

His kiss 681

Chapter 681

“I’ll stand by you, no matter what choice you make,” Wesley assured Gabriela.

When it came to his own treatment, Wesley had already shut the door on hope. All he wanted was to smooth the road ahead for Gabriela, preparing the best life for her before his time ran out—whether that meant returning to the Howard family or carving her own name in business.

Meeting his steady, fathomless gaze, Gabriela gave a firm nod and melted against his chest, her cheek pressed to the quiet rhythm of his heartbeat.

With Wesley, she felt an unshakable sense of safety, as though nothing in the world could unsettle her as long as he held her close.

Within the cold walls of the police station, Dustin’s hand had been bandaged, but the raw sting still made his forehead bead with cold sweat.

Hours of relentless questioning gnawed at his resolve, pressing so hard he nearly let Lauren’s name slip.

By the time afternoon light slanted through the barred window, the attorney Lauren had dispatched finally strode in.

The lawyer listened intently as Dustin recounted the crime step by step, nodding with measured calm, then assured him he would fight to have the sentence cut down to the bare minimum. Yet in the same breath, the lawyer's tone shifted—subtle, persuasive—as he urged Dustin to admit guilt.

A few years behind bars would hardly matter; the Howard family would see that Dustin was rewarded for his loyalty.

After a long silence, Dustin clenched his jaw, the decision etched across his face, and gave a stiff nod.

What other option remained?

He was already branded a fugitive for poisoning Marie, and prison loomed ahead no matter what he chose. Owning up to the attack might tack on another year or two, but it would also make the Howard family owe him a favor.

After his release, their support meant he could live out the rest of his days without a worry.

Matthew's jaw tightened at the news of Dustin's confession, a deep crease furrowing between his brows.

His driver had just wrapped up his stiff-voiced report when the door eased open and Lauren stepped inside, an insulated container balanced carefully in her hands.

She lifted the lid, and a modest bowl of soup studded with finely minced meat sent up a gentle, savory fragrance that filled the room.

Lauren placed the steaming bowl in front of Matthew, her smile carefully sweetened. "Matthew, I cooked this myself. Go on, have a taste."

She lifted the spoon toward his lips, but he made no move to accept it—only fixed her with a frigid stare that sent a chill crawling up her spine.

Her forced cheer faltered. "Why are you staring at me like that?" she asked, her voice tightening.

"Lauren," Matthew said, his tone flat and unyielding. "You were the one behind Dustin's attack on Gabriela."

It wasn't a question—it was an accusation laid bare.

Her composure cracked instantly, the smile slipping from her face. "I already made a mess of things once with Dustin. However cruel or heartless you think I am, I wouldn't repeat the same mistake."

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His eyes stayed hard, unblinking. "Then swear it. Make a solemn vow."

Matthew's fingers clamped around her wrist, his voice cutting sharp as steel. "If you truly sent Dustin to hurt Gabriela, may you never know a moment's peace for the rest of your days."

Lauren's face drained of color. She refused to utter such a curse, her silence only tightening Matthew's grip until it pressed hard against her wrist bone.

The room froze in brittle silence, the two of them locked in a cold, unyielding standoff.

Outside the door, Rebecca had been listening. She couldn't hold back any longer. Her hand shoved the door open, and she burst inside. "Mom? Dad? What's going on in here?"

Lauren, visibly shaken and defensive, snapped back, "Your father actually suspects I'm the one who sent Dustin after Gabriela this time."

Rebecca blinked, stunned. She never imagined her mother would involve Dustin in this again. The cruellest twist was that Dustin hadn't managed to harm Gabriela, but instead hurt Matthew, the one they cherished.

Hot tears blurred Rebecca's vision as she collapsed at the bedside, clutching the sheets. "Dad, whatever the truth is, Mom's been at your side all these years. Can't you just let it go?"

Her voice cracked with desperate pleading.

Deep down, Matthew bore a weight of guilt toward Rebecca. He exhaled slowly, shoulders sagging. "Fine. I'll let it go."

The moment those words left his lips, both Lauren and Rebecca released a shaky breath of relief.

Lauren, already two steps ahead, had secured a lawyer to settle matters quietly with Dustin, who knew better than to expose her.

It looked like they were off the hook.

Matthew's face remained unreadable as he finally broke the silence. "Wesley already knows, and the Williams family has people digging into it. From what I've heard, Stewart still hasn't recovered from his injuries. I doubt he'll be willing to let it slide so easily."

Rebecca's eyes widened, panic flickering across her features. "Dad, then what are we supposed to do?" she asked, her voice trembling.

Matthew's tone stayed icy. "Do the same thing you did with me—go plead with them."

His words made it clear he had no intention of stepping in.

Lauren's jaw tightened as she bit back her frustration, her teeth pressing hard against her lip.

What a cold-blooded man.

Rebecca realized that if not for Gabriela, her mother would never have sunk to such a desperate act.

In that instant, hatred toward Gabriela flared inside her.

It wasn't affection that made her worry about her mother; it was the terror of being branded for life as the criminal's daughter.

No, she would never allow that stain to fall on her name.

By the following day, Wesley and Stewart had already dug up evidence proving Dustin had pocketed money from Lauren to carry out the crime.

When they cornered Lauren's assistant, their fists and boots spoke louder than threats; the savage beating left his knees on the verge of breaking. The pain broke him, forcing a full confession.

Wesley and Stewart laid out the evidence before Gabriela.

They had shown up at the villa around the same time, and when their gazes collided, the tension between them crackled like an unspoken duel.

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Sensing the air growing unbearably stiff, Gabriela quickly stepped forward, taking the evidence from their hands to defuse the moment.

Whatever her personal feelings, she knew securing Dustin a harsher sentence—and making sure Lauren finally bore the punishment she deserved—was not something she could afford to resist.

Stewart, ever perceptive, excused himself after handing over the evidence, politely refusing even the offer of coffee.

Gabriela then walked him to the gates herself.

Just before sliding into his car, Stewart turned back with a faint, weary smile and asked, “Just tell me, Gabriela—was it a mistake for me to come?”

Gabriela gave a quick shake of her head, her eyes soft. “No, truly—I’m grateful to you.”

“I could tell Wesley’s expression was stormy the entire time. He even had evidence prepared, which made my contribution feel unnecessary.”

Gabriela leaned forward, her tone earnest. “That’s not true. What you brought was important, and I’m thankful for it.”

For a moment, Stewart held her gaze, a daring thought flickering through his mind.

But it slipped away just as fast, leaving him with nothing but a rueful smile. “Seeing how Wesley dealt with you today, I couldn’t help but feel... his need for control might cause you pain one day.”

Gabriela’s lips parted, ready to defend Wesley, but Stewart quickly caught himself and lifted his hands in retreat. “Forgive me—I didn’t mean to suggest he’s short-tempered. I honestly feel like being with you is a gift from heaven. He had no right to treat you poorly over something so insignificant.”

“That’s not really how it is.” Gabriela parted her lips, ready to defend Wesley, but after a pause she decided against it. Whatever tension existed between them was theirs alone to resolve, not something she owed anyone an explanation for.

Instead, she curved her mouth into a faint smile. “Wesley’s temper flares up sometimes, but I usually just let him have his way. Anyway, your driver’s been waiting on you for a while now. You’d better get in the car.”

With a gentle wave, Gabriela turned to leave.

Stewart didn’t move, though. He remained rooted to the spot, his gaze following her until her figure vanished from sight.

When Gabriela returned to the villa, she saw Wesley still sunk into the sofa, his jaw tight and his posture stiff, exuding an icy sort of majesty.

With a light chuckle, she remarked, “If you’re determined to sulk in silence, I’ll just head upstairs. You can either retreat to your own apartment or claim one of the guest rooms for the night.”

Wesley’s eyes widened in disbelief.

How could she treat him so casually, as though his rage didn’t matter? The audacity made his chest burn.

That cunning Stewart—had he whispered something unpleasant about him to Gabriela? Was she now swayed by his slippery words?

The thought left Wesley seething.

He stormed after her, footsteps pounding up the stairs until he reached the bedroom.

The moment the door shut, he seized her, shoving her back against the wall with a grip that trembled with rage.

Wesley's hand tightened around Gabriela's waist, his other palm braced against the wall beside her shoulder, boxing her in. His hold was unyielding, his breath cool as it ghosted along her neck.

"So you think I belong in the guest room?" he murmured, his voice edged with challenge.

Gabriela lowered her gaze and answered softly, "You were upset... I thought you didn't want to share a bed with me."

"You can sense my frustration, yet you can't fathom the reason?" he pressed, eyes sharp.

Her voice dwindled to a whisper. "Stewart brought the evidence. He meant well... I couldn't just turn him away."

Wesley's lips twisted into a sneer. "I had evidence too. And you cast me aside for his? You neglected me for him?"

"That's not true!" Gabriela shot back, her denial firm despite the tremor in her tone.

His gaze narrowed. "And what did he say to you just now?"

She sighed. "He said you're too controlling... that you won't even let me have friends."

The truth hung heavy between them. Wesley's expression darkened, storm clouds gathering in his eyes.

When it came to Stewart, his instincts were ruthless. Some part of him feared that if Gabriela ever leaned too close, Stewart might steal her away completely.

"So you actually let his words sway you?" Wesley's tone was sharp, suspicion simmering beneath it.

"How could I?" Gabriela countered softly, surprising him by leaning into his chest. Her arms circled his waist in a tentative embrace.

His jealousy radiated like heat between them. Yet instead of retreating, she clung to him, and that quelled his anger.

Tilting her face up, she whispered, "Wesley, I never even dignified his opinion with an answer. Our relationship is ours alone. No outsider has the right to interfere."

At the word "outsider," Wesley's hard expression faltered. His mouth twitched, and though he tried to mask it, a smile threatened to break free. He turned his face slightly, as if to hide it.

"Honey..." Gabriela's voice softened further, her tone a gentle balm. "Let's just live for ourselves, not for anyone else's approval."

The endearment struck deep, dissolving the last of his defenses. A genuine smile spread across his face, warmth replacing the storm in his eyes.

“You’ve been working all day,” she murmured, brushing her hand against his chest. “You must be exhausted. Let me run you a bath.”

He gave a low chuckle, the tension between them ebbing. “Alright.”

Not long after, steam curled from the bathroom where Wesley had retreated.

His voice rang out, asking her to fetch a towel.

No towel? Strange. I’m sure I left one with the pajamas...

Despite her confusion, she plucked a fresh towel from the cabinet, walked to the door, and gave it a light knock.

The door swung open without warning, and Wesley’s hand closed around Gabriela’s wrist, drawing her inside with a firm yet careful tug.

Heat and steam enveloped her instantly, the sharp scent of soap and body wash hanging in the air.

Her pulse stuttered as she gasped, eyes darting toward the fresh towel on the bar. “Isn’t it—”

Her words dissolved into a muffled cry as Wesley lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was deep, consuming, stealing her breath until he finally let her go. His voice, husky and raw, curled against her ear. “Come join me.”

Color rushed to Gabriela’s cheeks. She managed a flustered protest. “No! Absolutely not!”

Even ill, his desire was relentless, unyielding. It irritated her that he never seemed to know when to stop.

“Are you sure?” Wesley murmured, guiding her hand downward until the heat beneath his skin seared her palm.

Gabriela’s ears burned crimson. She tried to wrench away, but his grip held fast, his whisper rasping with need.

“Please.” He bent close, lips grazing her ear, his voice rough. “Honey... I want you now.”

Wesley, the man who always seemed untouchable, had laid his heart bare in a way she never imagined.

Her entire face flamed, hotter than the steam wrapping the room. She clung to her last shred of resistance, breathing out a fragile refusal.

Yet her tone was soft, trembling, more like a plea than a rejection.

Wesley's restraint shattered. His mouth claimed hers again, fierce and hungry.

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Wesley was merciless, leaving Gabriela's legs trembling by the time he was done.

He scooped her into his arms and carried her back to bed, satisfaction written all over his face.

Gabriela shot him a fiery glare. "Don't even think about touching me again!"

His lips curved in delight. "Alright. I'll do it instead of just thinking about it."

Fuming, she snatched a pillow and hurled it at him. He didn't even bother to dodge, letting her rage wash over him.

Once he was satisfied, Wesley grew unusually accommodating. When her tantrum simmered down, he leaned in and brushed a kiss across her forehead. "Get some rest. Tomorrow, I'll go with you to the police station."

That only reignited her temper. "Oh, now you remember? Look at the time, Wesley!"

He chuckled, unbothered. "My bad." Then, with disarming ease, he added, "Don't be mad. I'll follow your lead from now on."

Men and their lies.

She gave him a shove. "Go to the guest room!"

Instead, he slid in behind her, wrapping his arms tight around her waist. "Honey, could you really bear to send me away?"

His tone had softened again, his embrace steady and reassuring. Against her will, her heart weakened. Her cheeks warmed as she whispered, "I couldn't."

Wesley's laugh was low, satisfied.

He held her tighter, silently vowing to treasure her for the rest of his life.

“Goodnight,” he murmured.

“Goodnight,” she replied, her voice gentler now.

The night fell quiet, tender.

The next morning, as Gabriela descended for breakfast, Farley’s eyes met hers—sharp and unreadable.

She had dabbed concealer carefully to cover the hickeys Wesley left, but the scratches raking down his arm betrayed them both.

Farley’s gaze chilled. As her family, he had always kept a careful watch over her choices. He adored Truett, but when it came to Truett’s father, his heart held no such affection.

Even in his weakened state, Wesley’s recklessness had pushed him into indulgence the night before.

How could he entrust Gabriela’s future to a man who treated his own health so carelessly?

Wesley knew exactly how Farley saw him. Until his illness was cured, he had no right to speak of forever.

Any promises now would be hollow.

All he could do was wait for strength to return, then prove himself worthy, bit by bit, in Farley's eyes.

The weight of Farley's unyielding gaze filled the dining room. Gabriela sat stiffly at the table, staring down at her breakfast, her hands restless, unable to summon the courage to meet his eyes.

Just when the air grew unbearably heavy, a small voice rang out. "Daddy! Hug!"

Truett toddled over and wrapped his tiny arms around Wesley's legs. Without hesitation, Wesley lifted him onto his lap, balancing the boy with one arm as he patiently spooned porridge into his mouth.

The child's innocence chipped away at the rigidity in Farley's expression. His stern gaze softened.

Wesley might have been reckless and carried flaws too great to ignore, but he was still Truett's father.

For the boy's sake, Farley swallowed his disapproval.

Gabriela exhaled a breath she hadn't realized she was holding, relief loosening the knot in her chest.

After breakfast, Wesley escorted Gabriela to the police station.

By afternoon, word had spread like wildfire that Lauren had been summoned for questioning. The news sent shockwaves through the Howard family.

As Matthew's wife, Lauren occupied a position of weight and privilege.

In circles as rarefied as theirs, scandal was usually smothered before it ever reached the public eye.

For someone like her to be openly called in, she must have crossed a line with someone far more powerful.

Rebecca rushed to the McCoy estate in a storm of tears. Her voice trembled as she spun the tale, twisting details, skipping over truths, exaggerating at every turn.

"Gabriela's blowing everything out of proportion! She wasn't even hurt, yet she's raising a fuss!"

Bess McCoy, her heart aching for her granddaughter, clasped Rebecca's hand, dabbing her tears with tissues and murmuring comfort. "There, there... don't cry. We'll handle it."

Herman McCoy, Rebecca's grandfather, gave his solemn word. "Rebecca, don't worry. Your mother will be fine. I'll see to it personally."

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Herman saw Gabriela as no threat, and his real caution was reserved for Matthew.

Rather than confronting Gabriela head-on, he turned to Beverley, his tone measured and his face solemn as he laid out the risks.

"The Howard family is at its peak right now. With Matthew as the majority shareholder, every move he makes sends ripples through the stock market. Lauren is his wife—if she ends up convicted, the fallout could shake the entire Howard family."

Beverley grasped the weight of his words.

Inside, she seethed at Lauren's malice and stupidity for dragging the Howard family into this mess. Yet her disapproval didn't spare Gabriela either.

Gabriela, though tied by blood to the Howard family, chose to ignore their collective interests and turned the evidence over to the police—a move driven purely by her own will.

"Herman, leave this to me—I'll settle it cleanly. But Lauren's actions disgrace the Howard family."

Beverley's expression remained composed, yet her voice carried a sharp edge. "Even if I pull her through this, I expect you to finally set her straight."

Lauren's fault was undeniable. Herman's jaw tightened, but he forced himself to nod, swallowing the bitterness.

He promised, "Once this matter is behind us, Lauren will bear the punishment she deserves."

Beverley gave a frosty nod before motioning for Alberto to show Herman out.

Once Herman was gone, she quietly told Alberto to gather a few things and accompany her on a visit to Gabriela.

That afternoon, Gabriela had chosen to stay home with her baby instead of returning to the office, having already filed her report at the police station.

When Beverley arrived with Alberto, she showed no surprise. She passed Truett gently into Farley's arms. "Farley, take Truett upstairs for me."

With his small hand clasped in Farley's, Truett trudged toward the staircase, dragging his feet in an adorably unwilling march.

Catching sight of her great-grandson, Beverley felt an unexpected tug at her heart, an urge to scoop him close—or at the very least brush her fingers across his tiny hand.

She had come with weighty business in mind, and she knew that if she so much as cradled Truett, her resolve to speak sternly might waver.

The moment Truett vanished at the stairwell, Beverley fixed her attention on Gabriela. “Gabriela, I trust you already understand why I’m here today.”

“I do,” Gabriela answered evenly, her voice steady and cold. “I can also imagine the angle you’ll take in this conversation. Save yourself the trouble—whatever terms you bring, I won’t agree to them.”

In spite of herself, Beverley felt a flicker of respect for Gabriela.

Having been raised in hardship, she not only endured but also demonstrated her sharpness and formidable nature, skillfully running the company. She met each obstacle with calm resolve and unshaken courage.

That was the very spirit a Howard ought to embody.

For a fleeting moment, Beverley even toyed with the notion—Matthew had no son, which was why the company was entrusted to Jasper.

Rebecca might have been gifted, but she lacked the instincts for management.

If Gabriela ever chose to return to the Howard family...

Beverley shook off the thought and let her gaze drift toward Alberto.

Alberto swiftly laid a document on the table—a neatly prepared share transfer agreement.

He slid it across to Gabriela while Beverley's cold voice cut in. "One percent of Howard Group's shares."

Gabriela's gaze stayed steady. "Why don't you get to the point?"

Beverley leaned forward. "Drop the charges against Lauren, and this one percent is yours."

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A faint, mocking curve touched Gabriela's lips; she didn't even waste words on Beverley.

The composure on her face only deepened Beverley's irritation. "Do you even understand what one percent of these shares means?"

Simply put, a single percent of Howard Group's shares was worth more than the total revenue of a hundred Haynes Groups. The Howard Group's global chain stores represented only a fraction of its vast empire.

Gabriela gave a slight nod. "I understand, but that doesn't interest me."

Both Beverley and Alberto saw her response as nothing but arrogance.

With measured persistence, Beverley pressed on. "In addition to these shares, you can return to the Howard family. A press conference will be held to officially acknowledge who you are."

Gabriela cut her off sharply. "That won't be necessary."

She bristled at Beverley's lofty tone, finding it unbearably patronizing. If it weren't for not wanting to offend Beverley, Gabriela would have shown her the door already.

Gabriela kept her tone firm as she spoke. "In a society governed by law, Lauren broke it, so she must accept the consequences. I only wish to resolve this quietly, but if you force my hand, I have far harsher options."

She rose smoothly from her seat and added, "Mrs. Howard, I have other matters to see to. I won't be walking you out."

Beverley bristled, her posture turning rigid.

Even Roger was careful to offer her courtesy, yet Gabriela dared to dismiss her outright.

The slight made her chest burn with indignation.

Her voice edged with anger, she snapped, "Dustin's already been given ten years behind bars. Isn't that enough for you? You are also a Howard—our fortunes rise and fall together. If you choose to stir up a storm inside the Howard family now, it will be much harder for you to return later."

"Let's get one thing straight." Gabriela's tone stayed flat, each word landing like ice. "Dustin committed a crime, and ten years is exactly the sentence he earned. My feelings don't change that."

"Lauren broke the law too, and whatever punishment comes her way is the result of her own actions. If the Howard family wants to throw blame on me, then so be it—there's nothing I can do to change their minds."

Her gaze fixed firmly on Beverley as she added, "And don't forget—I'm not a Howard. I'm a Haynes."

Beverley faltered under Gabriela's unwavering, resolute gaze, a flush of uncharacteristic embarrassment creeping across her face.

The exchange hit a wall, and pride kept her from pressing further.

Rising sharply, she spoke in a clipped, icy tone. “Gabriela, you’d better think twice—there’s no undoing this choice.”

Gabriela, unwilling to waste another breath, simply escorted them out with composed detachment.

Once beyond the gates of Rosemont Gardens, Beverley’s features hardened, sourness etched deep into her face. For years, she had basked in deference. No one had ever dared defy her—until now.

Gabriela—a woman who brushed off her authority and offered not a shred of respect—made Beverley’s temper flare.

Alberto leaned in quickly, murmuring to calm her, “She has no idea what influence and power the Howard family truly wields. Don’t take her words to heart.”

Forcing herself to inhale deeply, Beverley steadied her breath.

With her voice edged in frost, she said, “We’re leaving.”

This meeting was intended as a gesture of reconciliation. If Gabriela had agreed, the whole affair could have closed on a pleasant note.

But if Gabriela refused to value it...

Beverley, once a woman who commanded fear, dismissed Gabriela as a problem she could solve effortlessly.

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By the next morning, Matthew had already learned of Beverley's visit to Gabriela.

Seated stiffly at the hospital bedside, Beverley recounted the encounter with a sharp tongue, her brows drawn tight in disdain. She scoffed, "Gabriela is young, yet brimming with defiance. She dares to challenge even me. If we allow her back into the Howard family too easily, she'll grow impossibly arrogant."

Matthew's expression darkened at once. "Mom, how could you speak to Gabriela like that?"

What began as mild irritation in Beverley quickly flared into anger when she realized her son was siding with Gabriela instead of her.

Her magnanimous offer of shares had been met with outright defiance. The audacity of Gabriela's refusal was a slap in the face.

Beverley drew a breath to reassert herself, but before she could, Matthew was already reaching for his phone, dialing Gabriela.

At that time, Gabriela was at the office, bracing herself to manage the business affairs before Wesley's departure for Athea.

The attending doctor warned that the treatment would take at least three months and could stretch to a year.

However long it stretched, Gabriela had already resolved to remain by his side.

So when her phone rang, she didn't even glance at the screen, her hands too busy scribbling notes. "Hello, who's calling?"

Her voice carried a cool detachment that made Matthew hesitate on the other end. After a brief pause, he spoke carefully. "Gabriela... it's me."

The pen in her hand stilled for a beat. Then, with deliberate composure, she replied, "Oh. Mr. Howard, what can I do for you?"

"Gabriela, I didn't know my mom visited yesterday. If she said anything out of line, I'd like to apologize on her behalf." His tone wavered, edged with helplessness, and for a moment an uneasy ripple flickered in Gabriela's chest.

But she steeled herself, remembering her mother's years of pain and the Howard family's suffocating arrogance.

“That matter is between her and me,” she said firmly. “It has nothing to do with you.”

“She’s your grandmother,” Matthew added, “and my mother. I know what she said was wrong—”

“Enough!” Gabriela cut in sharply. “Whatever you try to say or do, I’m not withdrawing the lawsuit against Lauren.”

She might have bowed her head in the past. After all, what chance did an insignificant young woman like her have against a powerful family?

But now, with Wesley standing firmly behind her, Gabriela was resolved to claim justice for herself.

Without waiting for Matthew’s reply, she ended the call.

Just then, Kaleb stepped into the office as she pressed a weary hand to her forehead.

“You’ve been pushing yourself too hard,” he said with quiet concern. “Go home and get some rest. I’ll handle what’s left at the company. Leave the worries to me.”

Gabriela shook her head gently.

Kaleb was no longer young. He had summoned her back to take on the role of CEO in hopes of retiring early, yet her return had only added more to his plate.

Retirement, for him, seemed to drift further away. The thought filled her with guilt.

"It's alright, Uncle Kaleb. I've got this," she assured him.

He studied her determined gaze and let out a soft sigh. "Very well. Do as you see fit. But if it ever becomes too much, promise me you'll let me handle it."

"Okay," she replied, a faint smile touching her lips.

Meanwhile, at the hospital, Matthew sat in silence, Gabriela's cold words still ringing in his ears, cutting deeper than he'd expected. His face betrayed his turmoil.

Beverley noticed and, with a disapproving frown, muttered, "Gabriela has no sense of respect for us. She'll never measure up to Rebecca's refinement."

"Mom, enough!" Matthew's voice, raw and trembling, cracked like a whip through the room. His eyes, rimmed red with emotion, burned with restrained fury.

“What has Gabriela done to deserve such scorn? She knows how to repay kindness and how to stand up for herself. What more could you want from her?”

“Rebecca hired bodyguards to wreck Gabriela’s company. And Cindy gathered vagrants just to stir up chaos at her hotel. Tell me, Mom—whose manners are lacking? Lauren spent millions to hire a fugitive to do her dirty work. And you thought you could toss around shares to buy silence, stripping Gabriela of her right to defend herself. Don’t you think that’s going too far?”

Chapter 689

Matthew’s arm, still gravely injured, ached with every word, and by the time he finished, his lungs burned, sending him into a fit of harsh coughing.

Beverley’s face tightened at her son’s rebuke, her temper flaring dangerously.

Even when she had once agreed to allow Gabriela back into the Howard family, it was always with the demand that Gabriela act meek and compliant.

But Gabriela’s defiance was feral. To her, such a woman could only be tamed by breaking her spirit.

Yet seeing Matthew gasping, his body wracked by pain, her anger faltered for a fleeting moment.

The marriage alliance between the Howard and McCoy families had left her son with the deepest scars, wounds that had never healed.

At last, Beverley forced herself into what she believed was graceful concession.

With a lofty air, she said, "There's no need to lose your composure over this. I won't meddle in this matter again. Will that satisfy you?"

Matthew shut his eyes, weary and disheartened. "Mom, I'm exhausted. Please... go home."

Beverley gathered herself, swallowing her fury behind a mask of dignity, and swept out of the hospital room.

Gabriela had no idea that Matthew had clashed bitterly with Beverley on her account.

She worked straight through the day, her focus unbroken. Even when a knock sounded at the door, she kept her fingers flying across the keyboard and said without looking up, "Come in."

The door swung open, carrying with it the faint scent of something crisp and refreshing. A tall, lean figure stepped inside.

The rhythm of the footsteps told her everything—Gabriela lifted her head, a smile instantly lighting her face. "Wesley! What brings you here?"

He stood with his suit jacket draped over one arm, his eyes warm as he looked at her. "I wrapped up all my work for the day at the office and thought I'd come pick you up," he said, extending a bouquet of roses. "These are for you."

He knew that Stewart had once overwhelmed Gabriela with flowers for nearly a month and was determined not only to match that gesture but to surpass it.

"Thank you," Gabriela murmured, accepting the bouquet. She brought the roses close, breathing in their fragrance with quiet delight. "They smell lovely."

Wesley's smile deepened as he offered his arm. "Come on. Let's go home."

With the flowers cradled in one hand and her other hand resting lightly on his arm, Gabriela walked out of the office by his side.

The staff stationed outside paused at the sight before them, exchanging glances filled with equal parts surprise and admiration. Straightening instinctively, they greeted with quiet respect. "Mr. Moss. Ms. Haynes."

Gabriela inclined her head with a gentle smile. "You've all worked hard today. Go home and rest. We'll continue tomorrow."

Only a handful remained behind—the ones who had stood by her unwaveringly. Unless the circumstances were dire, Gabriela never asked them to work late.

“Thank you, Ms. Haynes,” they replied in unison, their voices tinged with loyalty.

As Gabriela and Wesley exited together, a cluster of employees huddled in hushed whispers, curiosity bubbling over.

“So it’s true, then. Ms. Haynes is dating Mr. Moss.”

“That explains why Miss Howard lost her mind and came wrecking the place. She probably realized she didn’t stand a chance.”

“Stand a chance? Please. Miss Howard’s all noise and temper. Ms. Haynes? She’s got class, looks, brains, the whole package. If I were a man, I’d pick her ten times over before I’d look twice at Miss Howard.”

Someone leaned in, lowering their voice with dramatic weight. “You don’t know the half of it. Word is that Ms. Haynes might actually be a Howard.”

“No way! Ms. Haynes grew up an orphan.”

“Then how do you explain why Mr. Howard treated her so well? New air conditioners, an expensive bracelet, constant visits...”

“I’m starting to think it’s true—Ms. Haynes might really be a Howard.”

Chapter 690

Despite her reluctance to rejoin the Howard family, Gabriela swiftly became the center of town gossip as word of her true heritage spread rapidly.

Earlier, whispers had swirled around Gabriela and Wesley’s connection. Yet compared to Fiona and Rebecca, who had been paired with Wesley, many had deemed Gabriela’s origins too humble for him.

Circumstances had shifted, however. As a Howard—endowed with beauty, talent, and the distinction of having met Wesley first, with Wesley clearly devoted to Gabriela—she now appeared to be his ideal partner.

The chatter wasn’t confined to the Haynes Group’s staff; even during lunch breaks at Apex Group, employees huddled to exchange rumors.

As Gabriela’s best friend, Aubrey was inevitably surrounded by curious colleagues.

“Aubrey, is it true Gabriela is a daughter of the Howard family?”

“Aubrey, is Gabriela really with the boss?”

“Aubrey, I heard Gabriela has a kid. Is it true? Is the child Mr. Moss’s?”

The relentless questions bombarded Aubrey. They rang in her ears, giving her a headache.

She was aware Gabriela had a child with Wesley, but as a simple sales associate, it was not her place to share that insider information.

Mimicking Gabriela’s cool expression and tone, Aubrey shot a sharp look at the crowd. “So desperate to know? Go ask the boss directly.”

The group scattered like startled birds.

“Tch, being Gabriela’s friend makes her so smug. If she doesn’t want to share, she could just say so without the attitude,” someone muttered.

Unfazed, Aubrey took her tray and sat down next to Tessa, grumbling softly, “Is Gabriela really the daughter of the Howard family? She never told me.”

Tessa nudged her with an elbow, whispering, “Hush, Rebecca is here.”

Rebecca had been grappling with tough times lately.

First, her grandmother abruptly ended her engagement to the Moss family. Then she learned her father had an illegitimate daughter, and her mother faced frequent legal interrogations.

Now, rumors claimed Gabriela was Wesley's future wife.

Had Rebecca not wandered into the company cafeteria on a whim, she wouldn't have realized how fast people switched allegiances.

She sat at Aubrey and Tessa's table, smirking. "So, you're Gabriela's good friends?"

Normally, Rebecca exuded grace, like a refined lady—approachable and poised. But without her smile, her eyes turned cold and menacing.

Aubrey stiffened.

Tessa, seasoned in tense situations, replied evenly, "Yes."

"Then tell Gabriela that she's just a secret bastard. Does she really think she can waltz back into the Howard family?" Rebecca snapped.

Aubrey's fists tightened, ready to defend her friend, but Tessa gently pressed her hand down, silencing her.

Tessa smiled calmly. "Miss Howard, if you've got something to say, take it up with Gabriela. She's reasonable."

Rebecca's expression flickered.

What did that mean? Was that a subtle dig at her own lack of reason?

How dare a lowly secretary speak to her like that?

She sneered. "Let me make this clear—as long as I'm at Apex Group, Gabriela will never be the CEO's wife. Got it?"

Her icy glare swept the cafeteria, and many employees averted their eyes, unwilling to challenge her.

No matter if Rebecca could secure the role of the boss's wife, her status as a Howard made her a formidable figure not to be crossed lightly.

After unloading her frustration in the cafeteria, Rebecca stormed back to her office, only to find Billy and Brenden reviewing documents, which stoked her anger further.

“Brenden, that is Wesley’s chair. What gives you the right to sit there?” she hissed.

Brenden glanced up, surprised. “Why can’t I use it?”

With Wesley preparing to return to Moss Group headquarters to lead the family business, Brenden was tasked with managing Apex Group.

Though tedious, he was determined not to let Wesley down.

Rebecca, feeling it beneath her to argue with Brenden, snapped coldly, “Get out!”