

His kiss 951

Chapter 951

Gabriela lifted her gaze and sighed softly. “Alissa, I already hired you as my assistant, and your father is hardly thrilled about it.”

Although the Hopkins family was not the pinnacle of aristocracy, their wealth and influence still far exceeded what Gabriela’s pre-IPO company could rival. Bringing Alissa into the company had already stirred quiet resentment within the Hopkins household.

“You’re my savior, Gabriela. Please — you know you can’t abandon me,” Alissa said, looping her arm through Gabriela’s and swaying shamelessly. “If you won’t let me work as your maid, then at least let me stay with you for a few nights.” She had sworn not to set foot back home until Huntley finally left Okburg. The mere sight of him was enough to haunt her dreams.

Gabriela exhaled, finally surrendering to Alissa’s persistence. “If you truly have nowhere else to go, you may stay at my villa for a short while.”

Alissa nearly leaped off the ground in delight.

At that moment, the receptionist called through the intercom. “Ms. Haynes, there is a gentleman downstairs with an enormous bouquet. He insists you sign for it yourself.”

Gabriela hesitated briefly before responding, “Let him come up.”

The delivery man was young and striking, knocking lightly as he entered with a bright, polite smile. “You must be Ms. Haynes. Would you mind signing here?” Gabriela signed and accepted the bouquet of champagne roses. “Thank you,” she replied courteously. He was simply doing his job, and she had no intention of embarrassing a courteous stranger.

As soon as the door closed, Alissa snatched the bouquet, her eyes glittering. “These are stunning. Champagne roses are nearly impossible to find right now — who is this mysterious admirer?” She searched eagerly for a card but found none tucked between the blooms. “No signature?” Alissa frowned. “Could it be from Mr. Moss?”

At the sound of Wesley’s name, Gabriela’s brows knitted together. Ever since Wesley had chosen to marry Myah — whatever his motives — Gabriela had severed all emotional ties. The idea that the flowers might be from him stirred immediate irritation.

Yet Alissa hugged the bouquet possessively. “Don’t toss them. They’re gorgeous. If you don’t want them, I’ll take them.”

“Take them home after work, then,” Gabriela answered flatly.

“Really?” Alissa blinked. “Gabriela, are you actually finished with Wesley?”

In Alissa’s eyes, Gabriela was unparalleled in beauty, and Wesley was the only man who barely qualified as her equal. Though his demand for a hundred million had been outrageous, someone like him would likely repay it tenfold as a groom. If Gabriela turned him down, Alissa doubted Okburg held another man worthy of her.

“Office hours are not for gossip,” Gabriela replied coolly. “Say another word, and you will be booking yourself a hotel tonight.”

Seeing the steel in Gabriela’s expression, Alissa instantly pressed her lips shut.

Over the following days, anonymous bouquets continued to arrive — roses one day, lilies the next, eustomas after that, each arrangement more elaborate than the last. At first, Gabriela instructed the courier to ask the sender to stop. The flowers, however, arrived without fail.

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During that time, Wesley never contacted her, and she felt no urge to contact him either. Eventually, indifference settled in.

On the seventh day, the bouquet was delicate baby’s breath.

Alissa cradled the tiny white blooms like handfuls of starlight, sighing dreamily. “Gabriela, Wesley always seems so distant, but he clearly has a romantic streak. Why don’t you...” She nudged Gabriela teasingly. “Forgive him once and give him another chance?”

Gabriela shot her a warning glance. “If you have this much energy, condense my schedule for next week. I will not be coming into the office for a few days.”

Even amid romance, Gabriela remained married to her work. Alissa truly could not understand it. But Gabriela was still the boss, and obedience was mandatory.

Alissa swiftly reorganized the schedule, then left work alongside Gabriela, riding with her back to the Haynes family villa.

As for Huntley — despite knowing Alissa despised him, he had lingered at the Hopkins residence for an entire week. Throughout that time, Alissa had tried to maneuver Nicole closer to him, but Nicole failed repeatedly. Alissa dared not reject Huntley outright, so she avoided him instead, hoping that boredom would eventually make him call off the engagement.

While stepping into the elevator with Gabriela, Alissa grumbled about Huntley overstaying his welcome. With a soft chime, the doors slid open and they stepped into the plaza below — where they immediately noticed a familiar silhouette.

He stood tall and composed, his presence commanding attention without effort.

Alissa froze. “Isn’t that the Williams Group executive?”

Stewart turned at the sound, smiling when he saw them. “Gabriela, you’re done for the day?”

Noticing the baby’s breath tucked in his arms, Gabriela understood at once. All the flowers from the past week had come from him.

“Stewart,” Gabriela said, with a faint smile. “What brings you here?”

"I was waiting for you," he answered plainly, his gaze flickering briefly toward Alissa.

Under ordinary circumstances, such words would have prompted courtesy and a tactful retreat. But Alissa was anything but conventional. She tightened her hold on Gabriela's arm. "Mr. Williams, are you inviting her to dinner? Impossible. She promised to shop with me today."

She would never allow Gabriela — who had already rejected even Wesley — to fall into Stewart's hands.

Stewart paused, then asked politely, "Would you consider allowing me to carry your shopping bags?"

Alissa rejected him outright. "Two women shopping means secrets. What would you do following us around?"

Stewart smiled helplessly at Gabriela.

With her assistant already blocking the path, Gabriela followed suit. "I'm sorry, Stewart. I have been very busy lately. I did not realize the flowers were from you — there was never a note. I will reimburse you for them." She took out her phone, preparing to transfer the money.

Stewart's smile slowly faded. "Gabriela, you know that is not what I wanted."

Because Gabriela understood his motives all too clearly, she chose to cut the thread cleanly rather than let it tangle. Her heart was firmly anchored to her ambitions now, leaving no room to entertain Wesley — and even less patience for Stewart.

“Stewart, you understand perfectly well what I mean,” Gabriela replied, her eyes steady, her tone calm yet resolute, offering no apology for her bluntness.

A flicker of irritation crossed Stewart’s face, yet instead of anger, he felt an unexpected hollowness. With a helpless chuckle, he said, “Gabriela, you have a talent for making every step I take toward you feel utterly misplaced. I will not detain you any longer today.” He added those last words lightly, waving them off before turning toward his car.

The moment the car door shut, Stewart’s expression clouded over and he flung the bouquet of baby’s breath aside with a sharp motion.

Erik, seated in the driver’s seat, stiffened at the sudden shift in mood. “Mr. Williams, there is something on my mind, but I hesitate to say it aloud.”

Already irritated, Stewart snapped, “If you think it should stay unsaid, then don’t say it!”

Even so, Erik — ever observant — continued to piece the situation together. “Gabriela survived a fire not long ago, barely escaping with her life, and she has just severed ties with someone she once trusted deeply.” Noticing Stewart’s attention sharpen, Erik pressed on. “On top of that, she recently clashed with Wesley. There is no chance she would accept your feelings right now.”

“And why do you believe that?” Stewart leaned forward slightly, curiosity overtaking his irritation.

“Gabriela is logical to her core. If she has not completely ended things with Wesley, accepting you would make no sense. And if she just did end it, she would see your confession as taking advantage of her vulnerability. Either way, she would turn you down.”

Stewart frowned. “Isn’t that when people are most likely to reach for someone else — when the ground beneath them is unstable?”

“Mr. Williams, you have not truly understood Gabriela.” Erik recalled the days when Gabriela had worked side by side with their team to develop software for the visually impaired. Many male engineers groaned and complained, claiming the workload was inhuman, yet Gabriela quietly volunteered for the most exhausting tasks, never once voicing fatigue. A woman who could endure that — and who was now a mother — would never be fragile or hollow. A handful of flowers over a single week could not sway her heart.

Stewart absorbed Erik’s reasoning, unease creeping in as he loosened his tie. “Then tell me what I should do next. I cannot simply sit idle and wait!” What unsettled him most was whether Myah had revealed his hiring of a hypnotist in Athea to manipulate Wesley.

“Mr. Williams, patience is your best option,” Erik advised. “Gabriela is overwhelmed with work, especially designing the handbag for Princess Alvira. And look at Wesley — you sent flowers for days, yet he has not shown his face once.” Stewart’s conspicuous gestures would certainly not have escaped Wesley’s notice. Given Wesley’s attachment to Gabriela, no activity around Lakeshore Building would go unseen, yet he remained conspicuously absent.

After a long breath, Stewart nodded. “Fine. I will wait, for now.” He resolved to act only after Gabriela’s schedule lightened.

As Erik had predicted, Wesley was fully aware of Stewart’s daily flower deliveries. Still, he restrained himself, unwilling to appear petty or possessive. Such behavior would only sour Gabriela’s opinion of him further. What he needed was time — time to seize control of Crownridge Group and establish himself as Okburg’s most powerful figure.

Standing beside him, Billy continued his report. “Mr. Moss, Stewart appeared at Lakeshore Building today and stopped Miss Haynes at the plaza. It seems he confessed his feelings. However, he left shortly after, flowers still in hand — likely rejected.”

Upon hearing this, Wesley’s tense expression finally softened. Gabriela had ended things with him, yet she would never choose someone as calculating as Stewart over him. With a trace of satisfaction, he signed the final document and said, “Keep watching them.”

Billy collected the papers and nodded solemnly. “Understood.”

Gabriela remained unaware of Wesley’s quiet surveillance — and even if she had known, it would not have concerned her. She was drowning in work, barely keeping track of time.

That day, after concluding a meeting, she received a call from Presley.

“Gabriela, Leo has arrived.”

Leo had returned from overseas, rushing back due to family matters. Once those were settled, memories of the floral and butterfly motifs he had long admired resurfaced, prompting his visit to Okburg. This time he declined a pickup and went straight to Presley's estate after landing. Seeing him arrive unannounced, Presley immediately instructed the chef to prepare lunch, then — recalling Gabriela's earlier absence — called her at once and insisted she come without delay.

Hearing Presley's unmistakably firm tone, Gabriela sighed and agreed. "I will head over now."

Fortunately, her office work was largely wrapped up, allowing her to work remotely at the estate for the next few days. She briefed Alissa on pending matters and told her to return alone to the Haynes villa that evening.

Dark clouds rolled overhead, heavy with the promise of rain, and Alissa reminded Gabriela to drive cautiously.

"Don't worry — it's very close to Presley's place," Gabriela reassured her before steering her small car toward the estate.

No sooner had she parked than rain poured down in sheets. With no choice, Gabriela opened her umbrella and hurried toward the living room. The estate sprawled widely, requiring a short walk across the grounds.

Halfway there, she noticed a lone figure.

Rain lashed down mercilessly, and the man — unable to find shelter — walked beneath the trees instead. Gabriela immediately guessed he must be Leo. She quickened her steps, raised her umbrella over him, and asked with a warm smile, “Sir, are you a guest here?”

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Leo, dressed in a light brown coat, was soaked through and shivering from the chill. Coming to Presley’s unannounced had already felt bold enough, and he had been admiring the estate’s scenery when the storm caught him by surprise — too hesitant to trouble Presley by asking for shelter. He had intended to rush indoors on his own, but suddenly the rain no longer touched him, and a clear voice drew his gaze sideways.

His eyes met Gabriela’s smiling face.

In that instant, the world seemed to fall silent.

Leo had seen Gabriela’s photographs before. He had heard Princess Alvira praise her endlessly, calling her the most beautiful designer she had ever met. Yet no one had mentioned her voice — gentle as flowing water — nor eyes so arresting. Her hair fluttered in the wind, tugging sharply at something deep in his chest.

For the first time in years, Leo’s steady heart faltered, and he stepped back instinctively.

Gabriela moved closer, angling the umbrella to shield him from the rain. With a courteous smile, she said, “Hello. I’m Gabriela.”

Leo remained still, studying her in silence. After a brief pause, he spoke softly, testing the name on his lips.

“Gabby?”

Gabriela and Leo were not familiar with one another, so the casual form of address felt unexpectedly close. She curved her lips into a courteous smile. “Sir, you may call me Gabriela.”

Leo’s emotions were still unsettled. He turned his face slightly away, deliberately avoiding the brilliance in her eyes. “Hello. I’m Leo.”

Gabriela already knew exactly who he was.

“Nice to meet you, Leo.” With practiced grace, she extended her hand. “It’s a pleasure.”

“The pleasure is mine,” Leo replied, clasping her hand briefly as rain misted softly around them.

Sharing the umbrella, they made their way back to the living room at a brisk pace.

Presley had just instructed someone to go out with an umbrella when she turned and spotted Leo entering alongside Gabriela. She rushed over at once. “Leo, you’re soaked through!” Without delay, she instructed the housekeeper to bring clean towels and fresh clothes for him.

Leo responded warmly, “Presley, truly, there’s no need. I brought my own.” Smiling gently, he added, “It’s nothing — I’m young. A bit of rain won’t do any harm.”

Though Leo appeared mild and good-tempered, Presley took the matter earnestly, insisting the housekeeper attend to him carefully while he changed.

Soon enough, Leo returned, dressed neatly in clean clothes. Only then did Gabriela notice just how young he looked. His eyes were strikingly clear, bright with an almost youthful innocence — yet his achievements spoke of experience far beyond his years. She guessed he could not be more than thirty.

When she glanced at him unconsciously, the turbulence in Leo’s chest nearly surged again.

Fortunately, Presley’s voice broke the moment. “Leo, haven’t you been curious about Gabriela’s embroidery all this time? Come along — she can show it to you.”

Gabriela smiled and nodded, taking the lead. The three of them entered the studio, where she revealed the nearly finished flowers and butterflies embroidery to Leo. The blossoms were complete, and two butterflies had already taken shape. Though the palette leaned dark, the butterflies seemed alive, drawing the eye effortlessly — the muted background only heightening their vitality.

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Leo had not expected the design he had seen on his phone to possess such commanding presence in reality. Even unfinished, it was breathtaking. Eight words echoed clearly in his mind: minimal structure, exquisite craftsmanship. Gabriela’s hands must be nothing short of remarkable to create such beauty. His impression of her shifted yet again — she was not only stunning, but undeniably gifted.

Noticing his rapt attention, Presley smiled knowingly. “Gabriela, Leo seems deeply interested. Since you’re catching up on work anyway, why don’t you demonstrate your technique for him?”

Presley was clearly encouraging her student to shine before an influential figure in the world of fashion.

Gabriela smiled lightly and agreed. “Of course.”

She washed her hands, then seated herself gracefully before the embroidery frame, threading the needle with practiced ease. Presley announced she would rest for a while and left the studio, leaving the two of them alone.

Leo stood nearby, silently observing Gabriela. She was breathtaking — her luminous eyes lowered, lashes thick and dark like resting wings. His gaze lingered without intention, waiting for the moment she would look up, certain it would steal his breath.

Gabriela focused on her work, only occasionally glancing in his direction. When their eyes finally met, Leo felt as though his thoughts had been laid bare, and he hastily looked away.

It was the first time he had ever felt so unsteady.

Drawing in a slow breath, he said, “The air feels a bit heavy. I think I’ll step out for some fresh air.”

Gabriela nodded politely. "Alright. Shall I finish this small section and join you shortly?"

"No, no," Leo replied quickly. "I only came to see the piece. There's no need for you to keep me company." His easygoing tone put Gabriela at ease.

She nodded. "Alright."

Leo walked out of the studio. The rain outside had intensified. He stood by the living room window, watching it streak down the glass as his thoughts slowly settled. Who could have imagined that an impulsive visit would stir him so deeply?

His phone rang suddenly. It was his mother calling.

Leo answered at once, and Adalynn's scolding voice immediately filled the line. "What on earth are you doing? I called you home because your father was ill, and you barely stayed before leaving again!" She had even brought a girl home, but Leo left so quickly she never had the chance to introduce her.

Leo knew exactly what his mother had planned. With weary patience, he replied, "Mother, I was overseas on business. You and Dad pretended he was sick just to get me home. Do you know how much money I lost because of that?" The most absurd part was his parents conspiring together simply to force him into a blind date — and as a result, the deal he had carefully negotiated collapsed, leaving him to pay double the deposit as compensation.

“You’re already rich. What does a little loss matter?” Adalynn huffed. “You earn so much but don’t even have a girlfriend. What good is that? You’re worth tens of billions, yet you haven’t donated a cent to repair the roads in our hometown. Every time your father and I go out, it’s such a nuisance.”

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She had repeated these grievances for nearly ten years, and Leo had grown immune. He could predict her pauses and her tone with uncanny accuracy.

“Mother, I bought a house in Xamfield. If you don’t like the villa, I can purchase a larger estate for you and Dad.”

“We are not moving!” Adalynn grew even more agitated. “You think buying property solves everything? If you’re so capable, why don’t you relocate the whole village? If we move, who will we talk to? Who will we socialize with? Without familiar neighbors, with you abroad all year, and no grandchildren, your father and I would just sit staring at each other. Do you want us bored to death?”

Whenever she brought up road repairs and grandchildren, Adalynn spoke without pause, leaving Leo no room to respond. Fortunately, he was gentle by nature — no matter how much she scolded, he listened quietly until her anger subsided.

“Alright, Mother. Don’t be upset. I’ll come home tomorrow, alright?”

“Really?” Her voice was full of suspicion. “Don’t just placate me. If you dare lie again, I’ll truly fall ill!”

Leo nodded seriously. “I mean it. I’ll be back first thing tomorrow.”

After finally soothing his mother, Leo opened the WhatsApp profile of the princess's secretary. Several photos and videos were waiting — all of Gabriela.

Silently, he repeated her name in his heart. For the first time, he realized how beautiful those three syllables sounded together.

That evening, Gabriela stayed late, the studio lights burning softly as Presley's workspace sank into quiet. When she finally stepped out, she noticed Leo seated on the living room sofa, phone in hand, eyes distant as though his thoughts had wandered somewhere far away.

Gabriela offered him a gentle greeting, her voice carrying easy warmth. "I'm heading back now. See you tomorrow."

Leo slipped his phone away and rose at once, instinctively moving to walk her out.

Gabriela blinked in surprise. "It's raining so hard outside. You really don't have to go through the trouble."

Leo reached for an umbrella by the door. "I'm leaving early tomorrow morning. I'm not sure when we will meet again."

The comment struck Gabriela as strange — they were acquaintances at best, and years could pass without consequence. She brushed the thought aside, assuming he was simply eager to see the finished

flowers and butterflies embroidery. With a small nod, she stepped outside beside him. "Once the piece is complete, I will ask the princess for approval and send you a photo. I will use a high-resolution camera."

Rain poured relentlessly, the night heavy with damp air and mist. Gabriela spoke lightly, yet her presence seemed to linger, like a faint fragrance left behind.

Leo watched her calm expression, his heart thudding with an emotion he could not quite name — edged with quiet regret. He said nothing, holding the umbrella steady as they reached her car, then slowly extended his hand. "Gabriela, I truly enjoyed meeting you today."

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Her eyes widened in surprise once more. This man of influence appeared unexpectedly sincere, far removed from any distant mystique. She reached out without hesitation, returning the gesture with honest warmth. "I'm glad too."

Her palm was soft and warm — a fleeting comfort that tempted him to linger. Leo released her hand almost at once, restraining himself with visible effort.

Gabriela waved goodbye, slid into her car, and soon disappeared down the rain-soaked road. Leo remained standing beneath the downpour, unmoving, until cold seeped through his collar. Only then did he turn back, his steps slow as he reentered the house.

Meanwhile, when Gabriela arrived at the villa, she found Wesley already there.

He was in the living room, entertaining Truett with playful magic tricks. The moment Gabriela appeared, Truett tugged her excitedly toward him. “Mommy, Daddy is amazing! He can fix torn paper and make it whole again!” Wesley followed with more tricks — pulling coins from thin air, making a full glass of water vanish before their eyes.

Truett stared in open-mouthed wonder.

Gabriela sat beside her son, watching Wesley’s earnest effort, a quiet smile forming despite herself. She had been clear with Wesley about her refusal to marry him, yet Truett bound them together, and she had never barred him from visiting. Moreover, a man who could shoulder the weight of a corporation and still take the time to learn magic for his child was undeniably a devoted father.

By the time Wesley finished the tricks he had been practicing, the night had grown very late. Truett was already asleep in Gabriela’s arms, breathing evenly. Farley stepped forward and gently carried the child back to his room.

Gabriela turned toward the stairs, but Wesley called out behind her. “Wait, Gabriela.”

She turned. The shadows beneath his eyes were plain to see, fatigue written across his face. “What is it?” she asked softly.

“My grandfather wants me to take over Crownridge Group. I have been overwhelmed with work lately.”

His words hinted at a drastic shift in his future, yet Gabriela only nodded, offering quiet understanding. “Alright. If you are too busy, you don’t have to come by. I can explain things to Truett.”

The gentleness in Wesley's eyes sharpened, a trace of disbelief flickering through them. "Gabriela, do you not care for me anymore?" he asked bluntly.

"I'm sorry," she answered without evasion.

Wesley pressed on. "Do you still care about money?"

Gabriela nodded. After all, practicality had always guided her, and money was part of survival.

"Then marry me," Wesley said. "Build a life with me. I will let you handle everything financially." Gabriela froze, shock flashing across her face. He continued, "Crownridge has branches everywhere. Any project you want — name it. I will support you."

Chapter 959

He only wished she would stop treating him like a distant stranger. Lately, he had given her space, hoping that constant work might dull his restlessness. Yet whenever he found a spare moment, her smiles and expressions replayed endlessly in his thoughts. Those brief months when she served as his assistant had woven her into every corner of his life — even an ordinary coffee cup could stir memories, leaving a dull ache in his chest.

Gabriela steadied herself and replied calmly, "Wesley, my company is doing well. I don't need your help." As long as Jasper and Rebecca stayed out of trouble, her abilities would keep the business thriving. With Kaleb's support, the company would soon go public. "I will not stop you from seeing Truett," she added firmly.

Wesley had encountered this composure countless times. Since the fire, no matter his efforts, Gabriela remained unmoved and distant — and yet he had done nothing wrong. It felt unjust that she held Myah's mistakes against him and kept him at arm's length. The sense of grievance weighed heavily on him.

"Gabriela, even if you do not love me now, at least please do not love anyone else. Just give me time. I will prove how deeply I treasure you. I will make sure no one ever stands between us again."

"Alright." Moved by his sincerity, Gabriela felt a faint ripple in her heart and nodded before she had thought it through.

Relief crossed Wesley's face, his throat bobbing. "Gabriela, thank you."

He had once been the man she loved wholeheartedly, and she could not bear to see him so worn. "It's raining heavily," she said gently. "Do you want to stay the night?"

The invitation sent a surge of joy through Wesley. Afraid his excitement might overwhelm her, he masked it and asked carefully, "May I stay?"

"Of course," Gabriela nodded.

She quickly prepared a guest room. "You can rest here tonight," she said sincerely, before returning to her own bedroom. The long day had left her utterly exhausted.

Wesley lingered outside the guest room door, breathing deeply until his emotions settled. He had not expected her to place him in a guest room. With a quiet sigh, he went inside.

He recalled how Loretta and Miriam had once schemed endlessly to match him with Gabriela. Back then, he had found their efforts laughable — yet now, reckless thoughts crossed his mind before fading just as quickly as they came. Wesley did not dare act on them. Once, he could rely on Gabriela's affection and behave without restraint. Now that love was gone. If he so much as scorched the bed, she would surely throw him out at once.

The powerful CEO felt unexpectedly small, his authority meaningless here. He picked up his pajamas and headed for the shower, a profound loneliness settling over him like a second skin.

Although Wesley was merely staying in the guest room, the news struck Stewart like a bolt of lightning, shattering his composure at once.

His eyes turned glacial as they fixed on his assistant, sharp enough to freeze the air. "Didn't you say this was not the right moment to disturb Gabriela?"

Chapter 960

Under that merciless stare, Erik felt a shiver crawl down his spine. He had no choice but to speak plainly, even if the truth tasted bitter. "Mr. Williams, Gabriela and Wesley shared many years together, and they even have a child. Even if they are no longer together, cutting all ties is simply unrealistic. Put it this way — suppose you finally win Gabriela over and are enjoying a candlelit dinner. Then Wesley suddenly walks in, with Truett calling Gabriela 'Mommy' and Wesley 'Daddy.'" Erik paused deliberately, studying Stewart's reaction. "Could you really endure that?"

A faint crease appeared between Stewart's brows. Gabriela having a child with Wesley was undeniably a thorn in the path. But Stewart quickly steadied himself. "What matters now is winning Gabriela's heart. As for the child, we will deal with that when the time comes." He had schemed patiently for years, moving pieces in the shadows — his aim was to separate Gabriela and Wesley, and to replace Wesley entirely. Besides, Stewart found the child rather charming. If he could marry Gabriela, accepting Truett was not something he would resist.

Erik caught the glimmer in his boss's eyes and knew exactly where those thoughts were headed. He wanted to say: Boss, you are planning to raise another man's heir, and neither of them may accept that. But having misjudged things once already, Erik did not dare pour cold water on Stewart's hopes again. He only wanted to step away from the growing storm.

At that moment, Stewart's phone rang — granting Erik a perfectly timed escape, which he seized without hesitation.

Stewart glanced at the caller ID and picked up. "Leo, why the sudden call?"

Leo and Stewart were distant relatives, connected through a maze of relations with little reason to interact. They had met at a banquet and, despite lacking any business ties, found each other agreeable and gradually became friends. More than two years ago, Leo had introduced a doctor to Stewart, restoring Myah's sight — though Leo was too occupied at the time to follow the full story and never appeared during her treatment.

"I'm leaving early tomorrow morning," Leo said.

"So soon?" A trace of regret crossed Stewart's voice. With more time, he could have invited Leo out for drinks and conversation.

Leo sounded weary. “My parents are forcing marriage on me — they even faked an illness. If I don’t return, I fear the stress might truly make them unwell.”

Stewart was older than Leo, yet his own family had never pressured him. Perhaps the elders of the Williams family believed Stewart exceptional enough that marriage would come naturally whenever he wished it, and there was no need to worry about his personal affairs. Feeling little sympathy, Stewart replied casually, “If you want to avoid marriage, why not have someone pretend to be your girlfriend?”

Leo hesitated, the idea stirring something unexpected. As a dutiful son, he wavered. “Is it right to calm my family with a lie?”

“What choice do you have?” Stewart replied. “They are pushing you into marriage. Find someone willing to step away once it is over — let her help you get through it and buy some time.” Someone who would disappear afterward.

The thought lingered longer than Leo expected. “What if she is not someone I want to let go?”