttering, "Must be a rough day. Fine, hold it in if you won't use the men's room."

Teetering on the edge of a breakdown, Lauren had no time for his nonsense. She coldly instructed the secretary to find a solution.

The secretary then led Lauren and Cindy to the sixth floor to use another company's restroom.

The receptionist, from a firm friendly with Haynes Group, guided them in politely but with a scrutinizing glance. "We're busy today with distinguished guests. Don't linger, and make sure to flush properly."

Her thinly veiled disdain was palpable.

Lauren, unaccustomed to such indignity, seethed.

As she entered the restroom, she nearly collided with a woman.

The woman was none other than Ena Evans, a frequent business associate of the Howards, who blinked in surprise. "Mrs. Howard? What brings you here?"

Before Lauren could answer, the secretary interjected awkwardly, “Mrs. Howard needed to use the restroom, but ours is under maintenance, so we came here.”

Ena nodded.

Lauren’s stomach pain was unbearable, and she hurried into a stall.

Cindy darted into another, equally desperate.

Elsewhere, Kaleb sought out Gabriela. He had heard about her instructions to the secretary regarding Lauren, and his voice was full of concern as he spoke. “Gabriela, what if those near-expired coffee beans make someone sick?”

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Gabriela smiled lightly. “It won’t. I drank it myself this morning—it just upset my stomach a little.”

After the coffee she’d had earlier, she felt a brief rumble, then was fine.

That was why she’d confidently had it served to Lauren and Cindy.

The perfectly timed restroom maintenance presented an opportunity she couldn’t ignore—a chance to teach them a lesson.

Haynes Group could be small, but it wasn't to be trifled with.

Lauren, humiliated beyond measure, left for home right after the restroom ordeal.

Her anger smoldered, unquenched.

Cindy said angrily, "Aunt Lauren, you, Brenden, and I all drank that coffee and got sick. Something's wrong with it."

Lauren knew it, but that wasn't what upset her the most.

It was the mortifying restroom fiasco.

Ena, notorious for gossip, was surely broadcasting her restroom ordeal by now.

For Lauren, who was accustomed to dignity and supremacy, such a crude embarrassment was unbearable.

Lauren beckoned Cindy closer, whispering sharp instructions.

Cindy, gleeful, assured her, "Leave it to me. I'll handle it flawlessly."

She was a master at spreading rumors, a skill she wielded with particular zeal against Gabriela.

Whispers soon swept through Okburg's elite circles: Gabriela had shamelessly seduced Matthew and become his mistress.

They even reached Wesley.

He didn't believe Gabriela would do such a thing.

Yet Matthew's frequent visits to her home and company, laden with gifts, raised questions.

Wesley tasked Billy with digging deeper. "Find out Matthew's motives, quickly."

"Yes, sir," Billy replied.

While the rumors swirled, no one dared gossip in Matthew's presence. He remained oblivious.

The next afternoon, he appeared outside Rosemont Gardens, eagerly trailing Gabriela into her villa the moment she appeared.

In the living room, Truett's joyful laughter rang out.

Spotting his mother, he stretched out his arms for a hug.

Gabriela scooped him up, planting a kiss on his cheek as he nuzzled into her, giggling affectionately.

Matthew watched, consumed with envy.

He approached her. "Gabriela, may I hold him for a bit?"

Farley interjected sharply, "No!"

The last time Matthew touched Truett's head, the boy wailed for over an hour.

Farley wasn't risking it again.

He quickly gathered Truett into his arms. "Gabriela, why don't you keep Mr. Howard company? I'll take Truett for his bath."

Truett, nestled against Farley, chuckled.

Farley teased him, "Sweetheart, I'm taking you for a bath! Are you looking forward to it?"

Truett clapped his hands with delight.

Matthew's eyes lingered, brimming with longing.

This was his grandson, yet he hadn't held him even once.

What did Farley think he was, bonding so closely with Truett?

He stood, drawn to watch Truett's bath.

"Mr. Howard!" Gabriela called out. "What brings you here? Is there something you need?"

All Matthew wanted was to see how his daughter and grandson were doing.

He smiled softly. "No. I just came to see you."

"If you don't have any specific business, perhaps you should save your valuable time and not visit me," Gabriela said firmly.

She wanted nothing to do with Matthew.

His visits to her company had already stirred enough trouble. That day, Addie from GD Fashion had subtly probed about the rumors, urging her to protect her image.

If the gossip persisted, it could threaten her partnership with them.

Gabriela knew Matthew meant no harm, but for her company's sake, she had to set boundaries today.

Matthew paused, his tone cautious. "Gabriela, have I caused you any trouble?"

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Confusion clouded Gabriela's features. "Mr. Howard, what exactly are you after?"

She was nothing more than a modest business owner. What could she possibly have that would capture the attention of someone like Matthew, who had wealth and influence?

Her blunt question crushed Matthew's delicate hopes, sending them spiraling into darkness.

He had been an absent father for more than twenty years, missing the entirety of Gabriela's upbringing.

She had blossomed into a formidable, self-reliant woman. Even if she discovered his true identity as her biological father, she would likely reject any gesture of reparation he might offer.

The words lodged themselves deep in his throat.

Matthew's voice softened as he tried again. "Gabriela, something draws me to you. I'd like to look after you the way I would my own daughter. Would you let me?"

"I want no part of it." Gabriela's gaze remained steady. "Mr. Howard, please go."

Matthew already had a daughter of his own, so what reason could he have for treating her like family?

Gabriela viewed unexpected kindness with suspicion.

Farley and Kaleb showed her warmth because of their close ties to her mother.

Tyler cared for her because their friendship had deep roots.

But Matthew? He was Rebecca's father. What possible motivation could drive him to show her any consideration?

Gabriela walked Matthew to the door with quiet politeness, requesting that he not return.

Pain flickered through Matthew's chest, and his eyes grew damp.

Evening had settled around them, and the shadows concealed his expression from Gabriela's view. She disappeared inside without a backward glance.

Though Gabriela maintained her distance from Matthew, whispers about his repeated visits to her home and office traveled swiftly through the city.

Lauren's machinations ensured the gossip reached Beverley Howard, Matthew's formidable mother.

Beverley had once ruled the business world with an iron will, commanding respect from every corner of the industry.

Three decades earlier, the Howard family hadn't even ranked among Okburg's most powerful dynasties. Beverley's relentless ambition had single-handedly transformed their modest enterprise into an empire.

Though retirement had drawn her toward spiritual pursuits, her influence remained absolute. Even Roger from the prestigious Moss family approached her with careful deference.

Beverley sat in silence as Alberto Begum, her trusted butler, delivered his report.

"Mr. Howard's frequent contact with Gabriela has become the subject of considerable speculation."

Beverley's expression betrayed nothing—neither pleasure nor displeasure crossed her weathered features.

She understood her son's nature perfectly; he typically remained aloof and detached, maintaining cool distance even from his own wife.

Yet now he was extending care to some unknown young woman—a suspicious shift in his behavior.

"Bring her to me," she commanded.

She intended to discover what manner of enchantress could bewitch Matthew so completely.

The day had overwhelmed Gabriela with obligations.

After completing her final meeting, she clutched the documents for GD Fashion when an elderly gentleman intercepted her at the company's entrance.

"Hello, I am Alberto Begum," he announced with practiced courtesy. "Miss Haynes, Mrs. Beverley Howard requests your presence."

Gabriela drew a measured breath.

She grasped the situation's implications immediately. The rumors had climbed their way to Matthew's mother, and she was in trouble.

Nevertheless, Gabriela trusted in her own integrity and passed the documents to Kaleb. "Uncle Kaleb, would you mind overseeing the project for me?"

Kaleb studied Alberto for a moment, then whispered, "If anything feels wrong, contact me right away."

Gabriela acknowledged his warning before accompanying Alberto.

During the drive, Alberto studied Gabriela with discreet curiosity.

Even Jasper approached Beverley with profound reverence.

Gabriela, however, appeared to regard this summons as merely another social obligation. Either she possessed remarkable courage, or innocence had left her ignorant of Beverley's fearsome reputation.

They soon reached Beverley's estate.

Her residence exuded tranquility, resembling a carefully tended sanctuary.

Alberto escorted Gabriela inside, where she found Beverley positioned beside a serene pond.

The woman appeared to be in her seventies, her silver hair catching the light as she wore comfortable exercise clothes.

Her expression remained neutral, yet an unmistakable aura of command radiated from her presence, compelling instinctive respect from anyone who encountered her.

Alberto said quietly, "Madam, Gabriela has arrived."

Beverley nodded at him without bothering to glance at Gabriela.

Gabriela offered her greetings, receiving only a faint response before Beverley settled back and closed her eyes.

Gabriela felt no irritation; she stood quietly nearby, even finding time to admire the developing lotus buds decorating the pond. Once those flowers opened, this spot would become perfect for morning coffee and peaceful contemplation.

Wealthy individuals certainly mastered the art of gracious living.

Nearly an hour passed before Beverley opened her eyes and spoke softly. "Take a seat."

Gabriela took her place across from Beverley.

Beverley's elevated position created an intimidating atmosphere as she examined Gabriela with cold calculation. At first glance, Gabriela appeared to be an attractive young woman, nothing more.

"I learned you've recently received numerous gifts from Matthew." Beverley smirked.

Gabriela immediately denied it. "Mrs. Howard, your son did send me various items, but I refused them all. What I accepted was the compensation he offered for Rebecca's wrongdoings!"

Alberto's expression darkened with disapproval.

How dare this woman speak to Beverley with such boldness?

Beverley apparently considered direct conversation with Gabriela beneath her dignity.

She gestured toward Alberto. "Remove her."

Gabriela followed Alberto calmly as he guided her toward the kitchen. "Miss Haynes, Mrs. Howard will be keeping you for the evening meal."

"I see." Gabriela nodded with understanding.

Alberto continued with his explanation, "As a first-time visitor to Mrs. Howard's residence, you'll be expected to contribute to certain preparations."

Gabriela had no desire to remain for dinner.

Yet she recognized that failing to appease Beverley today would weave complications into tomorrow's fabric, entangling both herself and her company in unwanted difficulties.

Beverley radiated a more formidable presence than Lauren or Rebecca.

Gabriela sighed. "Very well."

Witnessing Gabriela's compliance, Alberto summoned servants who delivered an enormous basin brimming with lotus roots. Thick mud caked the roots, creating a miniature mountain of earthy debris.

Alberto instructed, "Miss Haynes, these lotus roots require thorough cleansing. Additionally, some roots harbor mud within their chambers, so complete purification is essential."

Gabriela inclined her head. "Consider it done."

She had anticipated some herculean challenge, yet this task was a piece of cake for her.

Gabriela pushed her sleeves beyond her elbows and attacked the muddy coating with swift efficiency, scrubbing each root until it gleamed. Then she sliced them open, examining every hollow for hidden dirt.

Two hours dissolved as she rendered the entire collection spotless.

Alberto observed with genuine astonishment.

Even four seasoned servants working in harmony might struggle to achieve such pristine results within the same timeframe.

This young woman possessed unexpected capabilities.

Alberto then produced a basin overflowing with edamame, his tone maintaining its courteous cadence. "Miss Haynes, if you would be so kind as to shell these."

Gabriela's fingers danced through the pods with practiced grace.

Finally, Alberto delivered his ultimate test. "Miss Haynes, our chef finds himself indisposed today, so preparing Mrs. Howard's dinner falls to you."

He proceeded to recite the evening's requirements. Thirteen distinct dishes accompanied by soup and an appetizer awaited creation.

Gabriela absorbed each detail with focused attention, inquired about Beverley's culinary preferences, then embarked upon her cooking odyssey.

Though thirteen courses suggested overwhelming complexity, Beverley's kitchen boasted professional-grade equipment.

Gabriela orchestrated her preparation like a conductor, readying ingredients while multiple dishes progressed simultaneously across various burners.

Aromatic soup bubbled contentedly in its designated pot.

Less than two hours later, the complete feast emerged in triumphant completion.

Twilight had painted the sky in dusky hues, creating perfect ambiance for the evening meal.

Beverley had monitored Alberto's progress reports throughout the afternoon, gradually becoming aware of Gabriela's remarkable competence. Something shifted within her weathered heart.

When she approached the dining table, the spectacular array of perfectly presented dishes released their intoxicating fragrances, and her stern features softened almost imperceptibly.

She selected a delicate slice of the stir-fried lotus root.

Paper-thin yet maintaining its satisfying crunch, the morsel delivered unexpected sweetness that danced across her palate.

Beverley sampled additional offerings, discovering each preparation exceeded her expectations.

The family's professional chef paled in comparison to Gabriela's culinary mastery.

Beverley found herself savoring each successive bite with growing appreciation.

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Alberto watched from the sidelines, his eyes wide with stunned disbelief.

Beverley had always favored simple dishes and hadn't shown such ravenous hunger in years.

Her features softened with each bite, and the sharp disapproval she'd harbored toward Gabriela began melting away.

Against all odds, this unexpected young woman had stumbled upon the secret to winning Beverley's approval through nothing more than her cooking prowess.

Watching Beverley savor every morsel, Gabriela settled into her own meal without hesitation.

The flavors struck her as unremarkable—decidedly lacking compared to the elaborate dishes she'd prepared for Wesley in the past.

Beverley devoured every last bite with evident satisfaction before reluctantly placing her silverware aside.

"The flavors are quite pleasant," she admitted with studied nonchalance, then fixed Gabriela with a penetrating stare.

Under closer scrutiny, Beverley discovered the woman possessed extraordinarily striking eyes—innocent yet mysteriously captivating.

Gabriela's eyes reminded Beverley of Matthew, whose gaze could convey profound tenderness to anyone who caught his attention.

Those same mesmerizing eyes had once ensnared Lauren decades ago, when she had threatened to destroy the Howard family's business empire unless they agreed to her marrying Matthew.

Beverley's memory drifted back to Matthew's fierce demands for divorce over twenty years ago, when he'd refused all sustenance to demonstrate his unwavering determination.

Yet something had shifted inexplicably—he abandoned his divorce plans entirely, never uttering another word about separation.

From that moment forward, he withdrew completely, even surrendering control of the family enterprise to Jasper.

Matthew and Lauren had maintained polished civility ever since, their relationship appearing mended to outsiders while an arctic chill persisted between them.

Now Matthew displayed such devoted attention toward a young woman...

A disturbing possibility crept into Beverley's thoughts. Her complexion drained of color as she drew a shaky breath and slumped against her chair.

Gabriela leaned forward with genuine concern. "Mrs. Howard, what's troubling you?"

Beverley dismissed her worry with a wave, preparing to probe deeper into Gabriela's family history.

Before she could voice her questions, a servant burst through the doorway. "Mrs. Howard, Mr. Wesley Moss has arrived."

Beverley's eyebrows shot upward in surprise.

Wesley had avoided visiting even after his engagement announcement to Rebecca.

Why did Gabriela's presence compel him to rush here?

Beverley directed Alberto to escort him inside.

Wesley's attention locked onto Gabriela the instant he entered, his keen gaze searching for any traces of distress or harm.

Finding her unharmed brought visible relief to his shoulders before he turned to offer Beverley a respectful greeting.

Beverley's demeanor toward Wesley radiated considerably more warmth. "Wesley, what unexpected pleasure brings you to my doorstep today?"

Wesley gestured for Billy to present an elegantly wrapped gift box to Alberto, his expression carrying deep reverence. "I should have paid my respects following my engagement announcement to Rebecca."

After exchanging the customary pleasantries, Wesley addressed Beverley with sincerity, saying, "Gabriela served as my personal assistant for some time. We've weathered various challenges together. If her words crossed any boundaries or caused offense during today's visit, please accept my sincere apologies on her behalf."

A sharp pang of irritation pierced Beverley's composure.

Wesley was Rebecca's fiancé, yet now he stood as Gabriela's protector.

This development reeked of impropriety.

Furthermore, whispered rumors suggested Gabriela maintained intimate connections with the Williams Group's powerful CEO.

However, lacking concrete evidence, Beverley swallowed her growing displeasure and forced a brittle smile. "Wesley, your concerns are unnecessary. Her culinary talents impressed me greatly. I may extend frequent invitations for her to prepare meals."

Wesley studied Beverley's expression carefully, unable to determine whether her words conveyed genuine appreciation or veiled intimidation.

He responded with calculated diplomacy, "I've also grown quite fond of Gabriela's cooking. I'd be honored to join these gatherings if you'd welcome my presence."

Beverley's head bobbed in agreement, her smile never wavering. "Naturally, you're always welcome."

After a brief additional conversation with Beverley, Wesley departed with Gabriela in tow.

Observing Gabriela trail behind Wesley, Beverley's pleasant facade cracked into a scowl.

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"Launch a comprehensive investigation into Gabriela's background," she commanded.

Alberto nodded in acknowledgment. "Consider it done."

Outside the estate, Gabriela slipped into Wesley's waiting vehicle.

She found him reclined against the seat with closed eyes, apparently resting, but couldn't contain her burning curiosity.

"Wesley, did you travel here because of me?"

Wesley maintained his silence, feigning sleep.

Gabriela grasped his arm insistently. "Wesley, I'm speaking to you. Why do you invest such care in my welfare?"

Wesley's eyes finally fluttered open.

Gabriela glimpsed what appeared to be profound exhaustion flickering in their depths before it vanished.

He replied coldly, "My grandmother requested that I watch over you. She'd be upset if harm befell you."

Loretta knew about her visit to Beverley's residence?

Gabriela prepared to voice her doubts when Wesley continued, "Moving forward, cease antagonizing the Howard family."

She rushed to defend herself. "I didn't. Beverley was the one who..."

Wesley cut through her explanation with a sharp warning. "Do not speak negatively about Rebecca in Mrs. Howard's presence."

Gabriela stared at him in stunned disbelief.

Was Wesley's desperate need to protect Rebecca's reputation the reason he had come to take her away?

Fury ignited in Gabriela's chest, turning her eyes crimson as she slammed the car door with violent force. "Unlock this door immediately—I'm getting out!"

Billy remained paralyzed in his seat, afraid to comply, instead gunning the engine to speed their return to Rosemont Gardens.

Wesley observed her outburst with complete emotional detachment. "You're free to exit now."

Gabriela drew in a shuddering breath, her chest tight with familiar anguish.

She understood she shouldn't nurture hope, yet why did disappointment slice through her with such relentless precision?

Perhaps it was the look of authentic concern on his face when he'd rushed to her side.

But his care proved illusory, while his terror of her criticizing Rebecca burned real and fierce.

Gabriela wrenched the car door open and fled into the night.

Billy released a weary sigh into the silence. "Mr. Moss, your feelings for her are unmistakable..."

“Drive,” Wesley commanded with arctic finality, his eyes sliding shut to signal the conversation’s brutal end.

Gabriela barricaded herself in her bedroom, tears streaming until exhaustion claimed her, interrupted only when Farley appeared cradling Truett.

The baby had graduated from nursing, now clutching his bottle with determined little fists while studying Gabriela with solemn curiosity.

Gabriela scrubbed away her tears and gathered him against her heart.

Farley’s voice carried gentle concern. “Gabriela, did Mrs. Howard torment you today?”

Kaleb had already briefed Farley about Alberto’s aggressive attempt to intercept her at the company.

“She merely requested a meal,” Gabriela murmured, tickling Truett’s chin. “My cooking appeared to satisfy her completely.”

Relief flooded Farley’s features as Gabriela continued, “I’ll tend to Truett tonight, Farley. You deserve rest.”

Farley nodded gratefully and disappeared downstairs.

Truett drained his bottle before launching into an enthusiastic crawling expedition across the bed's expanse.

The determined child had recently mastered locomotion, propelling himself with infectious energy from corner to corner.

Terror gripped Gabriela at the prospect of him tumbling to the floor, so she captured him in her protective embrace, just as his voice rang out with crystal clarity.

"Daddy!"

His declaration bloomed into an angelic smile directed straight at her.

Fresh tears scalded Gabriela's cheeks as fury erupted from her wounded soul. "Your daddy is a terrible man!"

Yet her son seemed determined to torment her further, chanting his mantra with gleeful persistence. "Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!"

Gabriela teetered on the precipice of madness.

But as her frustration reached its crescendo, unexpected laughter bubbled up from her depths.

Very well—her son was perfection incarnate, and if calling for his father brought him joy, she would endure it.

As for that father, he could vanish into the void where he belonged.

She sealed a sacred vow within her battered heart: never again would she shed tears over Wesley.