

His kiss 671

Chapter 671

The redness in her eyes drained away, only to bloom into a heated blush across her cheeks.

After letting the silence weigh between them, Gabriela steadied her breath and slid her fingers gently around Wesley's free hand, the one unburdened by an IV. Her grip was warm, tentative but resolute.

"Wesley... when the sun comes up, let's go see Truett together."

The thought of meeting his own flesh and blood made Wesley's throat constrict. Emotion swelled until his voice rasped low. "All right."

At dawn, once the IV drip had finished, they drove straight back to the villa.

Truett was already awake, perched at the table while Farley coaxed spoonfuls of breakfast into him.

The instant he spotted his mother, he wiggled eagerly in his chair, arms stretching out for her embrace. But the moment his gaze shifted to Wesley, he abandoned that plan, chubby hands reaching insistently toward him instead.

With a smooth, practiced motion, Wesley gathered Truett into his arms.

Truett burst into bright laughter, the sound filling the quiet morning air.

What Gabriela confessed at the hospital had left Wesley shaken. Now, with Truett resting in his arms, the reality crashed over him—he was a father.

He had a son of his own.

The sourness and resentment that had gnawed at him during the worst days of his illness dissolved, undone by the child's unguarded smile.

Perhaps fate had not been so merciless after all.

Truett reached out and wrapped his small fingers around Wesley's hand, his eyes shining with joy.

Gabriela looked on, her heart a mixture of quiet joy and sadness. With a tender smile, she bent close and murmured, "Truett, call him Daddy."

Truett's very first word was "Daddy."

At Gabriela's gentle coaxing, he parted his tiny lips and called out, "Daddy," in a sweet, obedient murmur that rang clear as a bell.

The sound pierced Wesley's heart, and tears welled in his eyes. For the rest of the morning, he clung to his son, unwilling to loosen his embrace for even a moment.

When noon arrived and Farley set out the prepared formula, Wesley insisted on doing the feeding himself.

By now, Truett had learned to clutch the bottle on his own, no longer needing help. The instant Wesley placed it in his hands, he seized it and drank with eager determination, his small cheeks puffing as he swallowed.

Once Truett finished drinking, he stubbornly clamped his teeth around the bottle, unwilling to release it.

Farley chuckled softly and offered him a teething biscuit. With one chubby fist, Truett grabbed the biscuit while his other hand clung possessively to the bottle, refusing to let it go. Farley gently wrestled it free, though not without effort, and Truett's lower lip jutted out, his eyes shimmering as if tears might spill.

Before the wail could come, Gabriela slipped the biscuit into his mouth, and in an instant his frown vanished, replaced by quiet concentration as he gnawed happily.

Watching Truett's antics, Wesley felt warmth flood through him—a deep, steady fullness, as though the hollow places in his heart had finally been filled.

A gray, heavy haze had long defined his world, but Gabriela and Truett had pierced it with the faintest shimmer of light. For the first time in years, Wesley felt an urgent desire to keep living.

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He kept Truett in his arms for hours, even through lunch, unwilling to set him down. Nestled against his chest, Truett seemed calmer than usual, happily fiddling with Wesley's shirt buttons for what felt like forever.

Maybe that was the invisible thread between father and son.

From her seat nearby, Gabriela watched with a tender ache, warmth stirring in her chest even as a pang of sadness slipped through.

Later, Farley simmered a gentle pot of vegetable porridge, and once Truett's small belly was full, he drifted into peaceful sleep. Wesley still clung stubbornly to Truett, refusing to let go, until Farley finally remarked with quiet firmness, "Keeping him in your arms like that while he sleeps will hurt his spine."

The words hit home, and Wesley loosened his grip at once.

Once Truett was tucked into his crib, Gabriela and Wesley stepped out into the damp evening air beyond the villa.

The breeze carried the clean scent of rain as Wesley laced his fingers through hers. They circled the lawn in silence again and again, his steady presence grounding her.

While they walked, Gabriela broke the hush. She told him how she had hidden away in the countryside to give birth, desperate to avoid him, and how, when the hospital demanded the father's signature for her C-section, it had been Farley—calm and unwavering—who signed in his place.

After the baby was born, she confessed, fear had shadowed her every step—at first terrified Brenden might discover the secret, and later haunted by the thought of the entire Moss family uncovering the truth.

When Wesley pieced it all together, the thrill of knowing he was a father dimmed, replaced by a heavy ache for the helplessness Gabriela had endured.

He clasped her trembling hand and said firmly, his voice steady, "You don't need to be afraid anymore. I'll see to it that both you and Truett are acknowledged by my family."

Gabriela lingered in silence, her gaze flickering with indecision, until at last she drew a breath and steeled herself. "Wesley... there's something I have to talk to you about."

His eyes softened as he leaned closer. "Tell me."

Her lashes lowered, voice quiet but deliberate. "For the time being, I intend to keep Truett's identity a secret from the Moss family—even from Loretta and Miriam."

Fear gnawed at her that if Wesley were gone, the Moss family would swoop in and steal Truett away.

Against Okburg's most powerful family, what chance did an ordinary woman like her have?

Wesley, reading the dread in her eyes, let his fleeting joy drain away.

The thought of Gabriela struggling to raise their son alone pierced him with guilt.

He reached for her hand, voice steady with resolve. "Don't be afraid. I'll make sure you and Truett are never separated."

If his illness truly proved incurable, then before death claimed him, he would set every safeguard in place—so neither Gabriela nor Truett would ever fall prey to the Moss family's cruelty.

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Realizing Truett was about to wake, Wesley and Gabriela headed back into the villa's living room.

The moment Gabriela stepped inside, she caught sight of unexpected visitors.

Loretta sat poised on the couch, while Miriam, ever quick to read the room, turned with a spark of curiosity lighting her eyes. Far more attuned to emotions than Loretta, Miriam couldn't resist letting her imagination race at the sight of Wesley and Gabriela walking in together.

Still, she restrained herself. No matter what thoughts she entertained, she wasn't reckless enough to blurt them out. Prying questions could easily make things worse. Today's visit had nothing to do with speculation anyway.

Both women had come for Truett.

After so much time apart, they had been missing the child terribly. They hadn't come empty-handed either—the corner of the sofa was piled high with colorful gifts they'd carefully chosen for him.

Loretta dangled a little yellow duck toy that squeaked with every squeeze, teasing Truett into laughter.

At one end of the living room, Farley steadied Truett, while Loretta and Miriam crouched at the other end, coaxing with bright voices, "Truett, come here!"

Fixated on the squeaking toy, Truett wobbled forward on his tiny legs, his face set with fierce determination.

Each tumble sent him sprawling, yet he pushed himself up every time, stumbling onward without complaint.

Watching his brave, stubborn little face, Loretta's heart softened, though it only deepened the weight of her lingering regret.

The wedding between Wesley and Rebecca had once been firmly arranged, yet the Howard family had abruptly withdrawn. With Wesley's marriage unsettled, Loretta wondered anxiously when she might finally cradle a great-grandchild of her own.

Lost in those thoughts, she failed to stretch out her arms when Truett was only steps away. Instead, he suddenly turned toward the doorway.

His bright eyes had locked on Gabriela and Wesley, who had just appeared.

Truett's little steps carried him straight toward Wesley. Even after tumbling once, he pushed himself back up and tottered forward with determined energy.

When it looked as though he might stumble again, Wesley bent instinctively and scooped him into his arms. Truett's laughter bubbled out, as if proudly showing off to his dad—asking without words if he'd done well.

Wesley's chest warmed at the sight, and he tapped Truett's cheek with tender fingers. "You're incredible, Truett."

Joy lit up Truett's face; he flailed his small hands in triumph, laughing louder as though he understood every word of praise.

From the side, Gabriela watched, a faint ache of jealousy tugging at her heart.

After spending barely half a day, Truett's closeness to Wesley had become unmistakable.

If the two of them lived under the same roof, she feared Truett might cling to Wesley entirely.

Loretta and Miriam exchanged confused glances.

"Wesley, since when did Truett get so attached to you?" Miriam asked, brows furrowed.

Gabriela's pulse kicked up, a sudden tightness forming in her chest.

Wesley's voice remained cool as ever. "Children are naturally drawn to beautiful things. Since I'm easy on the eyes, of course he likes me."

That quip almost made Gabriela laugh.

Even while he was seriously ill, Wesley's ego stayed perfectly intact—just as one would expect.

Loretta chuckled, reaching to gather Truett in her arms. Stroking his tiny back, she cooed, "Truett, do you really like your Uncle Wesley?"

Truett, sharp for his age, grasped the gist of the question. He mumbled in a wobbly voice, "Yes."

Loretta shot Wesley a pointed look and remarked, "See that? You should have a child of your own!"

Amusement tugged at Wesley's mouth, tempered by a faint trace of exasperation.

Once dismissed by children and disregarded by Loretta, he now found himself doted on by Truett yet still scolded by Loretta.

The irony weighed on him.

Clearing his throat, he cast a meaningful glance toward Gabriela. "Children come when fate allows. When the time is right, one will arrive."

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Loretta, though enchanted by Truett's muddled syllables, shot Wesley a sharp glare at his response.

"You're speaking of destiny when I'm telling you to have a child? Come on. I pray every single day, yet you won't marry!"

Wesley, stung by the scolding, held his tongue.

At last, standing close to Gabriela, he leaned down and murmured, “I’ve covered for you again. How are you going to repay me this time?”

Fearing Loretta and Miriam might catch on, Gabriela edged away without answering, choosing silence over risk.

Her timid retreat made Wesley chuckle softly; he let the matter drop, unwilling to push her further.

By afternoon, Loretta and Miriam lingered for dinner, doting on Truett until nightfall, then left at last with heavy hearts.

Wesley left alongside them.

Once the door closed, Farley fixed Gabriela with a serious look. “What exactly is going on between you and Mr. Moss?”

Ken stayed quiet, though his gaze demanded the same answer.

Both men already knew Wesley was Truett’s father, so hearing Truett call him “Dad” hadn’t shocked them.

“We’re together now,” Gabriela admitted at last. She then gave a brief explanation of Wesley’s condition. “Once he goes abroad for treatment and comes back healthy, we’ll get married. Then Truett will finally have a father.”

Farley, who usually respected her choices, couldn’t hold back a piece of hard truth this time. His voice was gentle but firm. “Keeping it from Loretta and the others for now is the right choice. But you must be clear-headed, Gabriela. If Mr. Moss truly can’t be cured, don’t tie yourself to him for life. And don’t go blurting everything out to Loretta in the meantime.”

Though blunt, his words carried undeniable weight.

Gabriela met his gaze, steady but somber. “Don’t worry. I know what I’m doing.”

If the worst happened—if Wesley never returned alive—she would carry his memory in her heart forever, never taking another husband. But she wouldn’t jeopardize Truett’s entire future, nor give the Moss family a single chance to claim her son.

By early the following morning, Gabriela headed to the county hospital in North Village to seek out Dr. Hobbes—the physician who had performed her surgery the year before—hoping for guidance on transferring the cord blood.

After Truett’s birth, Dr. Hobbes had urged her to preserve the cord blood, and she had agreed without hesitation, paying the full twenty-year storage fee upfront.

Now, looking back, it was the best choice she had ever made.

Once the cord blood was transferred to Okburg Hospital and tested against Wesley's blood type, the results showed a flawless match.

When the confirmation arrived, Gabriela clutched Wesley tightly, tears of joy streaming down her face.

It felt like the perfect beginning, and in her heart she carried a fierce certainty—he would recover.

In the days that followed, Wesley's assistant reached out to Dr. Gale in Athea. Given the severity of his condition, Dr. Gale agreed to move him up the line.

Treatment could begin in just two weeks.

As one of the few kept in the loop, Billy took charge of most of the arrangements.

When he discovered Gabriela was the woman Wesley had been concealing that day, the revelation startled him—yet, on reflection, it felt entirely in line with Wesley's character.

No matter how tangled the path had been, Wesley's heart had never wavered. From beginning to end, his chosen woman remained Gabriela.

Although the overseas treatment was shrouded in secrecy, no secret could stay buried forever—especially when someone had been tracking Gabriela’s every step.

Across town, Stewart stood before a display table, eyes fixed on the intricate scale model of a deep-sea city.

As Erik finished his report, Stewart idly traced the model’s edges with a fingertip, a faint chuckle escaping him.

Dr. Gale from Athea?

What an amusing coincidence!

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Once everything concerning the cord blood was settled, Gabriela turned her focus toward returning to the company. Wesley dropped her off at the Lakeshore Building before steering his car toward Apex Group.

That same afternoon, Haynes Group held its mid-year summary meeting. As the company’s CEO, Gabriela had no choice but to attend.

The session stretched for two solid hours, and though draining, the results were gratifying—this year’s performance growth far surpassed previous years, and the room practically buzzed with excitement from the executives.

Afterward, Gabriela leaned close to Kaleb and murmured, “Uncle Kaleb, I need to head to the hotel later. Could you assign one of your assistants to come with me and bring the necessary documents?”

Since she hadn’t yet chosen a permanent assistant of her own, Gabriela often borrowed Kaleb’s assistant whenever business required her to step out.

As they pushed open the office door, the two carried on their quiet exchange.

Inside, Matthew, who had been waiting on the guest sofa, immediately rose to his feet at the sound of their entrance.

His expression softened as his gaze landed on Gabriela, and with a warm smile, he asked, “All done with the meeting, Gabriela?”

Gabriela’s brow creased as she gestured for Kaleb to step out of the office.

Her cool gaze fixed on Matthew as she pressed, “Mr. Howard, what exactly brings you here?”

“I’ve been waiting more than an hour,” he said with practiced patience, keeping his tone warm. “I knew you were in a meeting, so I didn’t want to interrupt.”

Maintaining her polite front, Gabriela asked, “And what business do you have with me today?”

“I saw something at the auction the other night,” Matthew replied smoothly, “and my first thought was how perfect it would look on you.”

His lips curved in a gentle smile as he produced an ornate box and flicked it open with a flourish.

Inside gleamed a platinum bracelet studded with diamonds, its intricate design glimmering with luxury—clearly a piece that belonged to the top tier of high-end collections.

Gabriela’s expression remained unmoved. Turning her face away from the jewelry, she regarded Matthew with a touch of cool bewilderment. “If you have something to say, I’d appreciate it if you were direct.”

Her grudge against the Howard family only grew deeper, and the last thing she wanted was to be tangled up further with any of them.

Matthew’s eagerness clashed against her icy reserve, and the sting of rejection left him quietly deflated.

He longed to tell her everything—urging her to embrace the truth of her lineage at once. Yet her aloofness made it impossible for him to put his feelings into words. It felt like the right move was to hold back and wait.

After all, once his marriage was dissolved, he could finally claim his daughter openly.

Clutching at that fragile reassurance, he placed the platinum bracelet on her desk, his voice shaded by melancholy. “Gabriela, this piece really does suit you. Would you consider trying it on?”

In his mind, any young woman would be drawn to such sparkling treasures. Surely, once she wore it, she would soften.

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Yet Gabriela’s gaze never lingered on the bracelet. She closed the box with unhurried precision and handed it back, her tone cool and unwavering. “Mr. Howard, I must ask you not to visit me again. And please—stop bringing me gifts. I can’t accept these luxuries.”

Matthew faltered when she pressed the bracelet box back into his palm.

Gabriela’s voice carried no warmth as she stated, “Please leave. I have work to do and won’t be seeing you out.”

Sliding into her chair, she powered on her computer and focused on the screen as if he were already gone.

Even when he finally turned to leave, she never once looked up.

Moments later, a sharp knock sounded at the door. Brock Shaw, Kaleb's assistant, stepped in with a stack of files. "Ms. Haynes, the documents are ready. Should we head out?"

"Yes, let's go."

Gabriela gathered her things, smoothed her desk, and walked with him toward the lobby.

Their car waited in the plaza. Brock gestured for her to wait by the roadside. "Stay here a moment. I'll pull the car out."

She lingered at the curb, unaware that danger was already closing in.

Beneath the scorching sun, Dustin crouched behind the plaza wall, his patience long since frayed.

When he spotted Gabriela alone, his eyes gleamed with malice. Clutching a heavy bottle of sulfuric acid, he charged forward with a furious shout.

Gabriela reacted instantly, bolting toward the building's entrance where security usually stood watch.

Dustin, wielding acid instead of a blade this time, grew impatient after only a few strides. With a savage twist, he wrenched the cap open and hurled the contents at her back.

A wild thought seized him: once acid scarred Gabriela's beauty, she would never seduce another man again.

"Gabriela, watch out!" Matthew's voice cut through the chaos as he lunged into the scene.

In a heartbeat, Matthew shoved Gabriela aside and struck Dustin with a sharp kick that sent him sprawling.

The bottle slipped from Dustin's grasp, crashing to the ground. Acid splattered across the pavement, narrowly missing Gabriela.

A sizzling hiss filled the air as droplets landed on Dustin's own hand. Flesh burned away instantly, corroding down to bone—proof of just how deadly the solution was.

Dustin writhed on the ground, his screams splitting the air, sharp enough to turn heads across the plaza.

At the same time, the acid seared into Matthew's arm, eating through his skin at a terrifying speed.

Gabriela snatched out her phone, calling an ambulance with shaking fingers.

She then bolted into a nearby shop, grabbed a jug of purified water, and rushed back to flush the burning liquid from Matthew's arm.

The pain overwhelmed him, and he slumped into unconsciousness.

Onlookers restrained Dustin, who thrashed like a madman, his mouth pouring filth and fury.

"Gabriela, so long as I'm still breathing, I'll tear you down and drag you into hell!" he bellowed.

Gabriela refused to acknowledge him, her focus pinned on Matthew's limp body.

Relief surged through the crowd when sirens cut through the chaos—police and medics arriving almost at once.

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Without hesitation, Gabriela followed as the paramedics loaded Matthew onto a stretcher and whisked him into the emergency room, where doctors were already waiting.

Matthew's injuries were severe, and the doctor, aided by two nurses, spent over an hour carefully tending to his wounds.

Once the medication had been applied and antibiotics administered, the doctor reminded Gabriela, “He’ll need plenty of rest and should stick to a plain, light diet for now.”

“Thank you, doctor,” Gabriela replied softly.

After the medical staff withdrew, the room fell quiet. Gabriela remained by his bedside, watching over him until his eyelids fluttered open.

When Matthew stirred, she helped ease him upright against a pillow, her hands steady despite the tremor in her chest.

His once-elegant features—still refined and striking despite the years—were now drained of color, leaving his face ghostly pale.

Overwhelmed by a tangle of emotions, she leaned closer and murmured with genuine sincerity, “Mr. Howard, I truly owe you my thanks for what you did earlier.”

Gabriela couldn’t make sense of why Matthew would go so far to save her.

His reckless self-sacrifice resembled the instinct of a father protecting his child.

Watching her intently, Matthew relaxed once he saw she was unharmed, a quiet smile softening his face.

“It’s nothing serious,” he said lightly. “My injuries will heal in a few days. For someone like you, a scar would be no small flaw—it would be an outright disaster.”

He leaned closer, scrutinizing her features until he noticed the mark Rebecca had left had already faded.

A muted sigh slipped from him, subtle but genuine.

Although he spoke with practiced ease, Gabriela’s emotions twisted into an uneasy tangle.

She still couldn’t unravel what drove him.

Even if hidden motives lurked beneath his actions, the way he regarded her carried only clarity—an elder’s open kindness, free of anything untoward.

“Anyway, thank you so much. I won’t forget this favor, and if there ever comes a time...”

Gabriela’s words were cut short when the door slammed open.

A flurry of footsteps rushed in—Lauren, Rebecca, and Beverley had come straight to the hospital after hearing the news.

Without a word, Lauren stormed toward Gabriela. Her palm cracked across Gabriela's cheek, the slap sharp and merciless.

"You bitch!" she spat with malice.

Caught off guard, Gabriela couldn't avoid the blow.

Heat stung her face, but she held back her reaction. Lauren's fury came from seeing Matthew nearly sacrifice his life for another woman—and in that, Gabriela could not entirely fault her.

In a steady, sincere tone, Gabriela explained, "Mrs. Howard, Dustin's been on the run these last six months. I don't know why he suddenly risked everything just to attack me. While I regret Mr. Howard's injury deeply, your anger at me is misplaced."

Lauren's chest rose and fell sharply, her voice dripping venom. "You know you are his daughter. If you hadn't been so desperate to cling to him, he never would have been hurt saving you. Don't even dream of stepping back into the Howard family!"

The accusation rattled Gabriela. Her pulse hammered in her ears as she frowned. "Daughter? What are you talking about?"

The way Gabriela acted struck Lauren as deliberate—she was certain Gabriela was playing dumb.

“What’s with the act? Don’t play innocent with me. Your mother was nothing but a brazen homewrecker, and you’re cut from the same cloth. How much of our family’s money have you bled dry already, yet you still stand here pretending to be blameless?”

Lauren had poured a fortune into plotting her move, calling in every favor she could to summon Dustin as her secret weapon. But in the end, Gabriela had walked away unscathed—saved at the last second by her husband.

Lauren hated Matthew for demanding a divorce, yet her stubborn heart still clung to him. The man she had hired to strike at Gabriela had left her husband injured instead, filling her with a mix of fury and regret.

Pain throbbed at her temples, her thoughts spiraling until her tongue slipped free of restraint, regardless of where she was.

Matthew tried to rein in Lauren’s fury, but Gabriela had already snapped back with sharp words.

“How dare you insult my mother! Your mouth is full of nothing but filth. Maybe it isn’t me who’s the problem—maybe it’s that your heart is so twisted you can’t see anything clean anymore.”

Lauren’s face contorted, her anger twisting into something almost savage. “You insolent brat! I’ll beat some damn manners into you.”

Seething, Lauren lifted her hand high, aiming another vicious slap at Gabriela.

Alarm jolted Matthew, and he lurched out of bed despite his injuries.

Rebecca and Lauren both scrambled toward him, each reaching to steady his faltering steps.

Beverley's gaze cut sharply toward Lauren, her voice low but commanding. "Stand aside. I'll take it from here."

She had watched long enough to judge that Gabriela was still in the dark, and so she stepped forward with a carefully measured gentleness.

Choosing her words with care, Beverley skimmed over the past—deliberately softening the edges, offering events without the full reasons behind them.

The revelation left Gabriela momentarily frozen, her heart lurching before she forced her expression into composure. A deep frown shadowed her face. "I don't believe it. My mother would never tear apart another family."

Matthew, pale with guilt, tried to pull himself upright, his voice unsteady. "Gabriela, at the time I'd been in a car accident. The concussion blurred my memory—I forgot I was even married. Alanna had no idea I had a wife."

He rushed to add, "I truly cared for her. I never meant to fool her."

Rebecca, bristling at Matthew shouldering the blame, snapped before she could restrain herself. Her eyes burned with disdain as they landed on Gabriela. "No matter what happened, the truth remained: you are a bastard born out of wedlock. Get the hell out of here! Our family doesn't want a worthless piece of shit like you!"

Matthew's voice cracked like a whip. "Rebecca, that's enough! Apologize to Gabriela."

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His face had gone storm-dark, the veins at his temple standing out with rage.

Rebecca shot back without hesitation, her tone dripping with scorn. "Why should I? Gabriela is a shameless slut! Her mother seduced you, and now she's chasing after my fiancé. Like mother, like daughter—utterly disgraceful."

The last threads of respect she once held for Matthew had snapped the moment she learned of his illegitimate child. Nothing he said could restrain her anymore.

"You..." Matthew's rage twisted into pain. His face drained of color, and he pressed a trembling hand to his chest as a cough racked through him.

Lauren quickly caught Rebecca's wrist, giving a firm shake of her head, warning her daughter to hold her tongue.

Gabriela, watching Matthew's shoulders heave with each violent cough, lingered for a few uneasy seconds but stopped herself from moving closer.

When the coughing finally eased, Rebecca swung her glare toward Gabriela like a blade. "Why are you still standing here? Can't you see my dad is upset because of you?"

"I've no intention of staying here." Gabriela's steady gaze swept the room as she spoke with quiet dignity. "When my mother was with Matthew, she had no idea he was a married man. The moment she discovered the truth, she severed all ties. I accept that I was born out of wedlock—no one chooses their birth. But Rebecca, that doesn't make me someone you can spit on."

"My mother and I have done nothing wrong. You don't get to pass judgment on us. If you're mad, direct it at your father, not me."

Her eyes locked on Rebecca's, unwavering and resolute. The conviction in her words carried a fearless strength that left Rebecca mute, unable to summon a retort.

Matthew smiled as he watched Gabriela—admiration stirring for her unyielding spirit, even though her words carried a veiled rebuke toward him.

Beverley, too, found herself softening toward Gabriela. Gabriela's quiet composure and unshaken courage—this was what she believed ran in a Howard's blood.

Having said her piece, Gabriela turned away without offering another glance and walked out of the room.

The moment she stepped out of the hospital, a strong pair of arms wrapped around her.

Wesley had raced over after learning Dustin had hurled acid at Gabriela. Fear had driven him there, and only when he saw her unharmed did his taut nerves finally ease.

Pressed against his steady chest, Gabriela felt her throat tighten.

How much torment had she endured through the years?

Even when Phyllis scalded her arm with boiling water in the dead of night, or when Marie snapped her wrist, not once had she cried.

Yet now, in Wesley's embrace, her buried grievances swelled and burst like an overfilled balloon.

It turned out her father had been alive—she could have been spared a childhood of fear, raised in the security of his love.

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Wesley stroked her back with quiet patience, letting her cry with abandon. When her sobs softened, he bent close and brushed away the wet streaks on her cheeks.

“How about I take you out for something good to eat?” he asked gently.

“Alright,” she murmured.

From a distance, Stewart lingered in the shadows, watching Gabriela walk off with Wesley.

The moment he’d heard Dustin had tried to harm her again, he had abandoned an international meeting in a frenzy.

Red lights blurred behind him as he sped across the city, reopening the stitches on his arm in the process. By the time he arrived, all he saw was her leaning on another man.

His fists tightened until his knuckles whitened. Pulling out his phone, he dialed Myah.

“Myah, did you know Wesley’s with Gabriela?”

Myah had long suspected it, ever since the whispers about Wesley’s illness, but hearing it confirmed stung.

Still, she steadied her tone. “If she’s happy, then I’m happy for her.”

“Don’t bother lying,” Stewart cut in bitterly. “You can’t fool me—I know you too well.”

Myah ended the call without a word, then calmly returned to drying herbs.

Though her eyesight was still hazy, she managed simple tasks with quiet persistence.

Her steady effort and willingness to help had already earned Fred’s approval.

At the same time, Wesley guided Gabriela through Okburg’s bustling food street. He bought her every dish she fancied, tucking portions into bags to carry along. They wandered side by side, nibbling as they walked, laughter rising between bites. Whatever remained unfinished, he set in the car before driving her onward.

Before long, they pulled into the Okburg Ecological Park.

The place unfolded in dazzling colors—sweeping flower fields stretched as far as the eye could see, and above them shimmered the park’s famed glass bridge, suspended high in the air like a ribbon of light.

Wesley guided her through the sea of blossoms, pointing toward the glittering glass bridge, but Gabriela quietly refused. Her concern for his fragile heart lingered at the back of her mind, so she used herself as the excuse. "Heights make me uneasy."

The steadiness in her tone made Wesley hesitate before he finally asked, "Will you tell me what really happened today?"

Had it been only Dustin's attack, her composure would not have cracked so deeply.

Without evasion, Gabriela repeated Beverley's words.

Wesley wrapped her in his arms once more, his voice low. "Gabriela, do you want to return to the Howard family? If you do, I can make it happen."

Going back would mean stepping into the ranks of the elite, her life instantly gilded with privilege.

Yet Gabriela shook her head and answered firmly, "I've no desire to return."

The thought of those people filled her with nothing but aversion. To rejoin them would only trap her in constant unease.