

His kiss 791

Chapter 791

Around them, the other socialites stifled laughter behind their hands.

Rebecca, the Howard heiress, had been placed on a pedestal for years. Only Alissa dared confront her so directly.

Rebecca's face darkened. She turned and swept away, abandoning the piano solo she had prepared.

When she returned home, the fire in her chest still burned.

She wanted to see her father, to ask if he still cared for her, or if Gabriela was now his only cherished daughter.

As she approached his study, she noticed the door slightly ajar. Voices drifted out.

Beverley's sharp tone came first. "You want to name Gabriela the heiress of our company?"

Matthew's reply was steady. "Yes."

"I refuse," Beverley shot back. "Years ago, because Gabriela bore Wesley's child, I had to be the villain and end Rebecca's engagement."

The words struck Rebecca like thunder.

So Gabriela had ruined her engagement. And Beverley had known about the child all along.

From beginning to end, Rebecca had been the only one kept in the dark.

Her fists clenched, nails biting deep into her palms as she fought the urge to storm in and confront Beverley.

The voices inside carried on.

"In any case," Beverley said, "we cannot play favorites. If Gabriela becomes heiress, what about Rebecca? What about the McCoy family?"

"I couldn't care less about the McCoys!" Matthew's voice dripped disdain. "If Rebecca had the ability, she'd already be leading the board instead of Jasper. Mother, Gabriela is your granddaughter too. Would you rather hand the company to her or to Jasper?"

At that, Beverley fell into silence.

Jasper, after all, was not her blood grandson.

The inheritance battle had once nearly torn the family apart. Peace only came when Matthew secured Jasper a seat on the board, forcing both branches of the family into a fragile truce.

But Matthew was too lenient. Once Beverley passed, the Howard legacy could easily slip into Jasper's grasp.

"But Gabriela has no leverage. The board would never accept her," Beverley said, doubt flickering across her face.

Sensing her hesitation, Matthew leaned in. "I've watched Gabriela for years. She's managed the Haynes Group skillfully. She earned Presley's trust on her own and built ties with Princess Alvira."

Beverley shook her head. "That doesn't change reality. Jasper has been running this company for years. He holds the reins, and the board trusts him. Replacing him now is impossible."

It wasn't just Gabriela's lack of influence that worried her.

If they provoked Jasper, he might retaliate openly, and a power struggle could devastate the company.

Matthew only chuckled. “Mother, you’ve never truly seen Gabriela. Years ago, she brought over a hundred homeless people to our doorstep and urged me to open a shelter. I did, and in two years, it’s grown to house over three hundred. That single project won us government recognition and smoothed the way for countless ventures.”

Beverley frowned. “And what does that have to do with her?”

“The shelter is registered under Gabriela’s name,” Matthew replied with a small, knowing smile.

The shelter’s success wasn’t just charity—it was leverage. A project tied to Gabriela’s name would sway at least half the board in her favor.

Matthew was about to continue when the floor creaked.

His smile vanished. He turned sharply. “Who’s there?”

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Matthew approached the door and opened it, startled to find Rebecca standing there. “Rebecca? Weren’t you and your mother attending the Holt family’s banquet? Why are you home so soon?”

Rebecca’s face was ashen. She kept her trembling hand behind her back, fingers pressing hard into her palm.

“Dad, I... I’m not feeling well,” she murmured.

“What’s wrong?” Despite his disdain for the McCoy family and his strained relationship with Lauren, Matthew felt a pang of guilt and concern for his daughter. He gently touched her forehead and asked in a soft voice, “Should I call a doctor?”

“Just a little lightheaded,” Rebecca said, holding back tears. “I’ll be fine after resting in my room.”

“All right. Go lie down,” Matthew said, his tone softening.

Even Beverley approached and offered a few words of genuine concern.

Rebecca headed upstairs. The moment she shut her bedroom door, she called Lauren.

“Mom, come home now!” Her voice trembled on the verge of tears.

“Rebecca, where did you go?” Lauren replied. “The piano performance started. Since you weren’t there, the Holt family had Vivian take your place. She’s stealing your spotlight, and the Holts aren’t happy.”

While mingling with the other elite women, Lauren hadn’t noticed Rebecca slip away.

“Who cares about shining at some minor Holt family event!” Rebecca snapped, bitterness sharp in her voice. “Gabriela is coming back to take over the Howard Group—who has time to worry about the Holts?”

She had worked tirelessly to improve herself, swallowing her pride, yet in her father’s eyes, only Gabriela mattered—that other woman’s daughter. He had even been laying the groundwork for her for two years.

Stunned, Lauren left the banquet immediately and hurried home.

As she arrived, Matthew emerged from the study. He gave her a curt nod before heading upstairs.

Their bond had grown cold, though Matthew refrained from a public split for the sake of the family’s reputation.

Lauren watched him go, her heart torn between love and resentment.

Beverley stepped out of the study. Lauren quickly masked her feelings. “Beverley.”

Beverley glanced at her, seeing through her facade. “The banquet just started. Why are you and Rebecca back so early?”

Lauren lowered her gaze. "I'm not feeling well."

Matthew had already moved to a separate bedroom, and the Howard family knew their marriage was crumbling.

Lauren needed to keep up appearances with Beverley to delay the inevitable.

"What a coincidence," Beverley said coolly. "Rebecca isn't feeling well either."

Lauren didn't dare respond. Beverley pressed on. "She must have overheard Matthew and me earlier. And I assume you know now, too."

They had left the door ajar, unconcerned about eavesdroppers.

"Since you're aware, I'll be blunt." After a pause, she continued, "Matthew and I have decided to bring Gabriela into the Howard Group."

Lauren flinched, blurting out, "Why?"

"Because, like Rebecca, she is Matthew's daughter," Beverley stated. "When the Howard family was struggling, the McCoys stirred trouble behind the scenes. I rebuilt this family myself. Though I have stepped back from the board due to my age, I still hold influence in the Howard Group. When Gabriela returns, I'll support her. I expect you not to interfere."

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"It's unfortunate Matthew avoided conflict and handed the company to Jasper too early. Now Jasper and his branch control most of the power."

Lauren stayed silent, head bowed.

One misstep years ago had sparked a chain of errors that shattered her bond with Matthew.

But she had acted out of love—what was so wrong with that?

Was bringing Gabriela into the business just a way to provoke her?

Beverley, as if reading her mind, cast a cold glance. "If Rebecca were competent, the company would already be hers, and Gabriela wouldn't even be in the picture."

Lauren's face tightened with suppressed rage, but she forced respect. "Yes, Beverley. You're right."

This old woman always claimed the moral high ground, reaping all the rewards, she thought bitterly.

Matthew had long lost interest in the company, and Jasper's skill was undeniable. Even if Rebecca had taken charge back then, Jasper would have outmaneuvered her.

Now they were propping up Gabriela, with Matthew quietly paving her path and Beverley stepping in. It was blatant favoritism.

Beverley knew Lauren would never accept this willingly, but Lauren had no choice but to comply.

"If Rebecca is capable, she can join the company and compete with Gabriela." With a final scoff, Beverley added, "After studying abroad, Rebecca chose to work as Wesley's secretary instead of building a place in her family's company. The Howard family values pragmatism, not sentimentality. I don't know who she takes after."

Lauren's decades of devotion to Matthew were brushed off as mere "sentimentality," chilling her heart.

Bitterly, she said, "Beverley, my methods may have been flawed, but my love for Matthew is real. Please don't dismiss it."

"Real love is reciprocal. What you're doing—destroying what you can't have— isn't love. It's selfishness. You made a terrible mistake back then. I hope you'll see that soon and sign the divorce papers. It's better for you, for Rebecca, and for the McCoys."

Leaning on her cane, Beverley walked away slowly.

Swallowing her seething hatred, Lauren turned to comfort Rebecca upstairs.

But at the top of the stairs stood Rebecca, eyes red with fury. “Mom, I’m joining the Howard Group!” she declared.

There was no way she, a top graduate, would lose to someone like Gabriela. She would grind Gabriela into the dust.

“All right!” Lauren rushed forward, clasping her daughter’s hand tightly. “Rebecca, whatever you want, I’ll support you.”

Unbeknownst to Gabriela, Matthew planned to hand her the company. Nor did she know Rebecca now viewed her as a rival, plotting against her.

Even if she had known, Gabriela had no time to dwell on it.

She had finished her design drafts, and Princess Alvira loved them.

“I wish I could watch the production process,” Alvira said regretfully. “But I must return to Ewraso tomorrow.”

Gabriela smiled. “No worries, Your Highness. I’ll send daily photo updates.”

“Thank you, that’s very thoughtful,” Alvira replied, directing her maid to get Gabriela’s number.

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After Princess Alvira’s departure from Okburg, Gabriela didn’t slow down in the slightest.

If anything, her days grew even more demanding.

Between sketching new designs and running the company her mother had left behind, she often worked until the early hours of the morning.

One draining afternoon, surrounded by fabric swatches and mountains of paperwork, she received a summons from the Howard estate—Beverley wanted to ask if she would like to return to the Everglow Group.

Gabriela sat across from Beverley and wasted no time. “Thank you,” she said curtly, “but I can hardly spare a moment these days.”

Beverley’s lips curved into a faint, knowing smile. “The Everglow Group is the Howard family’s legacy. Compared to that, the company your mother left you is insignificant.” Her tone sharpened. “You should think carefully.”

“There’s no need,” Gabriela replied coolly. “I know perfectly well how powerful Everglow is. But that’s irrelevant to me. I once lived in fear of hunger and unpaid tuition. Now, I hold substantial assets and a five-star hotel. That’s more than I ever dreamed of.” She paused, her voice softening but steady. “Mrs. Howard, this isn’t bitterness. It’s contentment. I am truly happy with my life.”

Gabriela had been raised in scarcity; luxury was something she had never imagined.

What mattered now was the quiet blessing of being able to raise Truett in safety and comfort.

Beverley leaned forward. “But have you considered? The Haynes Group is a minnow compared to the Moss empire. If you truly wish to stand beside Wesley with dignity, your rightful place is within the Everglow Group.”

At Wesley’s name, Gabriela faltered for the briefest moment. She couldn’t deny her heart still held him close, but his constant suspicion had worn her down.

No matter how hard she tried, Allan always loomed between them. Even if today’s misunderstandings cleared, tomorrow would bring new ones.

She simply had no time or energy to keep patching broken trust.

“I don’t need to marry into the Moss family,” Gabriela said quietly but with resolve.

Beverley's eyes widened. "You bore Truett for Wesley. Do you no longer love him? Why refuse marriage now?"

Gabriela's answer was frank and weary. "I'm drowning in work. I hardly have the luxury to breathe, much less chase romantic dreams."

For once, Beverley found herself impressed.

This was the kind of strength the Howard family ought to embody—not the shallow entanglements of Lauren or Rebecca.

In that moment, Beverley's determination to shape Gabriela into her successor deepened. "Gabriela, your father and I have already cleared the path for you to return to the company. When you change your mind, the door will be open."

"Again, there's no need," Gabriela replied firmly, rising to leave.

She declined dinner and walked out without hesitation. Returning to the Howard family had never once entered her plans.

Still, whispers of Beverley's invitation spread quickly through their circle.

Meanwhile, at Jasper's residence, Rebecca spoke with an almost careless air. "Jasper, I hate to say I told you so, but I was right. Father's obsession with Gabriela would one day put your position at risk. Now, do you believe me?"

Jasper swirled the red wine in his glass, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

"The Everglow Group was your family's to begin with. Uncle Matthew trusted me enough to bring me onto the board. If he chooses to pass the reins to his daughter, then stepping back and supporting her is only natural."

Rebecca's tone hardened. "At this point, there's no use pretending. You've poured years of work into the company, only to see it handed to an outsider. Can you really stomach that?"

Jasper arched a brow, his dark eyes unreadable. "What exactly are you driving at, Rebecca?"

"I want your help," she said, her voice steady with resolve. "I want my seat back on the board, and I need you to help me push Gabriela out."

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Jasper gave a short laugh. "What difference does it make if it's you or Gabriela in that chair?"

"It makes all the difference," Rebecca replied, holding his gaze. "I've never had any desire to compete with you for the CEO's role. All I want is to see Gabriela fall. Once she's gone, the company goes back to you."

Jasper watched her carefully, saying nothing.

She pressed on. "You may hold power, but don't forget that my father remains the largest shareholder, and my grandmother controls another ten percent. My father intends to split his shares between Gabriela and me. Help me crush her, and once I win, I'll sell my portion to you."

At that, Jasper's detached demeanor shifted. He leaned forward slightly, interest flickering in his gaze. "Why should I trust you?"

Rebecca gave a small, deliberate smile. "I'm not suited to running a company. Selling my shares to you for a fortune means I can live comfortably without lifting a finger. Jasper, I've never stood in your way. Why wouldn't you believe me?"

Jasper's eyes grew colder, but his lips curved faintly. "Fair enough," he said. "We have a deal."

If she dared betray him, he would make her regret it.

That night, Rebecca stayed at Jasper's, ensuring word of their alliance would spread.

At the Haynes Group, Gabriela had little patience for whatever Rebecca was plotting this time.

But Alissa's constant chatter about her and Jasper was beginning to grate on her nerves.

"Alissa, I'm swamped," Gabriela sighed during a brief pause.

"But it's Rebecca! Aren't you worried what those two are cooking up?" Alissa said.

Gabriela's lips curved in a faint, dismissive smile. "I've done nothing wrong. If they want a fight, let them come."

Time and again, Rebecca and Jasper had secretly and openly set snares for her, but every time, Gabriela had turned their tricks to her advantage. Fear was never an option.

Impressed by her composure, Alissa quickly changed the subject. "Then tell me, how are things with Mr. Moss? You already have a son with him... so when's the wedding?"

Gabriela shot her a look. "Since when did you become so nosy? Playing matchmaker?"

"Not at all!" Alissa protested. "It's just... I made a hefty bet with my friends that you and Mr. Moss would marry within six months. I bet half a million, Gabriela. Don't make me lose it!"

Gabriela blinked, startled. "You're serious?"

Catching her expression, Alissa hurried to explain. "You know Fiona, right? She staked two million on you not getting married. But please, look at how well you and Mr. Moss get along, and you even have a child together. A wedding's bound to happen. Fiona's delusional if she thinks she has a chance at marrying into the Moss family!"

Gabriela tilted her head, curiosity sparked. "Which side has the better odds?"

Alissa frowned slightly, as if the question puzzled her. "Obviously, the odds favor you getting married."

A sly smile touched Gabriela's lips. "Who's running this bet? I'd like to place a bet on myself."

Alissa blinked, caught off guard, before finally saying, "I mean... technically, you could. How much are we talking?"

"Ten million," Gabriela said without hesitation.

Alissa let out a laugh, eyes dancing. "That's insider trading, and you know it. But don't worry, I'll keep your secret. So you're betting on tying the knot within six months?"

Her grin widened at the thought. If Gabriela herself was in, Alissa could confidently wager even more.

But Gabriela shook her head. “No. I’m betting we won’t marry within six months.”

With Wesley’s current doubts still standing between them, marriage was out of the question anytime soon.

And if she couldn’t win his trust just yet, well, she might as well win some money.

Alissa’s laughter faded, leaving her speechless.

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Alissa fell quiet for a long moment before finally asking, “Are you certain about this, Gabriela?” Betting against their own wedding? What kind of audacious scheme was this?

“I’m certain,” Gabriela answered with calm assurance.

Noticing Alissa’s stunned expression, she added, “Is the stake too high? Or are participants barred from betting on themselves?”

Alissa managed a strained smile, treading carefully. “Did you and Mr. Moss have a falling-out?”

Her real fear was the fallout if Wesley discovered they were wagering on him—especially with Gabriela placing such a bold bet. The consequences would be severe.

"No, we didn't," Gabriela replied.

To her, the rift with Wesley was far more complex than a simple spat. His stubborn nature made the idea of marriage within a year seem unlikely. Betting ten million was, in her mind, a restrained move.

"I just want to earn some money," Gabriela explained earnestly.

Alissa froze. She was floored by Gabriela's pragmatic focus on profit over her romance with Wesley.

Yet within moments, Alissa warmed to the idea.

Gabriela's beauty made even her money-driven motives seem oddly charming. It was, surprisingly, relatable.

Still, ten million was astronomical. Alissa gently urged Gabriela to scale back. "A fight with Mr. Moss doesn't mean you'll never patch things up. Six months can change everything. If you have second thoughts later, a smaller loss would be easier to handle. How about half a million?"

Gabriela saw the logic and agreed, lowering her bet to one million.

Alissa arranged for someone to place Gabriela's bet and, discreetly, bumped her own stake to one million.

She wasn't missing out on extra profits from a bet she could influence.

After securing the bets, Alissa handed Gabriela the receipt. Gabriela tucked it into her purse and headed home.

Work had kept her too occupied to spend time with Truett, and the little boy was starting to show his sulky side.

With the company less hectic today and her bag design project able to wait a day or two, she could devote an entire evening to Truett.

Stepping into the villa, she heard bursts of laughter and lively chatter from the living room. A playful children's tune floated through the air.

Gabriela quickened her steps. As she neared, the lyrics became clear: "Old MacDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O! And on that farm he had a chick, E-I-E-I-O! With a cheep-cheep here, and a cheep-cheep there..."

Truett was swaying to the beat, mimicking each animal with adorable flair—flapping like a chick, hopping like a puppy, and even bleating a tiny "baa" like a lamb. His bold, charming antics had the adults roaring with laughter.

Loretta beamed, her eyes crinkling with joy as she clapped along. She hummed slightly off-key in a way that was both amusing and endearing.

Gabriela entered with a warm smile. "Loretta, you're here."

At her voice, Truett rushed over, wrapping his arms around her leg and chirping, "Mommy!"

Loretta approached, taking Gabriela's hand affectionately. "Gabriela, are you done with work? Feeling tired? Should I make you something to eat?"

"No, thank you," Gabriela replied quickly. "Please, stay and play with Truett."

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Then her eyes drifted across the room and froze.

There sat Wesley, stone-faced, his handsome features radiating silent irritation.

Catching her glance, he stood. "Gabriela, come with me."

Gabriela barely had time to set down her bag before following him.

In the villa's back garden, Wesley halted and turned to face her.

Gabriela, though visibly tired, had eyes that sparkled with unyielding resilience.

Wesley, meanwhile, felt trapped in a strange, oppressive mood, finding little joy in his days.

After a prolonged silence, he finally said, "My grandma dragged me here today."

Fresh from handling business at Eventide Vale, he'd returned to Okburg only to find Loretta waiting at his apartment.

She'd unleashed a torrent of reproach. "Truett just went through a terrible ordeal, and you took off to some distant place! What's more important—family or work? You've made enough money for a lifetime, and you're still not satisfied? I'm warning you, if you don't marry Gabriela this time, I won't stand for it. Don't argue! That fortune teller said you'd face disaster at thirty-one! If it weren't for Gabriela, you wouldn't even be here!"

In short, Wesley barely got a word in before Loretta's tirade steamrolled him, compelling him to visit the villa to spend time with Gabriela and Truett.

Gabriela listened to his explanation and responded softly, "Okay."

She knew Wesley's pride would never let him seek her out willingly.

Her detached tone only fueled his frustration. All her past assurances about his importance now felt like hollow flattery.

With a cold huff, Wesley asked flatly, "Still upset with me?"

Truthfully, Gabriela's anger had faded, but his earlier distrust made it hard to fully let go. "No," she mumbled.

Wesley studied her, searching for sincerity in her words.

Then he noticed the absence of a ring on her finger, and his expression darkened. His voice taut, he asked, "Do you still want to marry me?"

The whole runaway scheme—whether Truett's childish plan or Gabriela's doing—had been about securing a future with him.

If she'd just soften and reassure him, he might be persuaded.

But the word "marry" triggered thoughts of the bet she'd placed, stirring guilt that made her avoid his gaze.

To Wesley, her evasive demeanor screamed avoidance of the topic. His brow furrowed—had she changed her mind already?

When she didn't give the eager "yes" he'd hoped for, Wesley turned sharply and marched back to the living room.

He'd been naive to think a simple question would prompt her to leap at the chance.

Fine. If she didn't want marriage, so be it. He just wasn't used to her being absent for days.

But he'd survived two years in Athea without her, hadn't he? He could hold out a bit longer. Eventually, he'd adjust.

Striding into the villa, Wesley spotted Myah standing quietly by the door. Her subdued presence slightly tempered his anger.

Myah kept her head lowered, not even acknowledging him.

Still seething, Wesley didn't notice her odd behavior.

Later that evening, Myah retrieved a ring from a drawer.

On closer inspection, it was identical to the one Wesley had used to propose to Gabriela.

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Myah gazed at the ring with distant eyes, her face clouded by bewilderment. The piece of jewelry seemed to hold secrets she couldn't quite grasp.

A sharp knock shattered her reverie.

Her body stilled, and clarity flooded back into her expression.

Without hesitation, she made her choice. She slid the ring onto her right hand before crossing the room and opening the door.

Gabriela waited on the other side. "Myah, why are you hiding away in here?" she asked, her smile warm. "Loretta just finished making her rice pudding. Come have some with us."

"I'd love that," Myah said, threading her arm through Gabriela's with practiced ease.

Her ringed hand rested lightly against Gabriela's elbow. "Nobody makes it quite like Loretta."

Gabriela's attention drifted to the subtle movement, and the sparkling ring immediately caught her eye.

Her brow creased. "Myah, when did you start wearing rings?"

Gabriela understood Myah's routine well. The girl occasionally visited Wesley's apartment, wandered through Moss Manor, or checked on her brother's old study space at Rutherford University.

Beyond that, Myah rarely left the villa. When had this sheltered young woman found time to date? And who would have given her such jewelry?

Unease crept through Gabriela's chest. She worried that Myah's trusting nature might someday make her vulnerable to those with darker intentions.

Before she could examine the ring more closely, Myah yanked her hand away and tucked it behind her back, her cheeks flushing.

Something felt wrong. Gabriela's voice softened. "Myah, are you seeing someone? Who gave you that ring? May I see it?"

Myah's internal struggle played across her features. After a long moment of hesitation, she slowly brought her hand forward.

Gabriela studied the intricate design, and her heart sank. Two delicate leaves intertwined around the band, tiny diamonds catching the light.

This was her ring.

Myah watched Gabriela's expression shift and asked tentatively, "Gabriela, you seem upset. Did I do something wrong?"

Gabriela's frown deepened. "Myah, why are you wearing my ring?"

Myah's eyes darted away as she whispered her defense, "This ring doesn't belong to you."

Gabriela cared deeply for Myah, but she couldn't simply ignore what stood before her.

She chose her words carefully. "This is the ring Wesley gave me when he proposed. It was custom-made for me. No other ring like this exists."

The color drained from Myah's face. "Gabriela, do you honestly believe I would steal from you?"

"I'm not accusing you, and I'm not angry," Gabriela said, exhaling slowly. "But I need you to be honest. Why are you wearing this ring in secret?"

“I never stole anything from you,” Myah cried out, suddenly throwing herself against Gabriela’s chest. “I spent my own money to have a replica made. If you don’t trust me, go get your ring and compare them.”

Gabriela wanted desperately to believe Myah’s explanation.

But the memory remained fresh—Myah had recently entered her room uninvited, taken her engagement ring without permission, and somehow loosened one of the precious diamonds.

Gabriela had quietly repaired the damage and hadn’t worn the ring since.

The truth crystallized in her mind. She asked gently, “Myah, have you developed feelings for Wesley?”

A man like Wesley possessed everything women found irresistible. His family, looks, charisma, and mind created a combination few could ignore.

Such a man needed only to show a fraction of kindness and attention to capture a woman’s heart completely. Given Myah’s sheltered life and limited experience with men, her attraction to Wesley seemed almost inevitable.

Myah realized her secret was discovered, and her tears flowed anew.

“Gabriela, my brother spoke about you constantly when he was alive. He told me how amazing you were, how much he treasured you. I will never compete with you. I could never bear to hurt you.”

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Her words danced around a direct denial.

Gabriela’s anxiety intensified. Myah truly had fallen for Wesley, and this revelation brought nothing but complications.

“Gabriela, please believe me,” Myah rushed to explain, panic in her voice. “I would never fight you for Wesley. I just... got carried away and had this ring made. I promise he will never know.”

Myah’s sobs wracked her slender frame, her shoulders trembling like leaves in a fierce wind. “Gabriela, please don’t make me leave. After my brother died, you became the only family I have left in this world.”

“I’m not blaming you,” Gabriela said, her heart aching. She reached for a tissue and gently dabbed Myah’s tears. “Stop crying. You need to protect your eyes. Let’s both take a moment to breathe.”

Gabriela spent several minutes comforting Myah until the crying finally subsided. Myah washed her face with cold water and followed silently as they made their way downstairs.

In the living room, Loretta looked up with curiosity. “Gabriela, what kept you?”

Wesley sat on the nearby couch with Truett in his arms, playing a quiet game while his perceptive gaze swept over the two women.

Myah quickly ducked behind Gabriela's protective presence, guilt and fear written plainly across her delicate features.

Gabriela placed a comforting hand on Myah's arm and whispered reassurance before turning to Loretta with a smile. "Myah had some eye discomfort, so I checked on her."

Myah's vision was paramount in their household. Loretta's face immediately showed alarm. She took Myah's hand. "What's wrong? They've finally healed properly—we simply cannot allow another setback."

Allan had entrusted Myah to them, and now that she had finally cured her eyes, nothing could go wrong again.

Seeing the redness and swelling around Myah's eyes, Loretta grew anxious. "Why do they look so irritated?"

Myah cast a fleeting glance toward Gabriela before offering her soft explanation, "They felt terribly itchy earlier, but Gabriela gave me some eye drops, and it's better now."

Relief washed over Loretta's tense shoulders. "Should any irritation return, you must see a doctor immediately."

"Okay," replied Myah.

Gabriela and Myah settled at the table, savoring the warm rice pudding in their bowls. Loretta beckoned the others. Wesley, abandoning his usual reserve and still holding Truett, drew closer.

"Take the seat beside Gabriela," Loretta instructed, pulling out a chair.

The moment Truett saw this, he bounded toward Farley with childlike enthusiasm.

Wesley's expression remained distant.

Sweet treats rarely appealed to him, yet when Loretta announced she was making pudding for everyone in the villa, he found himself compelled to stay.

Despite his concession, Gabriela showed no acknowledgment of his presence. Her attention remained fixed on her bowl, never meeting his eyes.

With calculated precision, Wesley set down his spoon with deliberate force.

Every pair of eyes shifted toward him expectantly, yet Gabriela seemed lost in thought.

"I'm done," Wesley announced abruptly, his voice cutting through the warm atmosphere. "I recently recovered from an illness, and my doctor advised against too much sugar."

The mention of medical advice finally drew Gabriela's attention back to him.

Wesley detected the bewilderment in her eyes, though he couldn't decipher what preoccupied her, and his expression hardened.

He released a cold, dismissive sound. "I'm leaving."

Truett overheard and immediately sprinted over, wrapping his arms around Wesley's leg. "Dad, you promised to tell me that special bedtime story tonight."

Wesley gazed down at his son, warmth flooding his previously stern features. "But I have some pressing matters..."

"Pressing matters?" Loretta interrupted, indignant. "You own a company—what could possibly need your attention tonight? You absolutely cannot break a promise to a child. You're not leaving!"

A barely perceptible smile ghosted across Wesley's lips before he surrendered. "Fine."

Chapter 800

After finishing dessert, Wesley rocked Truett until the boy's breathing softened, then quietly slipped out with his empty cup to get some water.

Just as he'd expected, Loretta was loitering in the hallway like a guard.

Her sharp eyes pinned him in place. "You're not spending the night in the guest room. Go make up with Gabriela—now!" It was obvious she'd pieced together the situation: the couple had quarreled, and Wesley was the culprit.

Tonight, she'd decided, he would swallow his pride and fix it.

Wesley's gaze drifted to Gabriela's closed bedroom door, his jaw tightening. "She might already be asleep."

"Don't you dare give me excuses," Loretta said, seizing his arm and all but dragging him toward the door. She rapped firmly on it.

Inside, Gabriela had just stepped out of the steamy bathroom, her hair damp and clinging to her shoulders, when the knock startled her.

She pushed the door open with a soft creak. "Loretta? It's late—what's going on?"

Wesley lingered just behind, his expression cool, but a trace of irritation flickered in his eyes.

Really? So she wasn't even going to pretend anymore? Was she that determined not to share a bed with him?

Loretta's tone was brisk. "Gabriela, there's only one guest room prepared, and I'm taking it. That means you and Wesley will share a room tonight."

Gabriela's breath caught. "Wait."

Her eyes darted toward Wesley, hesitation written all over her face as her hand tightened on the doorframe.

She'd only found out that very day about Myah's crush on Wesley, and the knowledge left her stomach in knots, unsure how to face him now.

Gabriela opened her mouth to invent some excuse, but Loretta had already shoved Wesley through the doorway.

"No more arguments. You may not have the marriage certificate, but with a child this big, you're basically husband and wife. Keeping your distance like this will only confuse him."

Loretta snapped the door shut with finality.

The room seemed to shrink around them.

Gabriela's gaze drifted toward Wesley, her pulse racing. He shot her a chilly, unreadable look before turning his face away, as if he couldn't stand to meet her eyes.

Silence stretched until Gabriela finally murmured, "Should I get you some pajamas and run a bath?"

"Forget it," Wesley said without looking back.

He found the pajamas himself, showered quickly, and was done in no time.

Propped up against the pillows, Gabriela scrolled through her phone, the screen casting a pale glow across her face.

When Wesley emerged, hair damp and shirt clinging to his shoulders, she stayed motionless, feigning interest in the screen.

In bold letters, the post asked: "What do you do when your friend falls for the same man you can't let go of?" The comment section buzzed with a flood of opinions.

Some urged her to face the problem head-on and set boundaries. Others insisted she step back and let the man resolve it.

A few suggested finding the friend a stellar boyfriend to steer her heart elsewhere.

Some suggestions were absurd—arguing that if the friend wanted him badly enough, let her have him, since friendship mattered most.