

His kiss 851

Chapter 851

Wesley watched the exchange through narrowed eyes. “Gabriela,” he said with cutting indifference, “Truett hasn’t had enough yet.”

Truett, who had already finished his share, immediately piped up at his father’s words. “More, please!”

Stewart promptly offered him a piece. “Here you go, Truett!” Truett accepted it with a polite nod and eagerly took a bite. Despite having just eaten, his continued craving was proof enough of how delicious the apple pie was.

Stewart sighed with playful exaggeration. “If I don’t leave some for Truett, he might never forgive me.” He reached for another box, intending to claim half its contents.

Gabriela intercepted him with a warm smile. “No need — there’s a second batch in the kitchen. It’ll be ready soon.” Her fingertips lightly brushed his hand as she gently stopped him, a touch that sent a subtle current through him, though she remained entirely unaware of it.

Bathed in the soft overhead light, her smile was genuine and bright, illuminating her features with a vibrant warmth. A spark of deep admiration flickered in Stewart’s eyes. Discreetly, he slipped his hand behind his back, fingers lingering where her skin had briefly grazed his.

In that moment, he indulged a fleeting fantasy of staying at Gabriela’s home permanently — anything to avoid leaving. Unfortunately, Wesley watched with the vigilance of a sentinel, making even a glance toward Gabriela feel like a trespass.

Stewart offered Wesley a knowing smile. He understood Wesley's position completely. Were their roles reversed, he would guard Gabriela with equal intensity.

To Wesley, that expression felt like pure provocation. His jaw tightened as he mentally catalogued every strategy for challenging the Williams Group after the holidays.

Clutching the two gift boxes, Stewart bid polite farewells to everyone before turning to Gabriela. "I'd love to spend New Year's Eve with you, counting down together." But he knew a certain someone would object. This time, he declined Gabriela's usual offer to see him out, urging her to stay with her family before departing alone.

With the most distracting presence gone, the tension in the room gradually lifted, and Wesley's cold demeanor softened by degrees. He glanced at Truett, who was still devotedly working through his apple pie, and allowed a faint smile to ease his stern expression.

Truett's father was still him. No one could change that.

Wesley lifted Truett into his arms, unconcerned with the crumbs now dotting his expensive clothes or the child's sticky hands and face. "Truett," he asked gently, "would you like to see some fireworks tonight?"

"Fireworks?" The three-year-old's eyes lit up. "Like the pretty ones on TV that burst in the sky?"

Wesley nodded indulgently, then contacted the property management. He learned that while fireworks were prohibited within the neighborhood, a large open area nearby was largely unregulated, so long as displays didn't draw excessive attention. That same open area was where Brenden had had his accident — a place rarely visited, even during holidays.

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After confirming the details, Wesley called Billy to arrange the fireworks. Billy, a lifelong bachelor, always seemed available, never quite able to fully relax even on vacation. Less than two hours after Wesley's call, he arrived with two large boxes of premium fireworks.

Wesley, accompanied by an excited Truett and the rest of the family, headed out to the open field. He began the display with a dazzling row of bundled fireworks that bloomed across the sky like an ethereal garden, shifting into mesmerizing shapes and lighting up the night with brilliant color.

It was Truett's first experience with fireworks. His excitement turned him into a little whirlwind, dashing across the field with joyful laughter ringing through the crisp night air.

Soon, Gabriela found herself swept up in the celebration. She accepted a sparkler from Wesley and joined in with uninhibited delight. Under the fireworks' glow, her face looked even more captivating, and the smile on her lips stirred in him an almost irresistible urge to pull her close.

After both boxes were emptied, the hour had grown late. His task complete, Billy accepted generous payment from his employer and headed home satisfied.

Gabriela gently coaxed Truett into the bath, then tried to settle him to sleep. The little boy was far too wound up, tossing restlessly in bed. She held him close, read from a storybook for half an hour, and sang several lullabies before he finally drifted off.

Wesley stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, watching the tender scene. The persistent unease from his fragmented memories suddenly found an anchor, settling into a deep sense of stillness and comfort.

Gabriela tucked Truett in carefully and slipped quietly from the room, immediately noticing Wesley at the threshold. His gaze stayed lowered, lingering a beat longer than was proper. She hesitated briefly but said nothing, brushing past him. "Remember to close the door on your way out," she said quietly.

"Okay," Wesley replied.

Gabriela returned to her bedroom, gathered her pajamas, and headed for the shower. As she removed her coat, the acrid scent of spent fireworks clung to the fabric, making her pause. The smell wasn't pleasant, yet it carried a certain festive air. Fireworks symbolized joy — despite their danger, people first associated them with beauty. Much like love itself: despite its inevitable challenges and heartaches, the heart still yearned for it.

She set the coat aside to wash later. She didn't particularly like the smell of fireworks. She preferred the clean scent of success. That was simply her nature.

After her shower, Gabriela was towel-drying her hair when she froze.

Wesley sat on the edge of her bed, his expression grave, radiating an unmistakable air of authority.

Gabriela stiffened, her brows drawing together. “When did you come into my room?”

“What — are you unhappy to see me?” His voice was cool, his dark eyes sharp. “You seemed quite enthusiastic with Stewart earlier.”

Gabriela felt equal parts irritated and darkly amused. “What business is that of yours?” she retorted.

Her sharp tone made Wesley’s expression darken. He rose and approached with predatory ease, looking down at her, his eyes burning with restrained intensity.

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Unable to decipher the dangerous look in his gaze, Gabriela turned toward the door. “Wesley, if you insist on staying, I’ll leave. I’ll sleep in Truett’s room tonight.”

The moment her fingers touched the doorknob, a strong arm encircled her waist and a firm hand closed over hers. “Gabriela, are you trying to push me away?” His presence enveloped her, saturated with the lingering scent of firework smoke, flooding her senses.

She turned to face him and recognized the restrained hunger in his eyes. A sense of foreboding washed over her as she tried to create distance — but his arms held her firmly against the door.

Wesley's gaze settled on her upturned face. Her eyes sparkled with clarity, lashes lowered like scattered dark feathers. Her skin looked tender and soft, faint blue veins tracing delicate patterns beneath the surface. Even after having a three-year-old, her complexion retained a flawless youthfulness.

His breathing deepened. He cupped her face gently, leaning closer as if to claim her lips.

Gabriela's eyes widened — and in an instant she ducked her head and drove her heel hard into his foot.

She struck with force, making Wesley grimace in pain. Yet his arm around her waist didn't loosen. If anything, his grip tightened, pulling her body flush against his until there was no space left between them.

"Gabriela," he murmured, his voice low and taut, "since when did you become so fierce?"

Gabriela felt a surge of frustration at the murky, unresolved tension between them. "Let go of me," she said icily.

Instead of releasing her, Wesley tightened his embrace.

She squirmed briefly before going still, her body betraying her — recalling the countless tender moments they had shared, acutely aware of what his physical response implied. Noticing her unease, Wesley refrained from pressing further, wary of pushing her too far.

A heavy silence settled over them, broken only by the faint, sweet scent of Gabriela's hair drifting through the air. Wesley's thoughts wandered to the crimson water lily in the apartment's courtyard, its petals swaying with each soft gust, stirring ripples across the calm water — much like the waves stirring in his own chest.

The atmosphere grew warm, charged with an unspoken intimacy. His voice low and rough, Wesley began, "Gabriela, tonight, could we —"

Her phone chimed, cutting him off.

Relieved, Gabriela slipped from his grasp and hurried to check the message. It was Stewart. "Happy New Year!" he had written. Without their noticing, midnight had come and gone. She replied swiftly: "Same to you!"

Turning back, she caught Wesley's gaze fixed on her — dejected, heavy with a melancholy he made no effort to conceal. The vulnerability on his face was jarring, and for a moment she was at a loss for words.

She hesitated, pressing her lips together. "So... tonight, are you —"

"Is this about Stewart?" Wesley cut her off sharply.

Confusion clouded her face. "What?"

"We were so close before, and now you're shutting me out. Is Stewart the reason?" He edged closer, his voice tight. "Do you think he's better than me?"

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Gabriela retreated two steps, bewildered. "What does Stewart have to do with this?"

Wesley's mood darkened. "Didn't I tell you to keep your distance from him? You ignored me and got cozy with him anyway." His words, it seemed, had meant nothing to her — and that was something he could not accept.

"I work with the Williams Group," Gabriela explained, exasperated. "Of course I'm on good terms with him." She offered a faint smile. "Wesley, let's keep other people out of our issues."

Wesley sneered, advancing. "So quick to defend him? Afraid I'll go after him?"

Gabriela pushed back, her hand firm against his chest. "Wesley, I had planned to talk after the New Year. But since you're pushing me, I'll say it now." Her gaze locked onto his, dark and unwavering. "Wesley, it's over between us."

Despite the pull of his striking features so close to hers — stirring a flicker of something she refused to name — she knew with certainty that reconciliation would only lead to more pain. Even if they patched things up now, Myah's inevitable claim — Gabriela loved my brother — would unravel everything. Allan remained a sharp, unspoken wound in Wesley's heart, a subject that could never be broached. Gabriela was not one to court suffering; unable to clear her name where Allan was concerned, she chose a decisive end.

“It’s over between us,” she said again, her voice steady.

Wesley stared, incredulous, her words reaching him as though from some far-off place — impossible to absorb. A glacial chill radiated from him, like frost crowning a winter peak.

“Gabriela,” he said, his voice dropping to something low and dangerous, “you’ve grown very daring. How dare you say such things to me?”

This woman, who had once declared her love and fought to stay by his side, was now discarding him. A twinge of something close to fear gripped him.

“Let me be clearer,” Gabriela said, holding his gaze. “That proposal from two years ago? It’s meaningless now. I won’t marry you.” She threw his own past words back at him without flinching.

Wesley’s grip tightened on her wrist, his voice strained. “Is this because of Allan? Or because of Stewart?”

Her wrist throbbed under his hold, but she couldn’t break free.

“Yes — everything is because of Allan!” she snapped, abandoning any effort to justify herself further. “Without Allan, someone ordinary like me would never have crossed paths with you. If you didn’t carry Allan’s heart, I wouldn’t have dared come near you. Wesley, since we started because of Allan, let’s end it with him. I’m done with Myah, I’m done with Allan, and I’m ready for a fresh start. Can you leave me alone?”

She delivered the words in a steady, unbroken stream — as though Wesley’s presence had dwindled to the point where a handful of sentences were enough to brush him aside.

His face shifted through a spectrum of emotions, growing ever grimmer.

“Gabriela, stop talking!” he snapped.

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She lifted her gaze to meet his. “Let go of my wrist, and I will.”

A heavy stillness fell over them. Outside, rain had begun to fall again, its soft tapping against the window amplifying the dense tension in the room. Rain on New Year’s Day felt like a dark omen.

Wesley’s eyes, red and strained, bored into hers, searching for something hidden beneath the surface. Had someone coerced her into these harsh words, or was she nursing a wound too deep to name? Yet with Matthew and Presley’s support behind her, who would dare threaten her?

With a bitter, quiet chuckle, he released her.

Gabriela turned and walked out of the bedroom, making her way swiftly to Truett's room. Wesley watched her go, her words — it's all because of Allan — ringing in his mind, echoing a painful memory from three years past.

He scoffed at himself. He had recently begun to wonder whether Myah had deliberately stirred up Allan's history, amplifying his devotion to Gabriela in order to cloud Wesley's judgment. It seemed he had only been shaming himself — when all along he had intended to express regret to Gabriela and gradually repair the harm he had caused her.

Now, it appeared she was utterly indifferent.

In Truett's room, Gabriela lay beside her son, her heart aching. After confronting Wesley, sorrow settled over her like a weight she hadn't expected to feel so heavily. He was, after all, the only man she had ever loved with such fierceness — and though ending it had been her choice, the pain cut deep.

From childhood, she had forged a heart of steel, refusing to let any sorrow linger beyond nightfall. She cradled her son and, before long, drifted off to sleep.

Morning came. Though grief still lingered at the edges, her face had regained its familiar, composed calm.

Truett woke to find his mother beside him and beamed. He snuggled close and chirped, "Mommy, why are you here? Where is Daddy?" He had dreamt all night of fireworks and riding on his father's shoulders, and had slept soundly.

Gabriela paused, then scooped him up. “Let’s brush your teeth, wash your face, and put on some nice clothes. Farley and Ken are waiting downstairs with New Year’s gifts.”

Truett’s attention shifted instantly. He clapped his hands with glee. “Gifts!”

After getting him washed and dressed, Gabriela led him downstairs — and froze.

Wesley was still there, seated quietly in the living room. Shock coursed through her. Despite everything she had said the night before, he hadn’t left.

That morning, Wesley wore a cream cable-knit turtleneck. The high collar accentuated the graceful line of his neck as he sat with commanding composure in the quiet villa.

Matthew, who had been away the previous night, had returned at dawn. The two men faced each other across the low table, sipping coffee in a silence charged with the tension of a corporate standoff. Gabriela felt a flicker of exasperation — Matthew’s usually relaxed demeanor always sharpened into a warrior’s edge around Wesley.

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The sound of footsteps on the stairs drew Wesley’s gaze upward.

Gabriela descended wearing a soft beige sweater, its warmth enveloping her. Her eyes were still soft with sleep, but they sharpened the moment they met his. As he studied her, a derisive smirk touched his lips. Did she honestly think her biting words from last night would make him leave? Starting the New

Year with a quarrel and a parting felt like a bad omen. So, despite his simmering anger, he held it back — especially since Gabriela seemed utterly unbothered by the idea of a split, which he found infuriatingly illogical.

“Daddy!” Truett’s face lit up and he darted over, clinging to Wesley’s leg before eagerly reaching up with both arms. Wesley’s expression softened into a warm smile as he lifted the boy into his arms. In his tiny, charming voice, Truett greeted everyone in the room, wishing them a happy new year, and soon a generous heap of gifts was showered upon him.

Gabriela moved to organize her son’s presents, but Truett gripped them tightly. “No, these are mine!” he insisted, his small voice gentle yet firm. “Even Mommy can’t have them!”

Wesley glanced at Gabriela as she tilted her head toward Truett, her chin brushing her collar, her sleek black hair falling in a glossy cascade.

“I’m just keeping them safe for you, not taking them,” she reassured him.

Truett stood his ground. “I’m a big boy now. I’ll protect my own gifts!”

Wesley’s heart warmed at the exchange. “You are truly remarkable,” he murmured.

They said the parent with the stronger traits shaped the child. Who would have thought Gabriela, so often underestimated, would shine through so clearly in their son? To his surprise, she caught his half-spoken praise.

A quiet pride swelled within her. “Naturally,” she replied.

Gabriela treasured Truett above all else, and Wesley’s recognition that their son mirrored her qualities sparked a quiet thrill in her chest.

Matthew, watching their warm interaction, subtly raised an eyebrow. He sensed Wesley had somehow managed to lift his daughter’s spirits — though, to his own quiet distress, he still hadn’t managed to ease her heart himself, and he was left wondering when she might ever call him “Dad” with that tender affection.

After showering Truett with presents, the elders passed some money to Gabriela as well. Despite her wealth, she clutched it with bright eyes and radiated genuine delight.

Wesley recalled the year Gabriela had moved into the manor — how she had employed every tactic imaginable to coax money from him. He had emptied his wallet then. Though a billionaire executive, he had carried only two hundred dollars in cash, which had forced him to sheepishly borrow two thousand from Farley. When he presented it to Gabriela, her expression had been one of pure astonishment.

“Why are you giving me money?” she had asked.

“I haven’t prepared a gift,” he replied.

Now, with a quietly shadowed gaze, Wesley held out an envelope. “Take it.” Gabriela accepted it hesitantly.

Chapter 857

She found herself wondering whether Wesley's memory was beginning to fail him. Had he already forgotten the sharp words she had hurled at him the night before? Noticing her confused look, a subtle grin played at his lips — and the sight of it caught her entirely off guard.

Since his return from Athea, his trust in her had been fragile, easily shattered. Each time he doubted her, she had felt wrongly accused. Yet when she boldly confessed her feelings for Allan, he hadn't met her with anger. Instead, he had shown an unexpected patience she hadn't anticipated.

"What's on your mind?" he asked. "Is the money not enough?"

Lost in thought, Gabriela was startled by his voice. She looked up and caught a spark of quiet amusement in his dark eyes.

In that instant, her resolve from the night before began to waver.

How could she resist? The father of her child was irresistibly magnetic — the very person who had first shaped her idea of beauty. Seeing the admiration flicker across her face, the irritation that had simmered in Wesley's chest all night quietly dissolved.

Leaning close to her ear, he murmured in a low, teasing tone, "If you don't kick me out tonight, I'll make up for every gift I owe you over the years. Deal?"

His voice made her ears burn.

Once, Wesley had been so cold. He had wounded her with cruel words, made her jump into the pool, left her standing in the rain, evicted her from his apartment, erased her fingerprint from the lock, and wrongly accused her because of Myah. She remembered every moment. Did he truly think a few gifts could erase all of that?

With a deliberately stern expression, Gabriela declared, “Every gift had better be worth at least ten thousand dollars.” His face was dangerously captivating — a grenade to her defenses.

She felt it detonate, all over again.

Watching her attempt at fierceness, Wesley stifled a chuckle. “Deal,” he said.

He would not pretend the name “Allan” no longer stung. After Gabriela’s heated words the night before, he had spent the quiet hours reflecting on their past. This pragmatic woman — who had once stumbled into his room by mistake, who had schemed for money while working at the manor, who had secretly given birth to his son and stayed faithfully by his side through his illness — her chaotic yet deeply kind nature did not align with the portrait Myah had painted of her. Moving forward, he vowed to temper his emotions and refuse to let “Allan” cloud his judgment.

Fortunately, Gabriela was still willing to give him a chance. He had time to mend what had broken between them.

He reached out to ruffle her hair, but she dodged neatly. “Don’t touch my head.”

From across the room, Farley called out, “Gabriela, Truett, everyone — come gather! Dinner is ready.”

A table had been laid with all manner of food. Settling into her seat, Gabriela closed her eyes, pressed her palms together, and made a wish. Wesley smiled quietly, unwilling to disturb the sincerity of the moment. He simply watched her earnest face, his heart full.

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In that stillness, he understood: as long as he could move past his fixation on “Allan,” Gabriela and their son would be there. That truth settled over him like warmth, filling him with a peace he hadn’t felt in a long time.

After a cheerful first day of the New Year, Wesley moved into Gabriela’s home.

Gabriela hadn’t turned him away — she had, after all, accepted his money. With the whole world slowing down for the holidays, even Wesley, the ever-busy CEO, allowed himself a pause, cancelling meetings and dinners to savor the simple joy of being near Gabriela and Truett.

Although she hadn’t agreed to marry him yet and still sent him out of the bedroom each night, at least she no longer met him with cold silence after her sharp words. Their reconciliation felt inevitable — a matter of when, not if.

Loretta, watching from the side, found solace in Wesley's willingness to reach out and mend what was broken. During this period, however, turmoil lingered elsewhere. Myah's restlessness grew worse with each passing day, and though Brenden was fortunate to have Fiona by his side despite his partial paralysis, Myah had spiraled deeper into despair after losing her sight.

Loretta couldn't bring herself to leave everything in the hands of the caretakers and spent nearly all her time at the hospital — yet no amount of presence could soothe Myah's fear of abandonment. Gabriela's cool indifference only deepened the sting, and Myah clung desperately to what she felt slipping away, stopping eating properly and asking over and over, "Why hasn't Gabriela come to see me?"

Loretta tried and failed to persuade Gabriela, torn between duty to the one who needed her most and the bonds drawing her back to the villa. Thankfully, Miriam stepped in, sharing the burden of hospital shifts so Loretta could occasionally return to Gabriela's home and steal quiet moments with her great-grandson.

Wesley had come to treasure Gabriela in a way he never had before. To Loretta, that new tenderness was the brightest comfort amid the gloom Myah's injury had cast over them all.

By January 7th, the gloom began to lift.

After lunch, brilliant winter sunlight poured down in long streams as Wesley led Truett into the garden. After a lively round of hide-and-seek, father and son retreated to the gazebo, surrounded by winter blooms. Gabriela appeared with fruit and lukewarm water, moving with quiet grace.

Truett, still buzzing with excitement, tugged at his father's sleeve and begged for a story about hide-and-seek. Wesley didn't hesitate. He pulled out his phone, found a tale, and began to read it aloud.

“On a bright, fine day, the little pig, the fawn, and the bunny were playing hide-and-seek in the forest. With a cloth tied over its eyes, the pig began to search. Feeling its way forward, it suddenly wrapped its arms around a tall tree, convinced for a moment that it had caught one of its friends.”

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His steady, measured voice rose with each suspenseful turn, drawing wide-eyed wonder from his son. Truett leaned in, clinging to every word, eager for what came next. And Gabriela, though a grown woman who had weathered many storms, found herself listening just as intently. Wesley’s playful lilt and the quiet mystery in his tone stirred something within her, making her just as eager as Truett to hear how the story would unfold.

Then Wesley’s phone buzzed. It was Loretta.

He stepped aside to answer.

“Wesley, Myah’s in a terrible state. She keeps banging her head against the wall!” Loretta’s voice was frantic. “The doctor’s on the way with a sedative, but she won’t calm down. She’s crying nonstop for you. You have to come right now.”

Wesley’s expression tightened. “I’ll be there immediately.”

He hung up, then bent to press a quick kiss on Truett’s forehead. “Daddy has something urgent to handle. I’ll finish the story when I get back tonight, alright?”

But Truett, spoiled by his father's constant presence over the past few days, clung to his shoulders and refused to let go. "No, Daddy! You have to finish the little pig's story first, or you can't leave!"

Wesley didn't want to let his son down, but the anxiety pressing in from the hospital left no room to hesitate. He glanced at Gabriela. "I need to go."

Gabriela caught on at once. She stepped forward and gently lifted Truett from his father's arms. "Be a good boy, sweetheart. Mommy will carry on the story."

Truett reluctantly loosened his grip, muttering, "Okay... but Daddy, promise you'll come back soon."

Wesley met Gabriela's eyes. "I'll do everything I can to return quickly," he said with quiet conviction.

Gabriela gave a faint nod. In recent days, his sincerity had begun to soften her guarded heart — though she knew Myah's turmoil couldn't simply be ignored. "Go," she said.

Once Wesley left, Truett's attention swung back to the story and he tugged at his mother's hand. Gabriela sat with him, her voice patient and steady, and picked up where Wesley had left off.

"The fawn and the bunny giggled at the little pig's antics. Feeling embarrassed, the pig huffed and refused to play with them anymore. But when the fawn and the bunny quickly apologized, the pig's heart softened — and from that day forward, the three of them became the closest of friends."

Truett's eyes lit up with sudden understanding, his head bobbing eagerly. "Oh, I get it now! That's just like when I played hide-and-seek with Myah. She couldn't find me, but she didn't get mad. That's why Myah and I are best friends forever!"

Hide-and-seek.

Gabriela's chest tightened, a heavy unease pressing down on her. Forcing her lips into a smile, she asked gently, "Sweetheart... when exactly did Myah play hide-and-seek with you?"

Truett answered matter-of-factly, "It was that time when I hid for a few days. Myah couldn't find me, so I just came home by myself."

A cold shiver crawled through Gabriela's veins.

Ever since Myah had developed feelings for Wesley, she had been prone to reckless, alarming behavior. But Truett was barely three years old — an innocent child. Why would Myah ever harm him?

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Worried she had misunderstood, Gabriela probed further, keeping her tone deliberately calm. Truett explained earnestly that during their "games," Myah had shown him all the hiding places and even prepared the things he would need in advance. Children's memories were fickle, and with time passing, he had forgotten all about the promise he had made to keep it a secret.

Gabriela's throat constricted, though her voice grew unnervingly steady. "Why didn't you tell Mommy back then, Truett?"

Startled, Truett clapped his tiny hand over his mouth, realizing he had broken his promise. But seeing that his mother didn't look angry, he hesitated, then began softly explaining. "Because Myah said if I told anyone, she would be sent away."

Truett's little fingers curled around Gabriela's hand, his wide eyes glistening with worry. "Myah is so pitiful," he whispered, his voice trembling with the pure, unguarded compassion only a child could carry. "She doesn't have parents, or a brother, or even a home. Mommy, please don't send her away."

A shiver tore through Gabriela's body. Cold sweat gathered at her temples and slid down the back of her neck.

So this was how Myah had wormed her way in — feeding her son a tragic tale, twisting his sympathy into silence, and cloaking her reckless schemes in a pitiful disguise. Gabriela's stomach lurched. She had deeply underestimated Myah's audacity.

Her face went pale, lips pressing together as though she were holding back a scream.

Without hesitation, she summoned Farley and Ken and gently sent Truett off to play. Once the two men stood before her, she laid out the story in clipped, icy words.

They exchanged stunned glances, unable to reconcile the timid, soft-spoken Myah they knew with the calculating girl Gabriela described. How could someone like her have pulled something so chilling right under their noses?

“From this moment forward, Myah is forbidden to set foot in my home.” Gabriela let each word hang heavy in the air. “And listen carefully. She must never, under any circumstances, come near Truett again.”

Farley and Ken adored Truett completely and agreed without a moment’s hesitation.

Truett crouched behind a vibrant cluster of flowers, stealing glances to watch for his mother’s approach. Gabriela found him there and tenderly lifted him from his floral hideaway, dusting leaves and grass from his clothes before gazing into his bright, trusting eyes. Her heart clenched.

The memory of Truett’s three-day disappearance still sent chills through her bones. At least he had returned unharmed. At least Myah hadn’t conceived something truly sinister back then. At least Truett bore no visible scars from that nightmare.

Gabriela hoisted her son up with a wide smile. “There you are!”

Truett’s face fell at being discovered so easily, though he managed a cheerful tone. “You’re incredible, Mommy — even better than Myah at this game.”

Gabriela’s smile wavered. “Do you miss her?”

Truett bobbed his head enthusiastically. “I miss Myah so much! She hasn’t visited in ages. Did something happen to her?”

Though Myah had exploited Truett's disappearance to drive a wedge between Gabriela and Wesley, she had always shown the boy a performance of warmth and kindness. Truett had been completely taken in by it. A sharp ache pierced Gabriela's chest as she playfully tapped his nose. "Myah went back to her real home."