

His kiss 691

Chapter 691

She knew how Brenden had risen to his position.

Wesley, nearing the end of his life, had handed the company to Brenden to secure his future.

He had even smoothed the path for Gabriela's company and helped her deal with the Howard family.

He had paved the way for everyone—except Rebecca.

Why?

She was his fiancée once.

If not for Brenden's interference, they would still be together.

The more Rebecca thought about it, the angrier she became, her voice dripping with rage.

Brenden, stunned, countered, "Rebecca, Billy is the executive assistant, I'm acting CEO, and you're just a secretary. What gives you the right to kick us out of the office?"

“Get out!” Rebecca dismissed them haughtily. “I don’t want to see you.”

Brenden, typically patient with women, saw her eyes red with anger and reluctantly left with Billy.

Facing Rebecca’s irrational outburst, he sighed to Billy, “Maybe we’ll work from the assistant’s office today?”

Billy nodded, reflecting on the news of Gabriela as a Howard daughter. Both she and Rebecca were Matthew’s daughters, yet their personalities were worlds apart.

Rebecca sank into Wesley’s office chair, thinking of that dignified, elegant man, her resentment deepening.

Wesley was meant to be hers—why did Gabriela, an illegitimate child, get to steal him away?

Just then, Cindy entered with Rebecca’s lunch.

Disliking cafeteria food and finding takeout inconvenient, Rebecca often had Cindy bring meals from home.

Setting the thermal container down, Cindy cautiously asked, "Rebecca, who upset you?"

Rebecca abruptly raised her head, fixing Cindy with a stare.

Her eyes were icy, shadowed with a hint of darkness, eerily reminiscent of someone teetering on the edge of a breakdown.

A shiver coursed through Cindy under that unsettling gaze. Instinctively, she approached meekly, dreading Rebecca's wrath. "Did I do something wrong?"

Ever since the Howard family's charity took in hundreds of homeless individuals, Rebecca had made Cindy's life increasingly miserable.

Cindy lived in constant fear, trembling at Rebecca's slightest scowl.

Rebecca grabbed Cindy's arm, twisting it harshly several times. Cindy's eyes watered from the pain, but she stayed silent.

After venting, Rebecca sneered, "Gabriela is such a schemer, claiming she doesn't want to return to the Howard family while secretly spreading the news, ensuring everyone knows she is a Howard."

She glared at Cindy. "Go to her company now and trash-talk her."

Cindy now harbored a growing fear of Gabriela.

Her unpredictable nature made any confrontation risky, with severe repercussions likely.

Yet defying Rebecca was unthinkable, so Cindy grudgingly made her way to the Haynes Group.

The receptionist, recognizing Cindy, barred her entry but courteously explained, “Miss Howard, Miss Haynes is currently meeting with important clients, and you don’t have an appointment. Please try again tomorrow.”

Unable to get in, Cindy lingered outside the company’s entrance and began hurling insults.

“Gabriela, are you feeling smug knowing you’re Uncle Matthew’s daughter? You are so hypocritical, claiming you want nothing to do with the Howard family while scheming in the shadows. An illegitimate child expecting a warm embrace from the Howard family? Pure fantasy! What is there to boast about? Your mother was a homewrecker, and you are nothing but a bastard. If you’re so brave, stop hiding and face me! I can’t imagine why Mr. Moss would care for someone like you...”

Cindy’s tirade lasted over ten minutes.

The fifth floor of the Lakeshore Building, a bustling hub with heavy foot traffic, drew a crowd that paused to witness her outburst.

Pleased with herself, Cindy thought her performance might spare her further torment from Rebecca.

Roughly twenty minutes later, Gabriela emerged.

Spotting her, Cindy charged forward, primed to unleash more venom.

But then, Matthew stepped out slowly behind Gabriela.

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Cindy's face drained of color.

She forced a fragile smile. "Uncle Matthew? What are you doing here?"

Matthew had come with a single purpose: to apologize to Gabriela.

A few curt words over the phone would never suffice; his presence was needed.

He had lingered outside her office, waiting patiently while Gabriela wrapped up her meeting. Their conversation had barely begun when Cindy's sharp voice cut through from outside. Matthew's expression darkened. "Cindy, who asked you to come here?"

Fear tightened around Cindy's chest. She couldn't betray Rebecca, yet she also dreaded Matthew's wrath. So she lowered her gaze and stayed silent.

Gabriela, however, remained a calm anchor amid the tension. Her expression was neutral, and her voice steady. "Mr. Howard, whatever you wish to discuss with me, please take her away first."

Matthew's shoulders slumped, shame flooding him. "I'm sorry, Gabriela. I'll take care of this."

Matthew then escorted Cindy back to the Howard Estate.

Beverley, having heard Matthew's account, immediately understood who had sent Cindy to stir up trouble at Gabriela's company. Rebecca, naturally.

Yet with Lauren already under repeated scrutiny, Beverley had no intention of punishing Rebecca for now. The girl had been living in constant fear lately, and Beverley felt a faint trace of sympathy.

Cindy, however, the foolish pawn, could not go unpunished.

Beverley's gaze turned icy. "Alberto, make her stand in the sun without pause for two hours. No water."

The midday sun blazed mercilessly. Two hours under its glare would be pure torment, though not fatal.

Cindy's face twisted with misery as she fell to her knees. "Mrs. Howard, I was wrong. I won't dare cause trouble for Gabriela again. Please, forgive me."

Beverley opened her eyes slowly, her voice steady yet razor-sharp. "What made you think I would allow a distant relative to treat my own granddaughter like that? If I let you go unpunished, others will believe they can do the same."

She could pick on Gabriela, but others could not.

This punishment was as much a lesson for Cindy as it was a quiet declaration to her son: boundaries were set, firm yet calculated, giving both sides a chance to retreat without losing face.

With no choice but to comply, Cindy trudged toward the courtyard, shoulders slumped under the sun's merciless glare.

Meanwhile, Lauren endured yet another round of questioning.

This was her third session in as many days. Without the protection of the Howard family's lawyers, their guarantees, and their ability to post bail, she would likely already be in detention.

The shame was suffocating.

Fury simmered beneath her skin. The moment she stepped out of the interrogation room, she stormed back to the McCoy residence, eager to vent her outrage to her parents.

“Mom, Dad, I can’t take this anymore! That shameless Gabriela struts around, acting fearless just because Matthew stands behind her. I don’t want to go to prison. You must help me!”

Herman had always spoiled his only daughter. If he hadn’t, he would never have stooped to schemes years ago to push her into the Howard family.

Now, with evidence he had hidden for more than a decade, he went straight to the Howard Estate to threaten Beverley.

In his hands was proof that, during the Howard family’s takeover of a project, high-grade materials had been quietly swapped for cheaper substitutes.

His face was solemn, his evidence undeniable.

“Beverley,” he said with deliberate care. “I know Lauren’s behavior in the past was excessive. And now, with her and Matthew at odds, even talking about divorce, I cannot blame him. But even if our families are no longer tied through marriage, surely it is wiser not to turn into enemies, wouldn’t you agree?”

Beverley's fingers trembled as she held the papers.

The McCoy's had sat on this secret for more than ten years, lurking in the shadows, quietly watching the Howards stumble, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

Beverley forced a smile, her fury hidden beneath calm words. "Of course. Even if Matthew and Lauren part ways, Rebecca will always be the Howard family's beloved child. She will always have her rightful share of the family's fortune."

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Herman's lips curved into a small, knowing smile. "Gabriela is also a Howard. I imagine she would be willing to listen to your advice if you gave it. Perhaps you should speak with her more often."

Beverley understood the meaning behind his words. She buried her anger and replied evenly, "You can rest easy, Herman."

When he was gone, she immediately summoned Alberto and murmured her orders.

He hesitated. "Madam, must we go this far?"

Her eyes hardened with resolve. "Gabriela is far too headstrong. Since she refuses to bend, her company will be made to suffer. This will cut down her pride and teach her to be manageable once she returns to the Howard family."

Leveraging the Howard family's influence, Beverley shut down most of Gabriela's business within two days.

Her warning was sharp and merciless. "If you don't drop the charges against Lauren, I can destroy the company your mother left you overnight."

Gabriela hadn't expected Beverley to go so far.

Her fists clenched as she sneered coldly, "Is this all the Howard family is capable of? Crushing people with your influence?"

Beverley's reply was calm, almost smug. "And yet this influence is what countless others spend their lives trying to achieve."

Her tone softened, almost coaxing. "Gabriela, as long as you back down, I will welcome you into the Howard family. Then this power will be yours as well, free to wield against anyone you dislike."

"Well, that's not going to work out, since the Howards are the ones I dislike the most."

With that, Gabriela ended the call with a sharp snap, her frustration spilling over.

At her side, Wesley pulled her gently into his arms. “Don’t let this bother you. Should I step in and teach them a lesson?”

Gabriela leaned against him, her voice quiet but firm. “No need. I’ll handle this myself.”

Although Wesley appeared composed, Gabriela knew his health was deteriorating. They were about to go abroad for him to seek treatment, and she refused to let him worry about such matters.

Wesley tapped her forehead with a gentle flick, his eyes a mix of firmness and affection. “As long as I’m here, you’re not allowed to shoulder everything by yourself.”

“I know,” she murmured, sliding her arms around his waist. Tilting her face up toward him, her gaze sincere, she added softly, “If it ever becomes too much, I’ll tell you.”

The Howards had crossed the line. This time, they meddled in a deal so sensitive that even the Moss family wouldn’t dare touch it. A reckless mistake.

Gabriela saw her opening, a chance to strike without mercy.

Though Wesley supported her resolve, he still phoned Billy, ordering him to keep watch on the Howards’ every step.

For Gabriela, this was the breaking point. Her patience was gone, her disappointment absolute. She immediately secured two of Okburg's top lawyers, prepared to wage war in court.

She would not be the quiet victim. She would show the Howards that she was no helpless target, but a fighter who would bare her fangs when provoked.

News of Gabriela's defiance left Beverley seething. Her appetite vanished; not a single bite passed her lips all day.

How could that foolish girl be so blind? If she let Lauren go, she would gain everything: status, wealth, and prosperity. Instead, Gabriela was hurling it all away.

Blind, stubborn, too caught in the weeds to grasp the larger picture.

As Beverley brooded, a visitor appeared at the estate: Presley. Ironically, the very deal Beverley had blocked for Gabriela revolved around her.

Presley, the celebrated international designer who had once gifted Gabriela a rare limited-edition handbag, entered with smooth composure.

She offered Beverley the courtesy of a greeting, but wasted no time on pleasantries. "My mother's eightieth birthday is the day after tomorrow. The banquet is set for The Gilded Fork, all arrangements already confirmed with the Haynes Group. With the celebration looming, why has the Howard family stepped in to obstruct our contract?"

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Beverley's expression shifted subtly at Presley's words. "Ms. Crawford, I believe there may be some confusion here. Allow me a moment to consult with my staff."

Presley commanded extraordinary social influence and maintained an intimate friendship with the Queen of Ewraso. Combined with her distinguished reputation in the design world, she had garnered deep respect throughout society.

Widowed early and childless, Presley now devoted herself to caring for her eighty-year-old mother.

Though her origins appeared modest, even the powerful Moss family tread carefully around her, and Beverley was desperate to avoid getting on her bad side.

Beverley swept into the adjacent room, urgently summoning Alberto for answers.

He conducted his inquiry and returned swiftly. "There is indeed a birthday celebration scheduled at The Gilded Fork tomorrow evening for an elderly woman, and the Haynes Group arranged the entire event."

Beverley's brow furrowed deeply. "Did no one investigate the client's background beforehand?"

Alberto spread his hands helplessly. "The staff failed to recognize Ms. Crawford."

Furthermore, the Haynes Group remained such an insignificant company that nobody expected them to secure such a remarkable contract.

Truth be told, Presley's gathering carried more prestige than GD Fashion Week itself.

Once the full picture emerged, Beverley's face darkened considerably.

Since Presley had already confronted them, placing blame would have to wait.

Beverley returned to the living room and offered Presley a genuine apology. "I extend my deepest regrets. My staff acted without proper consideration, creating this unfortunate misunderstanding."

Presley harbored no intention of condemning the Howard family. She possessed serenity and kindness, a woman of gentle reason through every fiber of her being.

She inquired softly, "Mrs. Howard, I'm curious what Gabriela might have done to provoke someone of your stature into personally targeting her."

Beverley refused to air family business before a stranger and replied curtly, "As you've likely heard, Gabriela belongs to the Howard bloodline. This amounts to nothing more than a minor family dispute."

Presley felt genuine surprise wash over her.

Though their interactions had been limited, she and Gabriela had maintained frequent contact while planning Presley's mother's birthday celebration, yet Gabriela had never breathed a word about her family connections.

Most people discovering they belonged to a family as illustrious as the Howards would trumpet the news immediately, desperate for recognition.

Yet Gabriela had remained perfectly composed, as though the revelation held no significance for her whatsoever.

This realization only deepened Presley's growing admiration for the young woman.

She sighed. "Since she's your own granddaughter, perhaps you shouldn't treat her quite so severely."

Beverley bristled at having her decisions questioned and shifted the conversation. "Ms. Crawford, today's incident rests entirely on my shoulders. I assure you, I'll locate a superior event planning company to guarantee your mother's birthday celebration proceeds flawlessly."

Presley shook her head firmly. "My mother has fallen completely in love with Gabriela's proposal."

The truth was that when Gabriela first accepted this assignment, she had conducted thorough research and discovered that Presley's mother, Lilian Crawford, remained a passionate devotee of classical music, particularly of the legendary soprano Bernice Thomas.

Bernice, once proclaimed the finest voice of her era, had withdrawn from public life years ago. Nobody understood how Gabriela had managed the impossible, but she had actually convinced Bernice to emerge from retirement, sending Lilian into absolute raptures.

The stage stood completed and every detail finalized, but at the final hour, the Howard family had reserved the entire venue for a full week, forcing the dismantling of everything. Naturally, Bernice had withdrawn her participation entirely.

"My mother worships Ms. Thomas and feels even more devastated than the singer herself. She's waiting at home for me to provide her with answers," Presley explained.

Hearing these words, Beverley experienced a sharp jolt of realization. She had never anticipated such intricate complications surrounding a simple birthday celebration.

She apologized to Presley once again. "You have my word that I'll discover a way to convince Bernice to reconsider her decision."

Presley's remaining anger evaporated, and she responded graciously, "Thank you, Mrs. Howard."

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Presley departed the Howard Estate accompanied by her young assistant.

The assistant, a spirited woman in her early twenties who struggled to contain her thoughts, voiced her indignation. “Ms. Crawford, are you truly going to forgive the Howard family so easily?”

The Howards dismissed the disruption of the birthday preparations with hollow apologies, never genuinely acknowledging the damage they’d caused. Outsiders might assume that Presley was someone you could cross without consequence.

Presley offered a cold smile and reassured her companion, “Why should you worry? Whether the Howard family can actually persuade Ms. Thomas remains highly questionable.”

Should the Howard family fail, she would be perfectly justified in making her demands.

Events unfolded exactly as Presley had predicted. The representative Beverley dispatched couldn’t even secure an audience with Bernice.

Beverley found herself with no alternative but to visit personally, only to encounter identical cold rejection from the renowned singer.

Bernice stood as the nation’s most celebrated classical vocalist, a legendary artist whose students populated every corner of the music world and whose admirers spanned every social stratum.

She owed the Howard family no courtesies whatsoever and confronted Beverley with an expression of pure frost.

"I arranged everything perfectly with Gabriela. The stage stood ready, every detail in place. Then your family descended like a storm, and suddenly everything lay in ruins. It resembled nothing less than vandals crashing through and destroying months of careful preparation!"

Bernice's fury burned undiminished. "This was meant to be a simple birthday celebration, nothing grandiose, yet you've transformed it into absolute chaos. Don't darken my doorstep again."

Bernice's student politely but firmly escorted Beverley from the residence.

Rage consumed Beverley so completely she could barely contain the trembling in her hands.

Given her standing, who in Okburg wouldn't extend her the utmost respect? Yet since Gabriela had emerged from nowhere, she found herself blocked at every turn. The once-formidable Howard family appeared to have suddenly lost all its legendary influence.

Beverley returned home, her anger simmering for hours. Even the carefully prepared coffee Alberto presented remained untouched on the silver tray.

Beverley couldn't comprehend how Gabriela, nothing more than an unknown young woman, had managed to win over someone as distinguished as Bernice.

She commanded sharply, "Find out exactly how Gabriela established contact with Bernice."

Alberto departed to execute her orders, returning only as evening shadows stretched across the estate.

“Gabriela secured a remarkable connection during her tenure at Apex Group. She met Mason from Alphacom Electronics and negotiated a billion-dollar contract that sent shockwaves through the business world.”

This extraordinary deal had even drawn in the Williams and Vasquez groups as investors, sending shockwaves through the industry. Mason had developed deep admiration for Gabriela and maintained their professional relationship long after her departure.

Moreover, Gabriela’s exceptional talent for creating intricate handmade models had forged a friendship between them.

Mason’s wife and Bernice had shared dormitory rooms during their college years and preserved a meaningful acquaintance across the decades.

This crucial connection, combined with Gabriela investing over half a month crafting a personalized model for Bernice, had proven instrumental in persuading the legendary soprano.

Gabriela’s artistry was nothing short of extraordinary; the model revealed intricate details so precise and lifelike it appeared to be a perfect miniature replica of reality itself.

Though Bernice typically showed little interest in handcrafted pieces, she became utterly enchanted by Gabriela's creation and agreed to emerge from her long retirement.

After absorbing Alberto's comprehensive report, Beverley experienced a whirlwind of conflicting emotions.

She had dismissed Gabriela as merely rebellious and unrefined, someone lacking genuine ability.

She had never anticipated that Gabriela possessed such remarkable talents hidden beneath her defiant exterior.

She glanced at the ornate clock adorning the wall. Evening had already settled over the mansion.

With only one precious day remaining, every moment had become critical.

Beverley instructed Alberto with urgent precision to ready the car immediately.

She would confront Gabriela directly, face to face.

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Gabriela barred Beverley at the threshold this time, not even a foot past the villa's polished doors.

With her posture serene, she said evenly, "Whatever it is, say it here."

Beverley, who prided herself on decades of cultivated poise, flinched. Her breathing came sharp and furious, her veneer cracking.

"Gabriela, I am your grandmother. How dare you treat me so shamefully? No manners, no respect! It's outrageous!"

"My apologies," Gabriela murmured coolly. "I lost my mother young, and no one ever taught me manners."

"You!" Beverley's face flushed crimson, fury tightening every word. "You're utterly impossible!"

Gabriela's gaze didn't waver. "Just state your purpose, Mrs. Howard. If there is nothing more, I'll go back inside."

After all, Truett was waiting for her, and he was far more important than this quarrel.

Beverley had never encountered anyone so unyielding: impervious to coaxing, immune to threats, and utterly unmoved by her authority.

For a moment, fury strangled her words, leaving her nearly speechless. When she finally regained her voice, it dripped with haughty assurance.

"I've already spoken with The Gilded Fork. You may proceed with Lilian's birthday banquet the day after tomorrow," Beverley said. "Remember, you are still a Howard. Do well at Lilian's birthday, and I won't meddle with your company again."

"I'm afraid I cannot continue with the banquet preparations," Gabriela replied evenly. "When the stage was torn down, Ms. Thomas witnessed it. She was furious, and she's sworn never to perform again under any circumstances."

Beverley's expression soured, her cloudy eyes narrowing, pressing down with a suffocating weight. "You dare defy me?"

Gabriela replied, her voice calm, her gaze unwavering, "You were the one who ordered the stage destroyed."

Beverley pressed a hand to her chest, her composure splintering. "Then build another one! You convinced Bernice once; you can do it again!"

Gabriela's lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. "A handmade model takes painstaking effort. It can't be conjured overnight."

Beverley's eyes sharpened. She realized it now. This was bargaining. "What is it you want?"

Gabriela didn't hesitate. Each word landed like a hammer. "I want Lauren in prison. Give me your word that you won't interfere, and I'll bring Ms. Thomas back."

Beverley's fury ignited anew, nearly choking her breath. Aside from forcing Matthew to marry Lauren, she had never bowed her head like this.

Never in her old age had she imagined a mere young woman would have the audacity to threaten her so openly.

Yet if she wanted to avoid making an enemy of Presley, she had no choice but to relent.

Beverley closed her eyes and finally nodded. "Fine. We have a deal."

Gabriela unclenched her fists, a small, victorious smile curving her lips. "Thank you, Mrs. Howard."

Beverley's gaze remained icy. "You're young and reckless. You don't yet understand that sometimes you must yield. Mark my words: you'll regret it one day."

Gabriela's smile never wavered. "When it comes to someone like Lauren, stepping back won't bring peace. It only gives them room to push me off the cliff."

Except for Truett, her one soft spot, Gabriela feared nothing. She never bowed in adversity, nor let success make her reckless.

She knew that as long as she stayed true to what was right, no one could crush her spirit.

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Beverley admired that quietly, but still snorted. "You're a stubborn one, I'll give you that!"

Gabriela's voice remained steady, earnest. "Believing she was untouchable because of the support from the McCoy and Howard families, Lauren hired people to harm me. But I have allies too."

Some of her friends carried weight in the underworld, and each treated her with affection and care. Any impossible task she requested, they would make happen.

Yet she seldom called on them, preferring to rely on her own steady efforts.

Even with such restraint, she was leagues above Lauren.

Beverley was left speechless, storming off in frustration.

With the Howard family's protection gone, Lauren was detained the next day.

Panicked, Rebecca rushed to Jasper, hoping he could intervene.

“Gabriela’s my father’s daughter too. If she returns to the family, she could rival you for control of the company.”

Jasper’s brows knitted slightly.

“Jasper, you know I don’t understand management. You’ve been running things all these years. But Gabriela... she has talent. If she returns, the Howard Group might not have a place for you anymore.”

Jasper gently patted her head, his tone soothing. “Don’t worry. I’ll find a way to get your mother off the hook.”

“Thank you, Jasper!” Rebecca cried, clinging to him as if he were her lifeline.

Jasper remained silent.

Words were easy; action was another matter entirely.

Chaos in Rebecca’s family worked to his advantage.

Gabriela, however, did pose a certain challenge to him, and he needed to keep his guard up.

Lauren had been abandoned by the Howards. Gabriela's lawyers provided a preliminary assessment. "Barring any surprises, Lauren will serve at least one year and three months for hiring someone to murder you."

Though the sentence was moderate, Gabriela felt satisfied. Achieving this purely through her own efforts and without leaning on anyone was no small accomplishment.

Gabriela then visited Bernice once more.

She offered, "Ms. Thomas, within three months, I'll craft another model for you. This one will be a concert hall. Would you like it?"

Bernice felt a flutter in her chest. When she'd seen the previous model, part of her had regretted that it hadn't been a concert hall.

Now, with Gabriela proposing to create one, she agreed without hesitation.

"Given your sincerity, I'll make an exception for you," Bernice said. "I'll perform on stage tomorrow."

Gabriela's face lit up, her gratitude genuine. "Thank you, Ms. Thomas!"

The new stage was set up at Presley's manor, carefully orchestrated by Gabriela and her team.

The banquet venue shimmered with precision and care, every detail accounted for.

On the day of the banquet, Bernice performed several timeless pieces for Lilian.

Though retired for years, her skill remained impeccable. Her presence commanded the stage, and her voice washed over the room and held it captive.

Lilian watched, delighted, every note a treasure.

After the performance, Lilian shyly requested an autograph.

Bernice smiled graciously and obliged.

The two elderly women, one eighty, the other seventy-two, both crowned with silvery hair, shared a quiet, reverent moment.

When Bernice handed the signed photo to Lilian, Gabriela observed, sensing the enduring power of artistry.

The moment moved her unexpectedly, and she found herself asking Bernice for an autograph as well.

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Gabriela had thrown herself into preparations for Lilian's birthday banquet these past few days, her energy infectious as she bustled through every detail. Lilian watched her tireless efforts with quiet appreciation.

While Bernice signed an autograph for Gabriela, Lilian drifted closer to her daughter and murmured, "This young woman captivates me."

Presley's laughter bubbled up. "She has that effect on me too."

A sudden thought sparked in her eyes, and she quickly added, "Mother, I spotted her first. You cannot steal her from me."

Back when Wesley requested that coveted handbag for Gabriela, Presley had felt herself drawn to that capable young woman.

Presley had traveled the world over the past year, occasionally accepting royal invitations and enjoying stays in palaces.

Without her mother's eightieth birthday anchoring her here today, she would likely still be lounging beneath some breathtaking sunset.

Despite her years, Lilian's spirit blazed bright as she fixed her daughter with a pointed stare. "Are you sure you want to battle me for a promising girl? With your idle ways, could you truly nurture Gabriela's potential?"

Presley's response carried unwavering confidence. "My reputation outshines yours."

Laughter escaped Lilian, though reflection revealed the truth in those words.

Learning from her daughter would certainly open wider horizons for Gabriela.

Lilian relented, saying, "Very well, she becomes yours."

The mother-daughter pair settled Gabriela's destiny as the Crawford family's craft inheritor with casual finality.

Presley prepared to discuss accepting Gabriela as her protégé when she noticed Bernice clasping Gabriela's hand, her gaze radiating unmistakable fondness.

“Tell me, Gabriela, does classical music truly appeal to you?” Bernice inquired.

Gabriela’s nod carried certainty. “It does.”

Bernice leaned closer with genuine curiosity. “But do you grasp its essence? Do you understand what breathes beneath its surface?”

Today’s youth rushed through life, pursuing shallow thrills and fleeting satisfaction. Precious few possessed the patience to embrace traditional art’s profound depths.

Gabriela’s response flowed with measured seriousness.

“Classical music carries centuries of history. It...”

Her invitation to Bernice had demanded thorough preparation. When she discussed classical music’s origins and evolution, her words carried calm authority and compelling depth.

Bernice was impressed by her deep knowledge of classical music. The question tumbled out almost unbidden. “Gabriela, would you consider studying under my guidance?”

Presley and Lilian exchanged startled glances.

Though Lilian cherished classical music with devoted passion, she refused to let Bernice claim her daughter's chosen successor.

She interjected swiftly, "Ms. Thomas, musical training demands childhood foundations. Wouldn't this prove too late for Gabriela?"

Surprise flickered across Gabriela's features at Bernice's unexpected offer.

Classical vocal preparation typically began at a young age. Disappointment shadowed Bernice's expression, though determination remained unshaken. "Gabriela possesses natural gifts. With dedicated effort, she might still achieve something significant."

The gathering continued around them.

Some guests represented Lilian's distinguished circle, while many others were Bernice's enthusiastic fans.

Nearby listeners perked up when Bernice mentioned taking a student, their curious gazes settling on Gabriela with obvious intrigue.

Who was this mysterious young woman? How did she charm Bernice with such apparent ease?

Understanding her limitations perfectly, Gabriela declined with heartfelt humility. "My voice lacks the qualities needed. I would only bring you disappointment, Ms. Thomas."

Regret touched Bernice's sigh, though she didn't pursue the matter. Instead, she pressed a tuning fork into Gabriela's hand. "This is a gift for you. Visit me whenever your schedule allows."

Gabriela accepted without hesitation. "Thank you, Ms. Thomas."

Witnessing this exchange, Lilian produced an exquisite bracelet for Gabriela.

It was crafted with sterling silver and a luminous cultured pearl for a touch of refined sophistication.

Gabriela sensed the bracelet's value and hastily refused. "Mrs. Crawford, this is your birthday celebration. How could I possibly accept such generosity?"

Her own gift to Lilian had been modestly priced, not exceeding three digits.

But Lilian's insistence proved unwavering.

Presley's intervention finally settled matters. "Gabriela, accept it graciously. Everyone's attention rests on you."

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Under the guests' collective scrutiny, Gabriela had no alternative but to comply, silently promising to present Lilian with something finer later.

The sight of two distinguished ladies showering Gabriela with gifts stirred both envy and amazement among the observers, ensuring her memorable impression would linger.

When the banquet drew to its close, Presley assisted her mother in bidding their guests farewell.

Gabriela remained behind with several staff members to restore order.

The manor returned to its peaceful state, and Gabriela prepared to depart when Presley requested her lingering presence.

"Something important requires our discussion."

Presley unveiled her newest handbag creation. The design featured an embroidered tableau of two birds preparing for flight from a blossoming branch.

The masterful needlework breathed such life into the scene that the birds seemed poised to burst from their fabric prison into freedom.

“Gabriela, examine this carefully. Do you notice any color discord within this design?” Presley inquired.

The memory of her unguarded critiques at Moss Manor, delivered before she knew Presley’s true identity, sent heat creeping up Gabriela’s neck. “Ms. Crawford, your bag’s design achieves beautiful harmony between concept and execution.”

Presley’s smile carried knowing warmth. “No need for diplomacy. Simply recreate this design on paper and breathe your own color vision into it.”

As Gabriela gathered the paper, pen, and watercolors, bewilderment clouded her thoughts. How had she, the banquet’s orchestrator, found herself transformed into an impromptu artist?

Years had passed since that missed high school competition, and her painting skills felt cobwebbed with neglect.

Yet this task demanded mere replication with personal color innovation, and Gabriela’s hands soon found their forgotten rhythm, completing the piece with renewed confidence.

Presley’s delighted applause filled the space.

Her original design had concentrated color drama solely upon the birds, relegating flowers and leaves to muted background roles, an approach that created visual tension rather than harmony.

Gabriela's subtle adjustments had transformed the entire composition, weaving colors into a symphony that whispered of tranquil joy to anyone who gazed upon it.

Wonder kindled in Presley's eyes. "Gabriela, you possess an extraordinary gift for color relationships."

Even Lilian reached for her reading glasses, studying the artwork with intense scrutiny.

This young woman claimed years of artistic dormancy, yet produced work of startling sophistication.

With proper mentorship, her potential seemed boundless. Lilian suddenly questioned her decision to let her daughter guide Gabriela instead of guiding her herself.

Just as doubt prepared to reshape her resolve, Gabriela's phone shattered the moment's contemplation.

After a brief conversation, she addressed both women. "My boyfriend has arrived to collect me. I should return home now."

Lilian swallowed her emerging words.

Presley accompanied Gabriela through the manor's corridors, their footsteps echoing against polished floors. "Visit my estate in a few days' time. Something significant awaits our discussion."

Curiosity sparked within Gabriela's mind. What weighty matter could someone of Presley's stature wish to explore with her?

Perhaps another elaborate celebration required planning.

She offered her agreement with a gentle nod. "Certainly."

Beyond the manor's gates, Wesley's vehicle waited in patient attendance. He stood beside it, tall, composed, unwavering in his vigil.

Presley's voice carried playful undertones. "Mr. Moss, your affection for Gabriela was transparent even last year. My congratulations on your romantic success."

Wesley's smile conveyed genuine appreciation. "Thank you, Ms. Crawford. When marriage beckons, you'll certainly receive our invitation."

After exchanging final pleasantries, Gabriela and Wesley settled into the car's luxurious interior.

He observed exhaustion painting shadows beneath Gabriela's eyes and drew her into his protective embrace. "The day has drained you?"

Gabriela's nod carried weary honesty. "Somewhat."

She had faced Beverley's threat and managed to overcome the challenges entirely on her own.

Wesley captured her hand, his thumb tracing soothing circles across her palm, a gesture suggesting unspoken words gathering weight within him.

His gaze held depths touched with weariness, as if important revelations pressed against his silence.

Chapter 700

Once he learned that Gabriela and Wesley were together, Roger unleashed relentless pressure on his grandson.

"Though Gabriela is a Howard, she remains nothing more than an illegitimate daughter—far beneath Rebecca's standing. If you must choose someone other than Rebecca, it shouldn't be Gabriela."

Roger stood firm in his resolve to bar Gabriela from marrying into the Moss family. Wesley, facing his imminent departure for overseas treatment, feared he wouldn't return in time to shield her from the fallout.

To his relief, Roger now had to account for Matthew's presence and didn't dare strike directly at Gabriela.

Wesley studied Gabriela's face, her eyes still holding traces of innocence, and decided she didn't need to bear the weight of these family machinations.

When he left the country, he would have to rely on trusted allies to watch over her.

The couple made their way back to the villa.

Miriam and Loretta had arrived earlier, guiding Truett through his tentative steps across the living room.

Loretta had grown so weary of Susie's barbs that she'd abandoned her beloved community dance gatherings entirely. Susie brought her three-year-old great-grandchild to every dance session—a charming little one with honeyed words and boundless energy who delighted in copying Susie's movements with chubby arms and wobbly legs, drawing coos of appreciation from the crowd.

While Loretta adored the precious child, she couldn't stomach Susie's pointed remarks.

"It's such a shame you're not a great-grandparent yet. Someone should really encourage your grandson to settle down."

These words left Loretta so incensed that she refused all contact with Susie for two solid weeks.

Evenings stretched endlessly without her usual social outlet, driving her to seek refuge at Gabriela's home, where she could dote on Truett instead.

As Wesley and Gabriela stepped through the door together, Loretta froze momentarily, then released a pointed snort before turning deliberately toward Miriam.

"Susie's daughter-in-law just delivered another great-grandchild. She's practically floating on air with joy."

Wesley had barely crossed the threshold before his grandmother's mocking began. Unable to reveal the truth behind his situation, he could only cast a pleading look in Gabriela's direction.

This silent appeal only stoked Loretta's irritation further.

"Don't you dare look to her for rescue! Even Gabriela can't shield you from this!"

Wesley touched his nose and managed a rueful smile. "Please don't upset yourself. I will start a family one day."

Most people remained unaware of Wesley's condition, including Loretta. He refused to burden her with worry or compromise her health with such devastating news.

Gabriela also couldn't risk exposing Truett's true parentage to the Moss family, leaving Wesley with no choice but to weather his grandmother's scolding with grace.

His reply only convinced Loretta that he was dismissing her concerns entirely, fueling her mounting frustration.

"I suppose I'll draw my final breath without ever witnessing my great-grandchild's birth or hearing those sweet words, 'Great-grandma.'"

Gabriela prepared to offer consoling words when Truett tottered over on unsteady legs, wrapped his small arms around Loretta's knee, and gazed up at her with bright eyes.

Perhaps Loretta's words had registered in his young mind, because he opened his mouth and produced the sweetest sound. "Great-grandma."

Though his pronunciation wavered slightly, everyone present could still hear it.

Loretta's heart melted instantly. She responded with overwhelming warmth, scooping Truett into her arms while her face bloomed with pure delight.

Truett possessed such natural sweetness and intuitive kindness.

If Tessa truly lacked the time to nurture him properly, how perfect it would be for Loretta to fill that role.

Despite Loretta's earlier storm of anger, Truett's adorable presence transformed dinner into a celebration of shared joy.

Following the meal, Miriam drew Wesley outside for a private stroll across the villa's moonlit grounds.

She fixed him with a serious stare. "Mr. Moss, I need the absolute truth—have you and Gabriela truly become a couple?"