

His kiss 621

Chapter 621

Gabriela rose before dawn the next morning, her mind already racing with plans.

Today wasn't just another day.

It was Farley's sixty-first birthday, and she intended to make it unforgettable.

She spent the early morning shopping for fresh ingredients with Ken, and as they moved from stall to stall, she called Tessa and Tyler, asking them to join the birthday dinner that evening.

Later, she stopped at Apex Treasures, Okburg's most renowned jewelry store.

A month ago, she'd placed a special order: a custom wristwatch, designed just for Farley.

He had given his whole life to the Haynes family, never marrying or having children of his own.

To Gabriela, he'd always been more than just a caretaker; he was family.

Now that she was earning well, with Lakeshore Building under her name, she decided to honor him properly.

Frugal as he was, he would never buy such a thing for himself. She had spent three million on the gift without hesitation.

The clerk handed her the velvet box with practiced care.

Gabriela lifted the lid, and her eyes lit up at the sight.

The watch was breathtaking. Its polished lines and refined craftsmanship radiated elegance.

There was no denying the allure of something so fine.

Farley would surely appreciate it.

Gabriela was studying the wristwatch intently when a sharp voice cut in behind her. "Hey! Let me see that watch you're holding."

She turned and found herself face-to-face with Cindy.

Cindy had been combing the store for a suitable birthday gift for Matthew. She wanted something that would impress him, but her budget left her stranded.

After all, too cheap would look careless, and too costly was out of reach.

Then her eyes landed on the watch in Gabriela's hands.

The moment she recognized Gabriela, resentment filled her eyes.

Her life had been in a downward spiral ever since Gabriela marched a hundred homeless people to Jasper's doorstep. At home, her parents scolded her; outside, Rebecca hounded her mercilessly.

She was trapped, humiliated, and now, seeing Gabriela drove her mad with rage.

"Gabriela," Cindy sneered, "what are you even doing here?"

Gabriela barely glanced at her. She passed the watch back to the clerk with calm finality. "Wrap it up, please."

"Don't wrap it for her!" Cindy barked, malice sparking in her eyes as Gabriela calmly ignored her. "I want that watch! Wrap it for me instead!"

The clerk's professionalism didn't waver. "Miss Howard, this watch was custom-made for Miss Haynes, who entrusted it to us half a month ago."

She motioned toward another case. "These are also excellent pieces at a similar price."

Cindy's mouth twisted into a sneer. "I don't want those. I want that one."

Nothing else would satisfy her, not when this piece was custom-made.

Gabriela, in no rush and amused by the scene, folded her arms and leaned back. She had time before the party, and she wanted to see what Cindy was up to this time.

The clerk tried again, more firmly this time. "I'm afraid that isn't possible. Miss Haynes commissioned this piece and placed a deposit."

Cindy's tone sharpened. "Do you have any idea who I'm buying this for? Rebecca's father. And you're just a clerk! So follow instructions."

Then she turned her scorn on Gabriela. "How much did she put down? Refund it and sell it to me."

The clerk froze, torn.

Store policy forbade it, but Rebecca was one of the store's top VIPs, granted priority rights on any purchase.

Crossing her could easily cost the clerk her job.

Gabriela finally spoke, her voice calm but edged with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Cindy, are you really sure you want to play this game?"

Her smile rattled Cindy. She remembered all too well how Gabriela's little maneuvers had backed her into corners before. A ripple of unease slipped through her bravado.

Chapter 622

But she had already staked her claim, and backing down now would mean humiliation—enough to keep her from ever showing her face in this store again.

Cindy sneered. "Gabriela, just do as I ask. Beverley already has her eye on you. One wrong move, and your little company could go bankrupt overnight."

Gabriela shot back, "Then by all means, call her right now."

The defiance made Cindy falter.

Unable to match Gabriela head-on, she turned her fire on the clerk. "If you dare sell that watch to her, I'll have Rebecca here within the hour."

The clerk stiffened. The Howard family's influence was daunting, but she also couldn't simply override a paid deposit. She was trapped.

Watching the back-and-forth, Gabriela suddenly felt a wave of exhaustion.

She was just one small figure, powerless to push back against those influential people and forced to comply with their demands.

Cindy noticed the hint of resentment in her eyes and felt uneasy. She was groping for a way to retreat gracefully when, out of the corner of her eye, she caught a familiar figure.

It was none other than Wesley.

He entered with Billy close behind, both tall and imposing, carrying an air of authority that seemed to shift the very atmosphere of the store.

Rumor had it Apex Treasures belonged to Wesley.

Seizing the chance, Cindy rushed toward them, her voice rising eagerly.

The sound grated.

Wesley stopped, displeasure flickering across his face, and turned.

“Wesley, are you here for an inspection?” Cindy asked sweetly, her tone dripping with flattery. “Why isn’t Rebecca with you?”

Wesley didn’t bother answering. His gaze swept the store and landed squarely on Gabriela.

Gabriela, remembering his threat from the day before, turned her head away with a huff, refusing to meet his eyes.

Cindy caught this and smirked to herself.

“Wesley,” she chimed in quickly, “Matthew’s birthday is coming up, and I’m here to buy him a gift.”

Wesley gave a nonchalant nod.

"I thought this wristwatch was perfect," Cindy continued, her voice turning dramatic, "but Gabriela refused to let me have it."

Wesley glanced at Gabriela again.

Her cheeks were puffed in indignation, and for some reason, the sight amused him. The corners of his lips lifted with the faintest smile. Strange how simply looking at her lightened his mood.

Noticing the softness in his expression, Cindy grew bolder. "Wesley, please tell the clerk to wrap up the watch for me. I don't understand why someone as poor as Gabriela is even allowed into this store! This piece costs millions! Do they honestly think she can afford it? She probably wrung money out of Matthew and is using it to butter him up, hoping to squeeze even more from him."

In Cindy's mind, there was no other explanation. Who else could Gabriela possibly be buying such a lavish gift for, if not Matthew?

After speaking to Wesley, Cindy sneered at Gabriela. "Cheap bitch!"

Wesley's expression darkened, a flash of disgust crossing his face.

Billy stepped forward immediately, his tone calm but commanding. "Since this was reserved by Miss Haynes, please ensure it is elegantly packaged."

The clerk exhaled in quiet relief and hurried to wrap the watch.

Cindy, expecting Wesley to lash out at Gabriela, blinked in shock at Billy's intervention.

She shot him a venomous glare. "I said I want this watch. Are you deaf?"

Billy turned to her, his gaze colder and more cutting than Wesley's, almost radiating disdain. "Miss Howard, every store has its own rules. If you refuse to follow them, then perhaps you should just leave."

He addressed the other clerks next. "Take note: Apex Treasures will not welcome such customers in the future."

The staff responded promptly, bowing their heads in agreement. "Understood!"

Billy's words stung.

Cindy's face flushed crimson with humiliation.

In the end, she was kicked out of the store.

Chapter 623

Cindy had banked on Wesley's support, given Rebecca's ties to him.

But instead of siding with her against Gabriela, he had her escorted out.

Evidently, Rebecca's sway over Wesley wasn't as strong as she'd claimed.

Cindy didn't dare challenge Wesley, so she swallowed her resentment and sought out Beverley to vent.

She was convinced that if Beverley knew Gabriela was splurging Matthew's money, Beverley would be livid and take action.

After Cindy had been ushered out, Gabriela brushed it off, paid for her purchase, and prepared to leave with the gift.

A store clerk hurried after her, bowing respectfully as she offered a card. "Miss Haynes, this is our VIP card."

It granted priority purchasing and a twenty percent discount on all items.

"We hope to see you again," the clerk added.

Gabriela accepted the card and stepped outside, only to spot Wesley waiting.

His presence sparked her irritation, and she moved to brush past him.

But Wesley stepped forward. “Gabriela, is that gift for Matthew?”

“None of your business!” she snapped, brandishing the receipt. “I paid for it, Mr. Moss. You’ve no right to pry.”

“Don’t be so defensive,” Wesley said, a trace of exasperation in his eyes. “I’m just looking out for you. Matthew’s not as harmless as he seems—be careful.”

Gabriela let out a sharp, mocking laugh. “Does Rebecca know you’re slandering her father behind her back?”

Rather than bristle at her biting tone, Wesley’s lips curved into a faint smile.

Her jealous spark was oddly endearing.

Seeing his amusement, Gabriela huffed and stormed off.

Wesley watched her go, his expression shifting from fond to grave.

That fiery, stubborn woman—if he wasn't around in the future, who would shield her?

As Cindy rushed to Beverley, Matthew had already arrived at his mother's residence.

"Mom, did you meet with Gabriela yesterday?" he asked.

Beverley toyed absently with her bracelet. "What, worried I'll make trouble for her?"

"Mom, Rebecca was in the wrong," Matthew said. "Gabriela's done nothing. Please don't target her."

Beverley's face hardened. "Rebecca may have faults, but she's a Howard, and family honor comes first. Any discipline should stay private. With our status, a nobody like Gabriela shouldn't act so boldly. Matthew, as a Howard, you must watch your actions. Keep your distance from her to avoid gossip."

"Mom," Matthew cut in, voice tight with urgency. "You don't understand. Gabriela's my daughter—it's only right I treat her well!"

Beverley froze, her eyes widening as she stared at him.

She'd just ordered the butler to investigate Gabriela, with no results yet, and now her son was confessing everything.

"Gabriela's a Howard?" she asked. "You're certain?"

"Yes," Matthew affirmed, his nod resolute. "She's my daughter."

Beverley sank back in her chair, reeling, her mind flashing to Gabriela's eyes—so like Matthew's.

So she was her granddaughter.

No wonder she couldn't dislike Gabriela yesterday, despite everything.

After a heavy pause, Beverley sighed deeply. "Matthew, it's been over twenty years. Focus on a peaceful life now."

Chapter 624

Matthew blinked, caught off guard. "You don't support me in telling her the truth?"

“Alanna’s been gone for years; you can’t bring her back,” Beverley said. “Rebecca’s grown. How’s she supposed to accept a half-sister out of nowhere? And Lauren—her temper will cause a storm. That kind of drama is best avoided.”

“Mom, you don’t know the half of it!” Matthew’s voice rose. “When the Howard Group was faltering and one of our major projects collapsed, Lauren forced me into marriage.”

He’d never wanted Lauren and rejected her outright. But her family, the McCoys, retaliated, rallying other firms against the Howard Group.

Refusing her would’ve meant bankruptcy for the company.

“Mom, I’ve never loved Lauren!” he said. “Did you know the McCoys sabotaged the Hopolis project behind the scenes?”

Beverley’s hand trembled, stunned by his outburst.

Thirty years ago, the Howards were a shadow of their current power, dwarfed by the McCoys.

Lauren, smitten with Matthew at a banquet, insisted on marrying him. He refused.

Spoiled and determined, Lauren wept until her father gave in to her demands, then covertly undermined the Howard Group.

Eventually, she got her way, marrying Matthew.

Later, as Matthew took the reins of the company, he uncovered the truth: the Hopolis project's failure, blamed on shoddy materials and splashed across headlines, was the McCoys' doing.

Learning this, Matthew's disillusionment with Lauren deepened, erasing any lingering guilt.

As he prepared to confront the McCoys, a car accident derailed him, and he met Alanna.

"For the family's sake, for the greater good, I sacrificed my happiness," Matthew said, tears brimming.

His dilemma had been brutal: marry Lauren or watch the McCoys crush his family.

He chose to save his family, but the cost was his own peace.

"Later, I was in a car accident—and it was Gabriela's mother who saved me," Matthew went on.

He recounted vanishing for over a year after the accident, his memory shattered by a brain injury.

Alanna nursed him, and he fell deeply in love.

They were soon together, and she became pregnant.

When his memory returned, Matthew went home to push for a divorce, ready to walk away with nothing to end it quickly.

But Lauren refused, sparking chaos, while the McCoys again threatened the Howard Group's business.

Matthew stood firm, fasting for two days and nights to prove his resolve.

Beverley, hearing this for the first time, was shaken. "You fasted to protect Alanna, keeping her name out of it?"

"Yes," he said. "But I failed her. Days after I filed for divorce, she came to me, saying she wouldn't be with a married man. She told me she'd ended the pregnancy and vanished."

His throat tightened with each word. "Soon after, word of Alanna's death spread. I even attended her funeral."

Beverley leaned forward. "She died, yet Gabriela exists?"

“Alanna lied to me,” Matthew said. “She didn’t die. Her relatives staged a fake funeral. She gave birth to Gabriela in secret and raised her alone.”

Chapter 625

Beverley had long understood that her son held no affection for Lauren, but she had never grasped the depth of the silent struggles he had faced.

Normally composed and calm, Beverley found herself speechless with shock in that moment.

After confessing what had transpired between him and Alanna, Matthew began sharing stories about Gabriela.

“When Gabriela was eight, Alanna passed away from cancer, leaving her alone. From childhood, her uncle’s family treated her poorly, yet she never grew resentful. She matured into an exceptional and talented woman, earning a spot at a prestigious university with outstanding grades. With a compassionate and optimistic spirit, she embraces each day with warmth and strength. Mom, Gabriela is my daughter, and I’ve been an absent father for more than two decades. Isn’t it time we made it up to her?”

Beverley had always felt guilty toward her son.

Back then, she had sacrificed his happiness to save the family business from collapse. She had bartered his marriage for financial gain.

Now, hearing his words, she let out a soft sigh and gently asked, “So, what’s your plan? Are you going to bring Gabriela back and share the truth?”

Given Lauren’s bad temper, she would surely cause a commotion. Even if Gabriela joined the Howard family, living under Lauren’s dominance would be utterly miserable.

“Gabriela holds a grudge against our family,” Matthew said, his voice heavy with sorrow and a hint of pleading. “Even if I tell her the truth, she may not be willing to come back. Mom, I only ask that you stop making things hard for her.”

Beverley sighed lightly and nodded. “I’m old now, and I won’t meddle in your matters anymore.”

Matthew suddenly added, “Gabriela has a son. I’ve confirmed with a test—he’s my grandson, your great-grandchild.”

Beverley’s hand shook. “What did you say? I have a great-grandchild?”

“Yes. He’s an adorable, chubby little boy who is already starting to talk,” Matthew said, his eyes softening with a warm smile as he spoke of Truett.

Beverley was delighted, though not entirely approving. “Not married, and yet she has a child? That’s reckless.”

Matthew quickly defended his daughter. “Gabriela must have her reasons. I’ll take you to meet her son another day.”

Beverley nodded. “All right.”

As they spoke, Alberto announced Cindy’s arrival.

Cindy came to vent her grievances. Seeing Matthew there, she hesitated briefly, but her humiliation from earlier that day clouded her judgment.

She embellished the story of her encounter at the jewelry store, painting Gabriela as an arrogant, flashy upstart.

Matthew’s heart ached hearing Cindy’s words, missing her complaint’s intent and fixating only on the fact that Gabriela’s gift was clearly for someone else, not him—her father.

Noticing Matthew’s crestfallen look, Beverley dismissed Cindy with a cold wave of her hand.

Cindy, misinterpreting Beverley’s stern expression as disapproval of Gabriela, left smugly, anticipating Gabriela’s suffering.

Seeing Matthew's dejection, Beverley sighed. "How about this? Let's go see Gabriela today."

She wondered for whom Gabriela had bought the gift.

Matthew, eager to see his daughter, agreed at once.

When they reached Gabriela's home, dinner was just ready. Gabriela emerged from the kitchen with the final dish.

Chapter 626

As Beverley recalled Gabriela's culinary skill—and, more importantly, her identity as her granddaughter—her stern expression softened.

Gabriela was surprised to see Beverley and Matthew, but since it was Farley's birthday, she kept the mood light and invited them to join the meal.

The villa buzzed with energy.

Tessa, Tyler, Kaleb, Aubrey, and Nina were all there, and Stewart, hearing of Farley's birthday, brought a gift to join the celebration.

Everyone greeted Matthew and Beverley warmly.

While most guests were at ease, Tessa and Aubrey felt a touch of anxiety.

Given Matthew's and Beverley's close ties to Rebecca—their boss's future wife—they grew cautious, taking delicate bites and sitting rigidly.

Tyler, however, was relaxed, heartily enjoying the food and drink.

Sampling Gabriela's home-cooked meal for the first time, Matthew was so moved he nearly wept, envying Farley and Ken, who savored her cooking daily.

Gabriela, oblivious to Matthew's emotions, kept urging Farley to eat more.

Beverley, distracted from the meal, scanned the room subtly, searching for her great-grandchild.

Just then, a clear cry echoed from a nearby room—the little one was awake.

Farley rose instinctively to comfort the child, worried that Truett, now able to crawl, might fall off his bed and hurt himself.

Gabriela quickly intervened. "Farley, you're the star today—stay put. I'll fetch the baby."

She soon returned with Truett, drawing Matthew's and Beverley's gazes instantly.

Fresh from sleep, Truett had whimpered from being alone, his lashes still wet with tears, his tender look tugging at their hearts.

Gabriela prepared a bottle, settled him in a highchair, and handed Farley a gift, saying, "Happy birthday, Farley."

Others followed suit, offering their presents.

Farley graciously received the gifts and began by unwrapping Gabriela's.

Upon lifting the lid, he discovered a costly item inside and gently scolded her for her extravagant spending.

Gabriela chuckled, explaining that the purchase was final and encouraging him to try it on for size.

With a sigh, Farley slipped the elegant wristwatch onto his left wrist.

He genuinely admired its fine craftsmanship.

Nearby, Truett noticed the shiny timepiece and eagerly tugged at Farley's arm, attempting to remove it.

Seeing the boy's fascination, Farley willingly handed the watch to Truett so he could play with it.

Gabriela cautioned gently, "Farley, that's your birthday present. Maybe you should keep it away from the child."

Farley smiled warmly, saying, "Let Truett enjoy it for a bit since he likes it."

Observing their affectionate exchange, Matthew felt a pang of jealousy.

Even Beverley, long accustomed to her lofty status and distant from such family warmth, couldn't help but feel envious.

Without thinking, she murmured, "What an adorable child. May I hold him?"

Gabriela hesitated, her fork poised midair.

While she could easily decline Matthew, it was harder to say no to an older woman.

She gently lifted Truett from his highchair and passed him to Beverley, who eagerly took the soft, well-mannered toddler into her arms.

Truett gazed at the silver-haired woman with wide, curious eyes.

Beverley's heart melted into a warm glow, her eyes softening with an unfamiliar tenderness.

Chapter 627

Truett fidgeted with the wristwatch in his tiny palms, letting out soft, playful coos that made the air lighter.

Beverley picked up a toy from beside her and shook it, trying to coax a laugh, though the smile she forced felt a little awkward.

Truett's wide, luminous eyes followed the toy's movement until, at last, he gave in to temptation, his little hand landing squarely on hers.

The touch melted her heart.

Moments like this were treasures no wealth could buy.

From the side, Matthew's gaze turned wistful, and he found himself aching to cradle Truett as well.

"Mom, let me hold Truett for a while," he asked eagerly.

Although Beverley hesitated, not quite ready to part with the warmth in her arms, she finally passed Truett into his waiting embrace.

Matthew cradled his grandson, his eyes misting until he nearly broke into tears. His throat tightened, leaving him unable to speak.

A hurried tilt of his head concealed the fragility he couldn't bear for Gabriela and the others to see.

Watching him, Beverley's thoughts drifted to his loveless marriage, and a quiet sigh of sympathy escaped her.

After the meal, Gabriela appeared with a three-tiered cake, handing the knife to Farley. Everyone clapped in rhythm as they sang his birthday song.

In the midst of the laughter, Truett suddenly babbled, his tiny voice joining in.

Everyone caught the word. "Farley."

Farley halted in place, his eyes instantly reddening. Overcome, he pulled Truett close and rained kisses across his chubby cheeks. "Truett, you're the sweetest little thing."

Matthew seethed with a sharp pang of jealousy. That was his grandson.

By the time Beverley and Matthew finally headed out, it was already late.

The moment Matthew dropped into the car seat, his restraint shattered. "Mom, I can't keep this secret any longer—I want to tell Gabriela the truth now!"

He ached to hear Gabriela call him Dad, to feel her look at him with the same deep warmth and respect she gave Farley. What he wanted most was to hear Truett say "Grandpa" to him.

Beverley stayed silent at first, letting him spill every ounce of frustration. When his breathing finally steadied, she spoke with calm deliberation.

"Once you reveal everything, there are only two paths. Either Gabriela refuses to acknowledge you and turns away completely... or she accepts you, returns to the Howard family, and then faces constant pressure from Lauren."

She weighed her words carefully, her gaze steady on Matthew. "Which of these outcomes can you live with?"

Matthew sank into silence.

Neither choice sat right with him.

“That’s why you can’t rush this,” she continued softly. “Give Gabriela time to accept us. We’ll take it step by step.”

Her tone was firm but not unkind. “Don’t worry—I’m not saying you shouldn’t acknowledge her. I’m only saying we need to guide her slowly.”

Matthew had been shackled to the marriage arranged between the Howard and McCoy families. Decades of a hollow union had left him suffocated, unable to break free, crushed beneath its weight.

Beverley sighed. “In the future, do whatever your heart tells you. I won’t stand in your way. If you want a divorce, I’ll help you through it. If the McCoy’s dare mess with you again, I’ll make sure they regret it.”

Though age had crept up on Beverley, the weight of her connections and influence remained unshaken.

“Thank you, Mom.” Matthew lifted his gaze, his tone steady and unyielding. “I’ve decided to end Rebecca and Wesley’s engagement.”

Her brows knitted tightly as she pressed. “Why? Do you have some grievance against Wesley?”

For all his arrogance, Wesley was undeniably gifted—rarely had the Howard family encountered someone of his caliber.

Matthew countered with a question of his own. “Have you ever considered who Truett’s real father might be?”

Beverley needed only a heartbeat to grasp his meaning, her composure faltering. “You’re suggesting Wesley and Gabriela...”

Matthew gave a solemn nod. “It’s still only a suspicion, but I’m convinced I’m not mistaken. I’ll arrange for a paternity test at the right time.”

Chapter 628

Beverley’s chest tightened with unease. She cautioned, “Don’t act on mere suspicion by breaking off Wesley’s engagement to Rebecca.”

If Matthew was mistaken, he might regret casting aside a capable son-in-law like Wesley.

“Mom.” Matthew’s voice carried a heavy finality. “Gabriela and Rebecca are sisters. If Rebecca marries Wesley, and one day Truett’s identity is revealed, both the Howard and Moss families will become a public spectacle in Okburg.”

To the Howards, a scandal like that would be intolerable.

Though Beverley said nothing, the crease in her brow showed she was weighing his words carefully.

Matthew pressed further, his tone low but resolute. “And Truett—he’s such a sweet child. You wouldn’t want him to grow up without a father, would you?”

Beverley’s resolve softened; just picturing the sweet-faced baby made her lean instinctively toward Matthew’s side.

After a thoughtful pause, she murmured, “I’ll bring this up with Roger.”

Matthew’s face lit with relief, and his gratitude came out fervent. “Thank you, Mom.”

The past few days, the looming marriage between Wesley and Rebecca had weighed heavily on him, leaving him helpless to prevent it.

Since Beverley was willing to intervene, it marked the best outcome they could hope for.

Meanwhile, Gabriela had no inkling that Matthew and Beverley lingered outside Rosemont Gardens, discussing such a consequential matter.

Inside, the birthday celebration unfolded in full cheer.

The only jarring note came from Farley, who was so touched that he let his emotions spill, his eyes brimming with tears in front of everyone.

Guests lingered late into the night before dispersing, with only Stewart remaining behind.

That evening, he drank heavily, his eyes bold and unrestrained, trailing after Gabriela wherever she moved.

As she tenderly soothed Truett in her arms, Stewart's mind wandered—if they ever had a child together, she would surely be even more tender, even more radiant than she was now.

When she offered Farley such gentle care, Stewart pictured bringing her home. His parents would undoubtedly like her and encourage him to marry her.

Seeing Tyler and the others embrace her as one of their own only deepened his yearning.

Stewart longed to claim that place by her side, to be the family she could rely on.

His heart brimmed with admiration for Gabriela, so luminous and captivating.

Tonight, he resolved, he would finally tell her how he felt.

Stewart lingered by the coffee table, a half-finished glass of wine in his hand.

Every sip he took came with his gaze anchored firmly on Gabriela, unable to look away even for a moment.

Gabriela sensed something wasn't right with Stewart. When the others had all left, she offered softly, "Stewart, it's already late, and you've had quite a lot to drink. Why don't you let Erik drive you home?"

"There's no need." His eyes lingered on her as he tipped back the last of the wine, then shrugged into his suit jacket. "Gabriela, would you mind walking me out?"

Since it was a small courtesy for a guest, she agreed.

Together they made their way to the entrance of Rosemont Gardens.

Gabriela's gaze swept over the sleek luxury car waiting at the curb, and she offered him a polite smile. "I'll head back inside now. Drive safely on your way."

Stewart's voice broke the quiet. "Hold on a second, Gabriela."

His eyes locked onto hers, sharp and unwavering. "There's something I need to tell you."

The intensity in his gaze made her heart jolt; she could already sense what was coming.

She hurried to cut him off, forcing a steady tone. "It's late, and you've had too much to drink. Let's talk about it tomorrow."

As she turned, intent on leaving, his hand shot out.

Fingers closed firmly around her wrist, his grip taut with desperation, as if he feared she would vanish if he let go.

"Gabriela," he said hoarsely, pulling her closer. "I'm in love with you."

The words hung between them, heavy and still, as though the air itself had frozen.

Gabriela couldn't bear to hear Stewart continue.

She understood that once his words filled the space between them, their friendship would shatter beyond repair.

She pivoted to leave, but Stewart's grip tightened around her arm, anchoring her in place with desperate determination.

"Gabriela, from the very first moment I laid eyes on you, you carved yourself into my memory."

Back then, Gabriela had been just a college freshman. Maturity hadn't yet touched her features, leaving her face soft and unmarked by the world's harsh lessons.

To Stewart, she had seemed fragile as spun glass.

Yet her hands possessed magic. The deep-sea city model she had crafted from nothing but imagination and skill had haunted his thoughts for years afterward.

She had arrived at his company repeatedly, her voice unwavering as she championed software development for the visually impaired—all for Allan's sister.

When success finally crowned her efforts, she threw herself into the work alongside the development team, gathering information with relentless passion. Her lips cracked from dehydration and her eyes burned from exhaustion, yet she never complained.

That year, something shifted inside Stewart—an instinctive need to shield her from the world’s cruelty.

Years later, when fate brought them together again, she had transformed. Radiance poured from her like sunlight, her laughter bright enough to banish shadows. The scars of her childhood had become invisible, buried beneath layers of hard-won confidence.

She moved through the world with skill that impressed him, intelligence that challenged him, and beauty that stole his breath.

In Stewart’s eyes, Gabriela existed without flaws.

He murmured, “I care for you deeply. I’ve carried these feelings for longer than I can measure, and you—”

Heir to the Williams dynasty, a man born with every advantage life could offer, Stewart found his voice trembling like a schoolboy’s. His heart thundered against his ribs as he forced out the words.

“Is there even the smallest chance you might feel something for me in return?”

“No.” Gabriela’s answer cut through the air without hesitation. “Stewart, romantic love isn’t what I feel for you. We’re friends, nothing more.”

She delivered her rejection with surgical precision.

“Am I truly so unworthy?” Stewart’s voice cracked with disbelief, his confidence crumbling. “You didn’t even pause to consider it.”

“You’re not unworthy.” Gabriela straightened her spine, her gaze steady and kind, yet immovable. “You’re handsome enough to turn heads, capable enough to command respect, wealthy enough to buy kingdoms. You lack the arrogance that poisons so many men born to privilege.”

Stewart, alcohol still clouding his thoughts, responded with a voice roughened by emotion. “You paint me as perfection itself, yet you crushed my hopes without a second thought.”

Gabriela’s laughter rippled between them, unexpected and genuine.

“You are remarkable, but so am I. I’ve built my independence stone by stone, lived each day through my own strength and determination. Your love confession proves your excellent judgment.”

Her expression remained serene, her eyes clear as mountain streams.

“But my heart doesn’t echo your feelings, and I won’t accept you simply because you are in love with me.”

Stewart’s laughter came soft and wondering, as if he had discovered something precious and strange.

Chapter 630

Never before had anyone rejected him with such disarming honesty.

The disappointment that had been eating at his chest suddenly lifted, replaced by something warmer.

Stewart reached out, his fingers brushing through Gabriela’s hair like a whispered prayer.

“Gabriela, you’ve just made me fall deeper. You’re absolutely right—I am exceptional. Just because your heart remains closed today doesn’t mean it won’t open tomorrow. I refuse to surrender.”

Gabriela sighed. “Stewart...”

Stewart pressed forward, cutting through her protest. “Tell me you won’t end our friendship over this, will you?”

Gabriela gazed into his bright eyes, and despite everything, her lips curved upward. “No, I won’t.”

“Perfect.” Stewart’s smile blazed with renewed purpose. “Tomorrow begins my official campaign to win your heart. I trust you won’t slam doors in my face.”

Having delivered his declaration, he strode to the curb with military precision, yanked open the car door, and disappeared inside.

Erik, who had been waiting behind the wheel, jolted from his stupor.

Oh, he had just witnessed his powerful boss suffer romantic heartbreak.

Tomorrow, would Stewart fire him for breathing the same air as this secret?

Erik forced his expression into careful neutrality, pretending his ears had captured nothing while his hands guided the steering wheel.

His mind replayed what he had witnessed—that flash of pain that had swept across his boss’s features before pride reasserted itself.

His untouchable, supremely confident employer had just experienced heartbreak in real time.

He thought Gabriela had made a mistake by rejecting a wonderful pursuer like Stewart.

Gabriela returned to her villa, let hot water wash away the evening's complications, then surrendered to sleep's embrace.

Consciousness abandoned her swiftly. She had no idea that a huge change was coming to her world tomorrow.

The following morning brought Beverley to the Moss family's doorstep.

Beverley embodied action—once her mind settled on a course, she executed it immediately, never allowing hesitation to breed in the space between decision and deed.

Surprise flickered across Roger's features before he ushered her into the living room.

Beverley wasted no breath on pleasantries.

"I'll speak plainly—Wesley has captured my genuine affection. However, last year's canceled engagement ceremony cast an ominous shadow over everything. When fate prevents a union from taking place and allows uncertainty to fester, it whispers that these two souls were never meant to intertwine."

Roger's brow contracted at her words, intensity blazing briefly behind his eyes before discipline smothered it.

His voice emerged wrapped in diplomatic contrition. “The ceremony’s failure rests squarely on the Moss family’s shoulders. I’ll bring Brenden to offer proper apologies to your family. You have my sworn promise—once Rebecca becomes part of our family, we will treat her well.”

Beverley sighed. “There is actually another reason for this decision. Recently, I consulted a fortune teller. Wesley’s and Rebecca’s paths run in opposite directions—forcing them together would only breed endless catastrophe.”

Roger’s expression grew thunderous. “Beverley, it was Jasper himself who brought Rebecca to us, requesting this marriage alliance. Everyone within our social sphere knows about it. Now you wish to dissolve everything based on fortune-telling superstitions—don’t you think that borders on the absurd?”