

His kiss 761

Chapter 761

A sudden warmth spread through Wesley's chest, an unfamiliar softness easing the tension within him.

He finished his shower quickly and stepped out to find Gabriela waiting, insisting on drying his hair again. Though Wesley had decided to start anew, these tender gestures still caught him off guard.

A mischievous smile played on Gabriela's lips. "Did you forget? I used to do this for you every day."

Her quiet persistence left Wesley with little choice but to let her have her way. She picked up the hairdryer and worked patiently through his hair, her fingers light and careful.

His hair gleamed under the warm bedroom light—thick, silky, almost perfect, showing that the years of treatment abroad had not diminished its quality.

The rich scent of shampoo lingered in the air, mingling with the gentle hum of the dryer and filling the room with a comforting warmth. In the tender stillness, Gabriela spoke softly, her tone calm yet firm.

"Wesley, I don't understand why you returned from abroad believing I stayed with you only because of Allan. You've forgotten parts of the past, and I don't hold that against you. But tonight, I need to be honest. Allan and I were once very close. He was the one who reached for me when I was drowning, who cared for me, who pulled me back from the edge. At that time, he was the most important person in my world, and no one could take his place. Even if it hurts you, you deserve to know this."

Her words hung in the quiet space between them.

Wesley's stern expression gradually softened, the tension in his shoulders easing.

A sharp ache filled his chest—regret that he had not known Gabriela during her darkest days, that he had not been there to shield her from the pain.

He would never be the one who had saved her then, never the irreplaceable figure etched in her memory.

Gabriela's voice grew even softer. "Still, you've stood by me, supported me, and helped me deal with Marie and everyone else. Most importantly, you love me."

Setting the dryer aside, she gracefully crouched before Wesley, tilting her head back so her luminous eyes met his.

"And I love you," she murmured, her gaze so warm it stole his breath. "That's something no one—least of all Allan—could ever replace. Wesley, you're truly extraordinary. There is only one you in this world, and no one could ever take your place. Why do you keep comparing yourself to anyone else? Don't go comparing yourself to Allan, all right? You're both good men, but you're entirely different—and you're the one I choose. You're the only one I want to hold close, the only one I need at my side forever."

A soft red shimmer lingered in Wesley's eyes, as though all the turmoil inside him had finally settled.

His finger brushed softly over Gabriela's lips. When he spoke, his voice was rough and low. "You sweet talker. Did the cola make your mouth sweet?"

Gabriela hesitated, her lashes fluttering. "I guess so."

"Let me taste it."

With that, Wesley lowered his head, capturing her lips in a gentle kiss.

The faint, clean scent of his shower still clung to him, cool and intoxicating, and his lips were just as fresh.

The kiss held a fierce, almost hungry intensity—what began as a gentle touch quickly deepened, turning demanding, almost relentless.

Gabriela went still, completely overtaken, her breath catching as if she had forgotten how to move.

When she didn't respond, irritation flashed in Wesley's eyes. He bit her lip just hard enough to make her flinch.

A startled sound escaped her, but before she could speak, he deepened the kiss, pressing forward with commanding intensity.

Still half-crouched, she felt lightheaded, as though the air had thinned, forcing her to cling to his collar for support.

Wesley's arm tightened around her, and in one swift motion he scooped her up and laid her onto the bed.

He pinned her beneath him, his warm hands sliding under her clothes, sending shivers down her spine until a helpless sound slipped from her throat.

"Take it easy..." Her tone wavered, soft enough to vanish in the air.

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A deepening intensity filled Wesley's gaze, his words low and steady. "Gabriela, I believe you. In a few days—"

He had chosen a date for them to get their marriage certificate and was even planning to have Truett formally acknowledged by the family.

But before he could say more, a sudden, urgent knocking rattled the door.

Startled, Gabriela jerked upright, fumbling to straighten her clothes.

Wesley's expression darkened, shadows gathering in his eyes.

Gabriela crossed the room and opened the door.

Myah stood clutching a pillow, her hair disheveled, eyes wide with residual fear.

Gabriela's heart clenched. She crouched slightly and asked gently, "Myah, what's wrong?"

With a sob, Myah flung herself into Gabriela's arms. "Gabriela, I had a terrible dream about Allan! He was hit by a car—there was blood everywhere!"

Her whole body trembled violently. "Gabriela, my brother was such a good man, so kind. He never hurt anyone. Why would fate be so cruel as to take him?"

Gabriela's chest ached at the sight. Memories of Allan's accident flashed through her mind, her own eyes stinging.

She swallowed her grief and gently stroked Myah's back, murmuring quiet reassurances.

Wesley approached, resting a warm hand on Myah's head. "Don't be afraid. It's over now—it's all in the past."

"But I can't sleep alone. The dark still scares me." Myah's voice quivered as she looked up with pleading eyes. "Gabriela, will you stay with me tonight?"

Gabriela's gaze drifted toward Wesley.

Seeing her concern, he nodded without hesitation. "Go ahead and keep her company. I'll take the guest room."

Casting a fleeting glance at Wesley, Myah bowed her head. "I'm sorry, Wesley. I'm interrupting your time together."

"Not at all," he said gently. "No matter what you ask, I won't blame you. You never have to feel like a burden."

His tone softened further. "Tomorrow, I'll have Billy pick up some aromatherapy candles. Light one before bed—it should help you sleep."

"Okay," Myah murmured, managing a shy smile. "Thank you, Wesley."

As Wesley turned to leave, a small shadow darted into the room.

Truett, who must have woken at some point, grinned mischievously at Myah. “Myah, you’re such a chicken! You’re a grown-up, but you’re still scared of the dark?”

Truett giggled at his own joke.

For a split second, a faint shadow crossed Myah’s gaze, her expression dimming.

Gabriela quickly intervened, her tone light but firm. “Myah just returned from abroad. She’s still not used to life here. Truett, you’re a little man now—don’t tease girls like that.”

Truett puffed out his tiny chest proudly. “That’s right! I’m a little man now, so I’ll protect Myah!”

He grabbed Myah’s hand with all the solemnity of a hero and tugged her toward the door. “Myah, you can share my bed so you won’t be scared!”

Before anyone could stop him, he was already leading Myah back to her room, determined to keep his promise.

Gabriela let out a weary sigh but managed a soft smile. “Truett really is a brave little guy.”

Though Truett had led Myah away, Wesley's mood had soured the moment "Allan" and "car accident" were mentioned. He shrugged. "I might as well head back to my place."

In haste, Gabriela grabbed his sleeve. "It's so late, and it's raining. Driving now would be risky. Stay here tonight."

A faint, almost bitter smile curved Wesley's lips. "Forget it. If Myah comes to crawl into your bed again, we'd be disrupted again. And honestly—your mind is probably still on Allan right now. Me staying would only make things more awkward."

The sarcastic edge in his tone left Gabriela stunned.

They had just worked through their differences—why did he sound like this again?

Seeing no point in arguing, Gabriela swallowed her explanation and reluctantly let him go.

She walked him to the gate of the complex and stood watching until the car's taillights disappeared into the night.

A heavy, helpless sigh escaped her. Truett, your father is impossible," she grumbled inwardly.

Truett, of course, had no idea how difficult his father could be.

At this moment, Myah had lulled him to sleep, and he was curled up like a little ball, breathing evenly. She rhythmically patted his small back, her eyes devoid of any warmth.

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Truett nestled deeper into sleep, thumb in his mouth, resembling a tiny, endearing hamster.

Myah gently draped the blanket over him, tucking it snugly around his small form.

She grabbed her phone and stepped onto the balcony.

A text pinged: "Didn't you say Wesley and Gabriela were most sensitive about Allan? I acted on your tip, but why didn't they bite?"

Myah's expression turned icy. She deleted the message without replying. "Idiot," she muttered under her breath.

A sudden knock from Gabriela startled her.

Concerned that Truett might disturb Myah's sleep, Gabriela offered to carry him back to his own room.

“No need, Gabriela,” Myah whispered. “He’s sleeping soundly. Let’s not wake him.”

“How about you take my room, and I’ll stay here with him?” Gabriela suggested.

“No, really, it’s fine,” Myah replied. “Wesley needs his rest too.”

“He went back to his place,” Gabriela said.

A fleeting glint of delight passed through Myah’s eyes, unnoticed by Gabriela in the dim light.

In the end, Truett stayed in Myah’s room. She insisted she loved looking after him and didn’t mind keeping him for the night. Gabriela didn’t press further.

Wesley returned to his place, pushed open the door, and sank onto the sofa.

The space, untouched all day, felt hollow and still. Compared to the lively villa, it seemed starkly barren.

Wesley pinched the bridge of his nose, weariness shadowing his eyes.

Regret gnawed at him. He shouldn't have stormed off in a fit of impulse. If he'd stayed, he could be asleep beside Gabriela right now.

As regret festered, a thread of resentment emerged. Gabriela hadn't even tried to stop him after his angry exit. Didn't she claim to care about him? What a liar.

The next morning, Gabriela descended the stairs to find Matthew already there.

He sat on the living room sofa, looking refreshed, while Farley poured him coffee. The two chatted amiably.

The moment Gabriela appeared, Matthew rose, giving her a concerned once-over.

"What's wrong?" she asked, confused.

"Last night at the banquet, Rebecca's grandfather kept me talking for a long time, so I couldn't get back to you," Matthew explained. "I heard Rebecca gave you trouble afterward. Is that true?"

Gabriela shook her head. "Not exactly."

In truth, Rebecca's actions had inadvertently helped. Wesley had been gentle and patient with her last night—a stark contrast to his earlier coldness.

Matthew pressed for details. Learning that Wesley had intervened left him conflicted. Wesley's ongoing health issues cast a shadow over Gabriela's future. Worse, the wrong medication had caused memory lapses, leading to his harsh treatment of her.

Matthew couldn't easily endorse such an unpredictable man.

But as Matthew mentally listed Wesley's flaws, Truett stirred awake.

Myah guided him downstairs. Spotting Matthew, Truett scampered over on his little legs. "Grandpa, you're here!"

Matthew scooped up his cherished grandson, his face lighting up with a warm smile. "Good morning, Truett!"

"Good morning!" Truett replied with an adorable nod. "Grandpa, I have exciting news!"

With his clear, young voice, Truett shared how Wesley had visited the day before, and how he'd been a brave boy who promised to protect Myah from the dark.

When Myah mentioned wanting Gabriela to stay with her at night, Matthew's brow furrowed slightly, his gaze flickering toward her.

Myah greeted him courteously. “Mr. Howard.”

Matthew gave a brief nod, then turned his attention back to Truett, guiding him to wash up before they sat down for breakfast together. It was the highlight of his day.

So when Truett beamed and said, “Grandpa, have you met my dad? He’s so tall and handsome—like a real superhero!” Matthew felt a flicker of warmth toward Wesley, softening his earlier reservations.

Chapter 764

After all, Wesley was the father of his beloved grandson. For now, Matthew could set aside his concerns about Wesley’s health.

Unbeknownst to Wesley, in his future father-in-law’s eyes, he still had much to prove. His only current advantage was being Truett’s father.

Back at the company, Wesley instructed Billy to organize an urgent meeting.

To everyone’s surprise, Brenden was nowhere to be found.

Over the past two years, as acting CEO of Apex Group, Brenden had become a fixture in the boardroom. The executives had grown used to his leadership, with him personally steering several major projects.

His unexpected absence sent ripples through the office, fueling whispers that Wesley's return might sideline him.

Billy quickly dialed Brenden, who answered with a sharp edge to his voice. "Tell Wesley I'm not working for someone so heartless."

With that, he ended the call, leaving Billy at a loss for words.

What the heck was going on with Brenden?

"Mr. Moss, Mr. Saunders says he's not feeling well and won't be in today," Billy reported, trying to sound supportive.

Wesley's brow creased. "Let's proceed without him."

Meanwhile, Brenden—supposedly unwell—was lounging on the fifth floor of the Lakeshore Building, chewing gum and chatting with the attractive receptionist. He had a knack for charming women with ease.

Just then, Gabriela returned to the office. The receptionist greeted her respectfully. "Good morning, Ms. Hayes."

Before Gabriela could reply, Brenden spun around, his face lit with exaggerated longing. “Gabriela, you’re finally here! I’ve been waiting forever.”

Used to Brenden’s theatrics, Gabriela brushed past him, quietly giving instructions to the receptionist. “I’ll be out this morning and have a meeting this afternoon. No visitors today, even with appointments.”

The receptionist nodded.

Gabriela walked inside, Brenden trailing close behind. “Gabriela, why are you ignoring me?” he asked, feigning hurt.

“Don’t you have work to do?” Gabriela shot back, glancing at him.

For the past two years, Brenden had been stretched thin as Apex Group’s acting CEO. Billy had dragged him across countless business trips, project reviews, and client dinners. Even when he was sick, he’d been called back to the office, sometimes working late into the night.

Brenden often vented to Gabriela about his “cold, unfeeling” cousin.

“Now that Wesley’s back, I’m taking a well-deserved break. Besides, after what he did to you, I’m boycotting work for a month to stand in solidarity!” Brenden declared with mock righteousness.

Gabriela rolled her eyes and ignored him.

As Gabriela settled at her desk to work, Brenden paced her office, undeterred.

“Gabriela, why didn’t you take me to the charity gala yesterday? I heard Rebecca gave you grief. Your bag sold for only 1.1 million? If I’d been there, I’d have bid 10 million and made you the star of the night.”

Gabriela sighed. “What would I do with that kind of spotlight? It’s not something you can eat or wear.”

Brenden pressed on. “But Rebecca mocked you for the low bid. She knew you couldn’t dance and tried to humiliate you. She’s so scheming!”

Gabriela, engrossed in her typing, found Brenden’s chatter as loud as a bustling marketplace and wished she could shoo him away.

“Gabriela, didn’t Wesley dance with you at the gala? Come on, spill it—what happened between you two?”

Exasperated by Brenden’s gossip, Gabriela snapped, “Nothing happened! And if you ask again, you’re out.”

Sensing her irritation, Brenden backed off, but quickly pivoted to gossiping about someone else.

Chapter 765

Brenden brought up the episode with the white roses. “Gabriela, what’s with that guy in the white suit? First, he spills wine on your shoes, then he tries to swoop in like some gallant hero. Thank heavens you didn’t fall for it.”

Gabriela thought of the young man whose face so uncannily resembled Allan’s. “It wasn’t intentional,” she said softly.

“Not intentional? Of course it was!” Brenden shot back. “Out of everyone in that huge hall, he just happened to bump into you. And then, what a coincidence, he spills red wine on your shoes. Please. That was no accident. He was clearly trying to get your attention.”

Gabriela’s fingers froze over the keyboard.

Brenden kept muttering, but Gabriela no longer heard him.

She had told herself it was just a coincidence.

But Brenden’s words planted a seed of doubt.

What if it wasn’t a coincidence? What if the man in the white suit had deliberately collided with her—dressed like Allan, carrying white roses, carefully reenacting that unforgettable night from their college dance?

Her chest tightened. There were memories of Allan that were private, known only to her. So who was behind this performance? And what did they want?

Her pulse quickened as she reached for her phone. "Tyler, I need you to look into someone for me."

"Who exactly?" Tyler's steady voice came through.

"I don't even know his name," Gabriela answered. "All I have is a picture."

"Send me the photo first," Tyler said.

Gabriela scrolled to the news coverage of the Howard family's charity gala. Though Rebecca had kept it modest, it was still newsworthy. Reporters had captured plenty, including the moment red wine splashed across her shoes.

She clipped the image, her fingers trembling slightly, and sent it to Tyler.

Tyler's reply came quickly. "Give me a few days."

"Thanks, Tyler," Gabriela murmured, ending the call.

Brenden immediately leaned in, lowering his voice with mock secrecy. “Gabriela, admit it! You think it was deliberate too, don’t you? Rebecca may be spiteful, but she’s not dumb enough for such a cheap trick. This smells like a bigger game.”

Gabriela gave him a sidelong glance. “You might be right, Brenden.”

The auction, the wine, the eerily familiar scene... it all felt connected by an invisible thread. Yet the purpose remained a mystery.

She hadn’t truly been harmed, except for the drugged wine.

Brenden, seeing she was actually considering his theory, looked oddly pleased. “You do listen to me sometimes.”

“Then listen to me just once,” Gabriela said seriously. “The past two years have proven how capable you are. Apex Group thrived under you. They need you back.”

“No way!” Brenden groaned at the thought of piles of documents. “I’m on break. For you.”

Gabriela patted his shoulder with mock sympathy. “But without you, the company might struggle. You’re indispensable.”

A faint blush crept across his face. "Am I really that important?"

"You are," Gabriela replied with solemn conviction. "Never doubt it."

Brenden thought back over the past two years, how Apex Group had flourished under his care.

A sheepish grin spread across his face. Even Wesley couldn't do without him. A man with such responsibility shouldn't hold petty grudges.

With his pride soothed and duty calling, Brenden returned to Apex Group.

After a short meeting, Wesley prepared to meet an important client. Brenden stepped in front of him. "Wesley, let me handle this. Gabriela was right. You're not at your best. I shouldn't hold petty grudges."

At the mention of Gabriela's name, Wesley's gaze turned sharp. "You went to see Gabriela?"

"Yes," Brenden replied without hesitation. "Rebecca humiliated her yesterday, so I went to check on her. Gabriela is different. She's bright and gentle. I couldn't raise my voice at her if I tried. If it were up to me, I'd shield her every day, keep her safe. But Rebecca keeps targeting her. One day, I'll make her pay."

Wesley's expression darkened. A muscle tensed in his jaw. Without a word, he turned and walked away.

Gabriela was his. Protecting her was his responsibility, no one else's.

Billy could only rub his temples.

Brenden, even now, was painfully naive. Skipping meetings, speaking so recklessly... If he weren't Wesley's cousin, the business world would have eaten him alive. His mother's gifted shares alone would never sustain his lifestyle.

Stung by the silent dismissal, Brenden hesitated in the corridor. A fleeting doubt pricked him—had Gabriela tricked him into leaving?

Wesley had walked several meters before glancing back. Seeing Brenden standing dazed, he said coolly, "Aren't you coming?"

"Coming!" Brenden brightened instantly and trotted after Wesley.

In his heart, he knew it. Wesley couldn't do without him. Maybe he shouldn't stay angry after all.

Meanwhile, having neatly redirected Brenden, Gabriela received a call from Presley.

“Gabriela, I’m back. Can you pick me up at the airport?”

“Sure,” she replied. No matter her schedule, she would always make time for her mentor.

Gabriela drove her compact car to the airport and soon spotted Presley in the crowd.

Beside her stood a woman who immediately drew the eye.

A foreigner, perhaps in her forties, wearing a chic cloche hat with a light gray suit dress. Her poise carried an unmistakable elegance, yet the warmth in her eyes suggested approachability.

Gabriela hurried forward. “Ms. Crawford.”

Presley returned her greeting with a genial nod, then smiled. “This is my protégée, Gabriela.”

“She’s lovely,” the woman remarked, her tone tinged with admiration. “And so very young.”

Gabriela inclined her head politely, curiosity flickering in her gaze. “And you are?”

Presley lowered his voice, almost conspiratorial. "This is Princess Alvira. She's here with me in Okburg on a private visit. Best not to spread word."

Understanding, Gabriela quickly bowed slightly. "Your Highness, welcome to Okburg."

Only then did she notice the wall of bodyguards trailing the princess.

Each stood well over six feet, dressed in identical black suits. They formed a protective cordon around her, moving with silent, practiced efficiency.

"Hello," Princess Alvira said warmly, extending her hand.

Gabriela clasped it lightly, struck by her gentle grace.

After the introductions, Gabriela drove them toward Presley's estate.

The princess showed no disdain for the modest car, sitting beside Presley without complaint. Her guards, however, hailed several sleek black vehicles and followed in formation.

Once they arrived, Presley turned to Gabriela. "Didn't you recently design a new handbag? You should show it to the princess."

Gabriela had already sent Presley photos, and Princess Alvira, having seen them, had taken a particular interest.

“Last time, Miss Emersyn Thorpe bought my bag,” Gabriela explained, “but somehow it ended up being auctioned at the Howard family’s charity event. At last, it was secured by Alissa Hopkins.”

Gabriela recounted the incident briefly.

Princess Alvira listened with growing curiosity. “If Miss Hopkins is willing, I would be happy to pay a higher price for the bag.”

She had long admired Presley’s craftsmanship, especially the intricate embroidery that distinguished her work. As her protégée, Gabriela’s creations naturally intrigued her.

“I’ll inquire right away,” Gabriela said.

Meanwhile, Alissa—unaware that a princess now coveted the handbag—was weathering a storm at home.

In the Hopkins’ grand living room, her father, Boden Hopkins, stood before her, face flushed with rage as several uncles added fuel to the fire.

He jabbed a finger toward her. "Who is this Gabriela? A nobody! An illegitimate daughter! And you wasted over a million on her handbag? You're unbelievable!"

Chapter 767

Boden was furious because Alissa's reckless behavior had offended Rebecca, potentially inviting disaster for the entire Hopkins family.

Divorce or not, Rebecca remained Matthew and Lauren's daughter, the rightful heiress of the Howard family.

Gabriela, for all her talent, was still marked as the child of an affair.

Even if the divorce went through, Rebecca would still command the full backing of the McCoy family. Her aunts had all married into influential households, creating a network of power few dared to provoke.

Yet Alissa had the audacity to provoke them, endangering the entire family.

It wasn't just Boden who lashed out at her; even her uncles joined in their censure.

Alissa could no longer stomach her father's servile tone. She snapped back with defiance, "Bernice and Mason bid as well! Mason has ties with the upper circles, and Bernice is a renowned maestro in classical music. They even offered a million!"

Boden's expression darkened. "They bid because of their personal relationship with Gabriela. Their support is theirs to give. But why must you meddle? Gabriela has studied design for only two years! How could her work possibly be worth a million? It's ridiculous!"

But Alissa, who had received the handbag just yesterday, thought otherwise. To her, it outshone any luxury brand with its intricate, lifelike, impossibly fine embroidery.

How could such artistry ever be deemed ridiculous?

She was about to fire back when her half-sister, Nicole Hopkins, interjected timidly.

"Alissa," she said softly, "our family may be wealthy, but Father works hard for his money. You shouldn't squander it so recklessly. Look how upset he is. You should apologize instead of arguing."

Nicole was Boden's daughter from his mistress. Eight years ago, the woman had appeared at the Hopkins' villa, fainting at the doorstep with her secret child in tow.

Overcome with guilt, Boden had taken them in, even purchasing a mansion for them.

He claimed one drunken mistake had ruined the woman's life, and his conscience demanded he provide for her. Maddie had been silenced by this excuse.

However, beneath that delicate exterior, Nicole was shrewd. Upon entering the Hopkins family, she cultivated the image of a gentle, innocent girl. She excelled in academics and music, gradually eclipsing Alissa, the legitimate daughter.

Before long, most of the family favored this seemingly flawless Nicole.

Fiery and strong-willed, Alissa saw right through the act. She spat out her contempt, "You angel-faced fraud, who do you think you are? What right do you have to speak here?"

Nicole recoiled instantly, cowering behind Boden, her wide eyes brimming with feigned fear.

Alissa's blood boiled. "Enough with the act!"

But before she could continue, a sharp slap rang through the air. Boden's palm had landed hard across Alissa's cheek.

Maddie, who had remained silent until now, finally broke. Her voice trembled. "If Alissa made a mistake, she can make amends. Why did you use violence? She's your daughter!"

Boden's glare was like thunder. "Daughter? Look at the mess you've made of her! I took that woman and her child in out of pity, nothing more. And you? You wear your suffering like a crown, playing the martyr at every turn! You've poisoned Alissa with that same defiance. She won't listen! She squanders money, clings to deadbeats, and drags this family down!"

Maddie swallowed her protest, lowering her head under the relatives' watchful eyes.

Alissa's voice cracked, her eyes burning. "Why take it out on Mom? You brought your mistress's daughter into this house. Did she ever complain? And now you scold her in front of everyone?"

Nicole burst into tears instantly, her wails more pitiful than Maddie's grief. "Alissa, Maddie, please, don't fight because of me. It's all my fault. I'll leave right now!"

She rushed out dramatically, sobs echoing down the hall.

Chapter 768

"You ungrateful child!" Boden roared, raising his hand again. "She's your sister! How can you treat her like this? She's timid and rarely goes out. If something happens to her, could you live with yourself?"

Alissa's chest heaved. Whatever affection she had left for her father shattered.

With stinging eyes, she spun on her heel and bolted.

Maddie called after her, moving to chase, but Boden's voice cracked like a whip. "Let her go. If she dares leave, she's no daughter of mine!"

Alissa stormed out, hailed a taxi, and gave the driver the address to Midnight Oasis.

Sliding into a booth, she immediately ordered a dozen tequila shots.

Tyler, who had just opened the bar for the evening, raised a brow. A young woman drowning herself in that much liquor caught his attention.

He approached with a half-smile, his tone gentle but firm. "Careful. A place like this... tequila isn't something you knock back by the dozen."

It wasn't judgment, just concern.

Alissa looked up at him—broad shoulders, an honest face. She managed a faint smile. "Thanks."

Kindness came from a stranger, when her own father had shown none.

Something about her seemed faintly familiar to Tyler. He signaled the bartender. "Keep an eye on her. Don't let her overdo it."

"Got it, boss," the bartender replied.

Alissa knocked back two shots in quick succession, fire burning down her throat, when her phone buzzed. It was her father.

“Alissa, where are you?” Boden’s voice was cold but controlled. “Come back. We need to talk.”

It was a stark contrast to his earlier rage.

For a fleeting moment, a foolish hope jolted her heart—that he might be worried.

The sharp ache in her chest nearly brought tears. She left the remaining drinks, paid the bill, and rushed home.

But upon entering, her breath caught. The house was filled with guests.

Boden greeted her with a smile, his earlier fury vanished as if it had never existed. “Alissa,” he said smoothly, “where’s the handbag you bought last night?”

“In my room,” she answered cautiously, eyes narrowing.

The living room was filled with well-dressed business figures and their partners. It didn’t look like a simple family discussion.

Boden, beaming, made introductions.

Alissa greeted them politely, though her instincts screamed that something was amiss. These people, who usually spared her no glance, now regarded her with disarming warmth.

Her chest tightened with suspicion. Was her father planning to use her as a bargaining chip?

At his urging, she fetched the handbag.

The women, intrigued, asked to see it.

Alissa handed it over, her voice clipped. "Please be careful. Don't damage it."

This wasn't just any handbag. She had spent over a million of her own savings on it. More importantly, it was Gabriela's masterpiece.

The women showered it with praise, marveling at the exquisite design, sumptuous leather, and flawless embroidery.

"This embroidery is so lifelike, the flowers seem ready to bloom right off the fabric," one exclaimed.

Their praises swelled, bordering on reverence. Then one lady cleared her throat and turned to Boden. "Mr. Hopkins, I'd like to offer two million for this handbag. Would your daughter consider selling?"

Another immediately interjected, her tone sharp. "Two million? That's too low for something this exceptional. I'll pay two and a half!"

Alissa stared, utterly baffled. What was happening?

Just yesterday, this handbag was dismissed as worthless. Now people were vying for it?

The bidding war escalated rapidly, with offers soon soaring past three million.

The bag itself might be worth ten thousand at most, and Gabriela was still an unknown designer, making the numbers absurd.

Were these people insane? Why this sudden frenzy over something previously dismissed? Was it Gabriela's talent alone, or perhaps her beauty, that had captivated them?

Chapter 769

Several affluent women had vied fiercely for the handbag, but Boden declined to make a decision on its sale. He offered a measured apology, saying, "I'll consult with Alissa before finalizing anything."

Once the butler had ushered the guests out, Boden turned to Alissa, his tone firm. "I need you to give me the handbag."

Clutching the bag tightly, Alissa retorted, "Absolutely not! You just reprimanded me for being extravagant. Why should I hand it over?"

Boden's expression darkened, though he reined in his frustration and revealed his reasoning. "Princess Alvira of Ewraso is currently in Okburg. And she wants this bag."

Though she was traveling incognito, her interest in a particular handbag—this handbag—had spread swiftly through elite circles.

Ambitious business figures, eager to forge ties with her, were now approaching the Hopkins family, offering substantial sums to purchase it as a gift to win her favor.

Alissa's lips curled into a smug smile. "So now they see its true worth?"

Gabriela's talent was undeniable.

Boden's stern expression softened a fraction. "If you give me the bag to present to the princess, it will benefit the entire family."

“No chance!” Alissa declared. “I won this handbag fair and square, and I’m not giving it to anyone.”

With that, she marched to her room and locked the bag securely in her wardrobe.

Boden’s face flushed with anger, but unable to lash out directly, he muttered complaints about Maddie’s influence on Alissa’s defiant spirit.

Nicole stood silently nearby, her gaze lowered, her unreadable thoughts masked.

As she secured the handbag, a wave of satisfaction washed over Alissa.

Gabriela’s captivating designs were truly in demand.

She was more determined than ever to connect with the designer herself.

But how? A pang of regret struck her—her earlier mockery of Gabriela’s modest car couldn’t have helped.

Meanwhile, Gabriela was unaware of Alissa’s determination to befriend her. She was deep in conversation with Princess Alvira. Princess Alvira, having learned that Alissa refused to sell the bag, was not upset.

Instead, she understood the sentiment well.

“I adore Presley’s creations too. If someone tried to take one from me, I’d hold on just as tightly. Gabriela, it’s remarkable that you’ve earned such devoted admirers of your own.”

After commending Gabriela, the princess turned to Presley. “When might you create another piece for me?”

For any designer, the admiration of the Ewraso royal family was a prestigious honor.

Yet Presley, known for her reluctance to accept new commissions, wasn’t easily swayed, even by a personal request.

The embroidery was part of a revered tradition, with Presley’s technique being the most intricate of its kind.

It fused global trends with traditional motifs, creating a unique beauty that had become her signature—so intricate that replication had proven impossible.

Presley proceeded to explain the various embroidery styles to the princess, detailing each one. “My specialty involves over a hundred unique stitching methods, each requiring unparalleled skill and precision.”

This complexity was why Presley, now in her later years, had never taken on a protégé—until Gabriela.

“I’m truly sorry,” Presley said earnestly. “This work is incredibly time-intensive and strains the eyes. At my age, my vision simply can’t keep up.”

The princess nodded understandingly, her love for the handbags undiminished.

After a moment’s thought, she turned to Gabriela. “It’s extraordinary that you’ve grasped such a challenging technique in just two years.”

A blush touched Gabriela’s cheeks as she thanked the princess.

The princess pressed gently. “Would you consider designing a piece for me?”

Caught off guard, Gabriela hesitated, feeling inadequate for the task. “I haven’t fully honed my skills yet. How could I create something for you?”

Over the past two years, juggling her company and caring for Truett had left little time to refine her embroidery.

She'd kept pace with Presley's lessons only thanks to her strong artistic foundation and keen sense of color. Presley had not yet deemed her ready to take on commissions on her own.

"It's fine, Gabriela," Princess Alvira reassured her. "You can design a piece for me. No matter the result, I have full confidence in you."

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The princess's approachable demeanor sparked an instant fondness in Gabriela. She glanced at Presley for guidance.

Presley gave a subtle, encouraging nod.

With her mentor's tacit approval, Gabriela accepted the commission with a serious nod. "I'll do my best, but it may take a long time."

Crafting the design and executing the embroidery would demand at least three months.

The princess beamed. "Time is no concern at all."

Once completed, it could be delivered to Ewraso on her behalf.

Meanwhile, Alissa, now in possession of the coveted handbag, found herself thrust into the social spotlight.

One day, a prominent socialite invited her to shop; the next, an elegant lady whisked her off for a spa day; and by the third, a charming young man asked her to dinner. Alissa reveled in her newfound prominence.

Though Boden couldn't secure the handbag, his attitude toward her softened considerably, which brought a welcome reprieve for Maddie as well.

Nicole, however, seethed with envy. Despite her efforts to maintain a calm and graceful facade, Alissa saw right through her.

Alissa took every opportunity to flaunt her triumphs in front of Nicole.

"Oh, this bracelet? A gift from that lovely lady yesterday. Isn't it stunning, Nicole?"

Nicole forced a smile. "It's beautiful."

Alissa's tone dripped with sarcasm. "All you do is play the piano. What's the point? Even if you master it, you'll never cross paths with someone like Gabriela or the princess in your lifetime."

She didn't hesitate to make such jabs, even in Boden's presence.

Reluctantly dependent on Alissa's social cachet, Boden swallowed his frustration, which only fueled her boldness.

Nicole's carefully crafted poise began to crack. Each evening, she retreated to her room, consumed by silent fury.

One afternoon, while accompanying a wealthy lady to collect a custom gown, Alissa spotted Gabriela.

Gabriela was with Presley, carefully selecting silk satin and vibrant threads.

Determined to use the finest materials for her first royal commission, she was engrossed in choosing the most exquisite patterns.

Amid her busy schedule, she hadn't found time to mend things with Wesley.

As she examined a bolt of satin, a voice called out, "Miss Hayes!"

Gabriela looked up, surprised to see Alissa.

Recognizing the girl who had defended her at the party, she smiled warmly. "Miss Hopkins."

“Please, just call me Alissa,” she insisted.

Caught up in the other girl’s enthusiasm, Gabriela nodded. “All right, Alissa.”

“And I’ll call you Gabriela!”

Alissa’s protective, almost admiring gaze made Gabriela chuckle, though it left her slightly bemused. “Alissa, why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because you are pretty. I can’t keep my eyes off you,” Alissa said earnestly, as if it were the most obvious truth.

Gabriela found it both amusing and perplexing. She couldn’t help but notice the odd intensity in Alissa’s eyes—not merely seeking friendship, but the awe of someone encountering a rare treasure.

Presley joined in with a hearty laugh. “Gabriela’s talent is what shines; her beauty is just a bonus.”

Finding them both approachable, Alissa chatted briefly before sidling closer to Gabriela and attempting to link arms with her.

The sudden familiarity made Gabriela uneasy, but with others watching, she didn't want to cause a scene and allowed the gesture.

As a faint, pleasant fragrance wafted from Gabriela, a thrill ran through Alissa. Spending over a million on that handbag had been worth every penny!

Unbeknownst to them, Wesley witnessed the scene. His expression darkened.

Swamped with work, he hadn't seen Gabriela lately and had been too proud to reach out first.

He'd told himself that a single kind word from her would bridge the gap, letting the matter with Allan fade.

But Gabriela hadn't approached him, and now here she was, arm-in-arm with someone else.

Unacceptable!

Billy, noticing Wesley's icy demeanor, leaned in and whispered, "Mr. Moss, that's the Hopkins family's daughter. Miss Hayes is quite the sensation now—even the ladies are smitten with her."

Wesley's irritation only deepened.

Allan and Stewart were bad enough—now a woman was vying for Gabriela's attention too?