

His kiss 961

Chapter 961

Stewart immediately sensed a shift. Having known Leo for years, he understood that the world-renowned designer appeared gentle on the surface but was distant and restrained to his core. Once, a famous international actress had pursued Leo relentlessly. In the end, she gave up and settled for friendship, defeated by his unyielding reserve. The idea that Leo might actually have feelings for someone left Stewart startled.

Yet their friendship was built on polite distance, and personal matters were rarely discussed. Back then, had Stewart not mentioned his blind sister in passing, Leo would never have introduced the doctor. Thinking back now, Stewart found himself wondering whether restoring Myah's sight had been the right choice. The thought unsettled him — enough to prompt him to cross an unspoken boundary.

He asked cautiously, "Leo, have you met someone you care about?"

Silence stretched on the line, long enough for Stewart to regret the question and begin preparing an apology.

Then Leo answered softly, "Yes."

From that single word, it was clear Leo wanted to talk. Stewart's curiosity flared. Unable to stop himself, he pressed on. "What is her name? She must be beautiful, right?"

"Yes." Leo laughed quietly. "She is from Okburg and quite well known. You might even know her."

Stewart stiffened. "I might know her?"

He knew many attractive women, but few truly remarkable ones.

"Her name is Gabriela Haynes," Leo said openly. "She is Presley's apprentice — exceptionally skilled. I had my team look into her today. She is the Howard family's illegitimate daughter and once caused quite a sensation in Okburg over a hotel incident." Leo himself had been surprised by what he found. He had not expected the warm, clear-eyed woman to carry such a turbulent past — yet the contrast only deepened his fascination.

When Gabriela's name reached Stewart's ears, disbelief washed over him. How could Leo, long absent from the country, fall for Gabriela on a casual return?

Afraid he had misheard, Stewart asked quickly, "Do you have a photo of her? Can you send it to me?"

With no conflicting interests and years of trust between them, Leo did not hesitate and sent the photo through WhatsApp.

In that instant, Stewart did not know what expression to wear. His close friend and he desired the same woman. The situation was absurd beyond belief.

Yet as he stared at Gabriela's image glowing on the screen, a quiet calculation began to take shape in his mind. He weighed the facts carefully. Leo's background was ordinary, yet as a top designer, his reputation was unmatched — and his gentle temperament and sincerity were things Wesley could never

rival. Stewart had long been searching for a way to deliver a fatal blow to Wesley and Gabriela's fragile connection. Leo's sudden appearance felt like fate handing him one final opportunity.

Still, Leo was his friend. And Stewart hesitated, unwilling to plot behind his back.

Leo, still on the line, had no inkling that Stewart was already weaving calculations around him, intending to stir discord between Wesley and Gabriela.

Chapter 962

Preoccupied with the looming confrontation with his obstinate parents the following day, Leo found his usual composure shaken by memories of his mother's unyielding insistence on marriage. Pressed into a corner, Stewart's earlier suggestion surfaced in his mind — the idea of hiring a woman to play the role of a girlfriend. The notion barely took shape before shame followed, and he dismissed it at once. After all, he had known Gabriela for only a single day. Her eyes were limpid and sincere, untouched by scheming. He could not bring himself to taint that image.

Unaware of this turmoil, Gabriela had no idea that the renowned Leo, whom she had just met, was spending a restless night thinking of her. Worn to the bone, she longed only for a hot shower and deep sleep.

As she reached for her bedroom door, Alissa suddenly slipped out of the guest room and hurried to block her path. "Gabriela, you are finally back."

Gabriela paused, surprised. "You were here all along?"

She had not seen Alissa since coming home and had assumed she had either left or checked into a hotel.

Alissa looked frazzled. “Wesley showed up, so I didn’t dare move around.”

Earlier, Alissa had been playing with Truett when Wesley arrived. The moment she saw him, her legs nearly buckled from sheer intimidation. Wesley had frowned and asked, “What are you doing here?” — and Alissa was so frightened she almost dropped to her knees. She knew that after betting with Gabriela that there would be no marriage within six months, Wesley, heir to the Moss family, had already written her off. Only two months had passed, leaving four more to endure before the wager ended. During this period, she was nothing more than a thorn in Wesley’s eye, and the fact that she had not been thrown out immediately was surely because of Gabriela.

So Alissa had quickly made an excuse, hidden in her room, and spent the night in a constant state of alarm. To make matters worse, Huntley kept sending disturbing messages: “I want to be scolded. I miss your sharp little mouth,” and “I want to be your personal toy. Breaking me is fine.” Her nerves were stretched tight as a bowstring, close to snapping.

Seeing Gabriela finally return felt like a lifeline, as though she could draw strength simply by standing beside her. Alissa clutched Gabriela’s arm, tears threatening to spill. “Gabriela, I’ve been hiding for so long, but Huntley still won’t stop.” She hated burdening Gabriela again, yet Huntley clung to her like a shadow. Meanwhile, Boden kept trying to curry favor with the Wilson family, constantly arranging chances for Alissa and Huntley to be alone. Gabriela’s home had become her last sanctuary.

Nicole — the scheming instigator who usually tormented Alissa — could not even handle someone like Huntley. Alissa was nearly tempted to teach Nicole a lesson herself.

Gabriela was startled by this turn of events. With such a tempting opportunity, someone like Nicole should have leapt at it without hesitation.

Alissa explained, "Nicole is vicious and crafty, but she lacks real nerve. She cannot face true predators." Perhaps Nicole sensed that Alissa and Maddie posed no real danger, which was why she dared to toy with them daily. When confronted with a genuine menace like Huntley, she faltered — unable even to steady the whip, much less wield it. Huntley craved domination and pain, and Nicole did not impress him in the least.

Chapter 963

Gabriela was surprised her plan had collapsed, and felt a trace of regret. Still, not everyone could be as reckless as Myah or Phyllis, willing to burn bridges to reach their goals.

"If there truly is no other option, you can stay here for now," Gabriela said gently, patting Alissa's shoulder. "Don't worry. No matter how bleak things seem, they will turn around." If one path failed, she could always carve another.

Alissa thanked her repeatedly. "Gabriela, I truly don't know what I would do without you." She was grateful for the charity gala where she had outbid everyone for Gabriela's bag, allowing their friendship to take root.

Finding her overly emotional, Gabriela urged her to rest. "Go sleep. You still have work tomorrow."

Reassured and reenergized, Alissa returned to her room and finally slept soundly.

Gabriela slept well too.

Wesley, however, in the neighboring guest room, lay awake far into the night before exhaustion finally claimed him. Before dawn, Gabriela had already left for Presley's estate, and when he woke to find her gone, his mood darkened. He turned to Farley. "Does Gabriela always rise this early?"

Farley sat at the table with Truett, pouring cereal into a bowl, and replied casually, "She has been busy with work lately."

Wesley's expression eased slightly. As long as she was not deliberately avoiding him.

Alissa came downstairs a short while later, but froze the instant she heard Wesley's voice and quietly retreated before reaching the dining room.

Gabriela arrived at Presley's estate just as Leo was about to depart. She smiled brightly. "Perfect timing." She handed him a neatly packed food box. "Fresh bread for breakfast — you can eat it on the way."

Leo was touched and accepted it gratefully. He invited Gabriela to attend his international fashion exhibition the following month. Gabriela did not hesitate. "Of course. I will be there."

Her willingness stemmed partly from his influence in the industry and partly from his genuinely easygoing nature. Since he extended friendship so naturally, she saw no reason to refuse.

They chatted briefly outside the gate. The rain had stopped, but a chill still lingered in the air. Leo noticed Gabriela's ears reddening and urged her to go inside. She smiled, wished him a safe journey, and turned back at once.

Leo watched her figure disappear before stepping into his waiting car and instructing the driver to depart.

Neither of them noticed the black car parked quietly at the corner. Inside it, Stewart observed Leo's lingering gaze, his eyes gleaming with quiet calculation.

Leo had always been a dutiful son. Despite dreading his parents' pressure, he returned promptly to Silvermoon Village in Xamfield, determined this time to put an end to their pretense of illness meant to summon him home.

The car stopped at the village entrance, unable to go farther. Leo got out and walked toward a flat-roofed house with a spacious courtyard — the very home where, two years ago, Gabriela had stayed while seeking treatment for Myah, though neither of them knew it yet. It was the home of Patrick and Adalynn.

Chapter 964

Adalynn waited eagerly at the gate, her wrinkled face breaking into a broad smile as she ushered Leo inside. In the living room sat a young woman with twin braids, wrapped in a vivid red wool coat — a style considered fashionable in the village. Adalynn was clearly pleased with her and pulled Leo forward. "Leo, this is Maura. She arrived early and has been waiting. Say hello."

Maura was the beauty of neighboring Snowport Village. At just twenty, she was striking, with sharp and lively eyes. When she saw Leo, interest flashed across her face. Adalynn had told her Leo worked away from home and avoided marriage, promising a gift of six hundred and sixty thousand dollars if she

succeeded. Maura had hesitated at first, imagining a greasy middle-aged man, and came only for the promised reward. To her astonishment, Leo was handsome beyond expectation.

Maura was quite pleased with Leo's appearance. Yet, upon reflection, she reminded herself that she was hardly lacking either. She was the most beautiful girl in her village, and many young men from nearby villages were eager to marry her. Had Adalynn not offered a hefty wedding gift of six hundred and sixty thousand dollars, a man Leo's age would not have stood a chance.

Noticing Maura quietly assessing her son, Adalynn felt secretly delighted. Leo, who had seemed unwanted for so long, finally had someone showing interest. She smiled and said to him, "It's Maura's first time visiting our village, and she's not familiar with the area. Why don't you take her around? Remember that patch of land where we planted peach trees? Take her to see if they have blossomed."

Patrick and Adalynn had a considerable amount of farmland, making them well-off by village standards. Maura had heard Adalynn mention this a few days earlier. With Leo being their only son, once she married into the family, all that land would belong to them. The thought made her more interested.

Leo, ever obedient to his parents, could not defy his mother's wishes so soon after returning home. He obliged and took Maura outside.

The weather in March and April was perfect — gentle breezes, sunny skies, ideal for romance. Yet Leo seemed somewhat distracted. Despite having no feelings for Maura, he maintained a polite demeanor, as was his nature. He walked ahead to lead the way while Maura followed, admiring his tall figure with quiet satisfaction. Still, Leo remained silent and made no effort at conversation, which left her increasingly displeased. What good was a handsome appearance if he was so taciturn? No wonder he was still single in his early thirties.

They walked for nearly half an hour without finding the peach orchard. Leo had been thin and frail as a child, frequently bullied by the village's troublemakers, and had felt little attachment to Silvermoon Village as a result. He left before the age of ten to study and work and had almost never returned — so the village roads were unfamiliar to him, and he could not bring Maura to the peach trees as promised.

Leo finally stopped by the roadside and spoke plainly. "I'm sorry, but marriage isn't what I'm looking for right now."

Maura was taken aback. What was the point of inviting her here and making her wait if he had no intention of marrying?

Chapter 965

Seeing her anger, Leo felt apologetic. "My mother's views are rather rigid. I came back mainly to calm her down. As for your wasted time, I can compensate you in other ways."

Maura felt insulted. She was young and beautiful, and she had waited for him only to be brushed off. She no longer wished to speak with him and stormed back to the house.

She marched straight into the kitchen where Adalynn was cooking. "Adalynn, your son doesn't want to get married. Were you trying to make a fool of me? Don't contact me again." She turned to leave. Adalynn quickly set down her knife and hurried after her. "What's going on? Don't be upset — I'll ask my stubborn son what happened."

Adalynn managed to calm Maura before turning to glare at Leo. "What's your problem?"

Leo was about to speak when Adalynn cut him off. "Don't say a word. Let me handle this." She turned back to Maura with a soothing smile. "My son is a bit reserved and doesn't know how to talk to girls. Don't be angry — I'll give him a good talking-to." Then she dragged Leo into a corner, her expression exasperated. "What did you promise me on the phone? Maura is such a beautiful girl, and you don't like her? What are you waiting for — a princess?"

Leo tried to speak, but Adalynn pressed on. "You're not allowed to say another word of nonsense. Spend some time with Maura over the next few days. Maybe you'll warm up to her." In Adalynn's day, one simple meeting had been enough to decide on marriage. She believed her son simply refused to settle down, chasing impossible ideals despite his age. "She waited half a day, and you want to send her away the moment you arrive? That's just rude!"

Overwhelmed by his mother's frustration, Leo reluctantly agreed. "Fine. Don't be upset. I'll have a meal with her."

"That's better!" Adalynn quickly prepared a full table of dishes and called Patrick in from outside. Everyone gathered for the meal.

Adalynn's cooking was quite good, and Maura found it satisfying enough to ease her irritation. Seizing the moment, Adalynn began speaking warmly of her son. "Leo works away from home and earns a decent salary. If you're willing..." She was about to suggest that Maura could join Leo in the city and that they might even buy a large house there.

But before she could finish, Maura interrupted. "Leo, how much do you earn a month? Do you have a million in savings?"

Adalynn was taken aback. She knew her son was quite wealthy, but since they did not live together, she had no clear sense of his monthly income. When Leo noticed his mother looking at him, his clear eyes

shifted slightly, and he offered a resigned smile. “I make clothes, and my income isn’t very stable. In a good month, when I have more customers, it’s a bit higher.”

Chapter 966

The enthusiasm in Maura’s eyes diminished at once. No wonder someone so handsome was still single — he was not nearly as financially secure as she had hoped. She cleared her throat, feigning mild embarrassment, and began to state her conditions. “Adalynn, my mom told me Leo is almost twelve years older than me. If we’re really going to consider marriage, you should at least buy a house in a big city, and the title should be in my name.” If she truly married him, she felt she was losing out significantly — asking for a house was the least she could expect.

Adalynn had already planned on such a gesture and quickly agreed. “No problem. I’ll have Leo buy it for you.”

Maura continued. “And I have a younger brother. Our family isn’t well-off, and when he gets married, he’ll need a house. I’ll definitely need to help him — maybe ten or twenty thousand dollars.”

Adalynn felt that was manageable too. Patrick frowned slightly upon hearing it but remained silent. Having lived in the countryside all their lives, they did not hold strong views on social status. They did not think of their son as particularly remarkable — just a man who had made good money — and so they did not look down on Maura’s modest background. They were entirely unaware of Leo’s significant international standing.

As a result, seeing the Strickland family so accommodating, Maura grew increasingly convinced that Leo was of little worth. In her mind, she had already cast herself in the role of a spoiled princess.

After finishing her meal, Maura set down her fork and added one final condition. “Adalynn, I need to be clear about something. After I marry into the family, I won’t do laundry, cook, or wash dishes. I refuse to do any household chores.”

Adalynn’s expression immediately faltered. “If you won’t do any of those things, who will?”

“I certainly won’t,” Maura said with an air of superiority. “I’m still young, and I’m the spoiled princess of my family. I’m not marrying to become a household servant.”

“You don’t have to do everything,” Adalynn tried to negotiate. “What if you and Leo split the chores between you?” She knew her son was not lazy around the house — whenever he visited, he swept floors and washed dishes without complaint.

But Maura retorted, “I’m marrying into this family and will be bearing children for you. Why should I also do housework?” Patrick’s expression grew noticeably sterner.

“And after we’re married, Leo needs to hand over his bank card for me to manage. Otherwise, I won’t feel secure.”

Even with her patient temperament, Adalynn was beginning to feel the strain. Were this girl’s demands not a bit much? But after searching for so long, Maura was still the most beautiful girl in the area — and if they looked elsewhere, her son might end up with someone even less appealing. Better to bring Maura home first. As long as they worked together as a couple, who managed the bank card was not truly important.

Just as Adalynn was about to agree, Leo’s phone rang.

“Excuse me. I need to take this call,” he said politely and stepped aside.

Chapter 967

It was his assistant — a client wanted to adjust the sizing of a custom dress from a few days ago and change the diamond embellishments on the collar to pearls. Leo replied quietly, “We can switch to thumb-sized pink pearls. For the size, adjust according to her waist measurement...” After a few words, Maura grew visibly irritated. He barely earned anything, yet he took work calls during a matchmaking visit — it was pretentious.

Just as she was about to complain, Leo’s phone rang again.

This time it was Stewart. Leo moved to a more distant corner to answer.

Stewart’s voice was light, almost amused. “How did it go today? Were Patrick and Adalynn very upset?”

Leo, feeling slightly worn, gave a brief account of the situation. “I don’t know how to get out of this one,” he admitted.

“I actually called because I suddenly remembered something important,” Stewart said.

“What is it?”

“Do you remember, around two years ago, you introduced Dr. Hill to me to treat Myah’s eyes?” Leo replied that he did. Stewart continued, “It was actually Myah’s sister who brought her for treatment.” Leo was puzzled. “Why bring this up now?”

Stewart hesitated for a few seconds, then said, “Myah’s sister is Gabriela. She stayed at your home for two days when she came to Silvermoon Village.” Leo’s heart skipped a beat. Who could have imagined he shared such a connection with Gabriela?

“Afterward,” Stewart continued, “Adalynn even had Gabriela add you on WhatsApp. She gave your contact to Gabriela, and she added you right away.” He paused. “Did you accept her friend request back then?”

Leo was taken aback by Stewart’s remark.

Over the years, Adalynn had often urged him to add girls on WhatsApp, but he had no recollection of adding Gabriela. It had been two years ago, and he had not known her then — she was a stranger, nothing more.

Stewart was surprised by Leo’s response. “Have you not added Gabriela on WhatsApp these past few days?” As far as he knew, Gabriela had been at Presley’s estate the day before and had not left. Leo said he liked Gabriela, yet an entire day had passed without them exchanging contacts.

“Gabriela was too focused on her work,” Leo replied. “I didn’t want to disturb her.”

Stewart was momentarily stunned — then quietly relieved. Given Leo's straightforward nature in matters of romance, and with Gabriela's feelings still tangled around Wesley, even if Stewart tried to use Leo to create a rift between them, Leo would never truly win her over. Reassured, Stewart said generously, "I'll send you Gabriela's contact. Check if she's already on your list."

Leo agreed gratefully.

Stewart sent the information promptly. Gabriela's profile picture was an adorable little bunny, unchanged for years. When Leo clicked on it, he discovered he had indeed added her on WhatsApp over two years ago. She had sent him a simple "Hello" greeting, but he must have been too busy at the time — or considered her unimportant — and had never replied.

He could have known Gabriela two years ago.

Leo's heart gave a small, sharp lurch. If he had replied back then, perhaps things between them would be different now. With quiet resolve, he typed a response — two years late, but sincere. "Hello. It's nice to meet you."

Gabriela did not reply.

Chapter 968

Leo considered his profile: a nondescript picture, a name she would not recognize. She had never spoken to him on the app and likely had no idea who he was. He quickly changed his profile picture to the SK Elite Boutique logo and updated his display name to "Leo."

Once the changes were made, he noticed that Gabriela's app name was simply a capital "L." Something about that small detail made his ears flush slightly.

While he waited for her reply, Stewart sent a sixty-second voice message suggesting that if Leo could not find a way out of the matchmaking situation, he might use Gabriela as an excuse — Patrick and Adalynn had been quite fond of her during her stay two years ago.

Leo listened in silence, turning the idea over in his mind. Before he could reach a decision, Adalynn's voice cut through his thoughts.

"Leo, come over here."

He pocketed his phone and walked over. Adalynn cast a sharp sideways glance at him, lowering her voice to a scolding murmur. "You're home for a matchmaking visit, yet you've been taking calls nonstop — and now you're on WhatsApp? Are you trying to embarrass Maura?"

Maura, standing nearby, watched Leo with open displeasure. She was already unimpressed by his circumstances, and the constant interruptions only deepened her doubts. If they married, he would likely neglect her entirely.

Despite her unfriendly expression, Leo apologized politely.

Maura pursed her lips and rose to her feet. "Adalynn, I can see Leo is very busy and has no time for me. I'll head home."

An unstable income, perpetually distracted even on days off — if a man like that could offer a wedding gift of six hundred and sixty thousand dollars, it had probably been scraped together by his parents. Even if she married him for his looks alone, she would have to find ways to extract far more than that.

Seeing Maura move toward the door, Adalynn grew anxious. “Maura, don’t be upset. I’ll agree to your requests on Leo’s behalf!”

Young women these days hated housework — that was simply the reality. If it came to it, Adalynn would handle the chores herself after the wedding. She believed that once Maura matured, she would naturally learn how to manage a household. The priority now was securing the marriage. Once they were wed, everything else would fall into place. Adalynn was firmly convinced that starting a family would finally settle Leo and keep him from roaming the world endlessly.

Maura, seeing Adalynn’s humble posture, grew even more smug. She had been raised amidst constant praise for her beauty, and the phrase she had heard most throughout her life was: “Maura is prettier than any actress on television — she’ll marry a wealthy man and live like a lady.” Being treated like a lady was her lifelong ambition.

But after several matchmaking attempts, she had found that wealthy men were either bald or greasy. Leo was the most pleasing to the eye by far. The Strickland family, however, was simply too poor. And above all else, he was so much older than her — if she was to marry him, they would have to treat her like a queen.

Chapter 969

Thinking this, Maura spoke with deliberate indifference. “I’m not particularly impressed by Leo. Whether anything comes of this depends on my parents.”

Adalynn nodded readily. "You're right to consult your parents, of course."

"Then have eight thousand dollars ready," Maura added. "Deliver it to my home by tomorrow, and we can discuss marriage from there." Adalynn saw no obstacle in that and nodded eagerly. "Of course. I'll bring Leo to your home tomorrow for the proposal."

Maura finished with casual finality. "After receiving the money, I'll try dating Leo. And whether we end up married or not, the eight thousand is mine to keep."

Adalynn hesitated.

She knew her son was incredibly wealthy — far beyond what anyone in this village could imagine. But rural common sense was practical: money did not grow on trees. And given her son's indifferent attitude toward the whole affair, if things fell through...

Noticing Adalynn's pause, Maura gave a cold little laugh. "Alright. Think it over, Adalynn. I'm heading home." She turned and left without so much as asking Leo to see her out.

Patrick could no longer contain himself. Once Maura was gone, he said quietly, "Maura has very high expectations. If Leo marries her, I'm not sure his life would be a happy one."

Adalynn did not agree. "High expectations are fine. Once married, she'll see what a good life Leo can give her." What she did find unreasonable was demanding eight thousand dollars before any formal engagement had been made.

But in the end, she blamed her son.

If he had been more proactive, none of this would be so difficult. They would have gladly given Maura the full six hundred and sixty thousand — not merely eight thousand. The more she thought about it, the more frustrated she became, until she was glaring at Leo as though he were the greatest disappointment she had ever raised.

“What on earth are you thinking?” she snapped. “If you can’t give me a good reason, don’t bother coming home again. You barely visit as it is — no attachment to the family, none to the village, and clearly none to your own parents. Look at the people you grew up with — their children are already in middle school — and here you are, still an old bachelor!”

Leo was at a loss. He was barely past thirty. When had that become old?

Just then, a message arrived from Gabriela.

“You’re Leo?”

Gabriela was genuinely surprised.

She could not recall ever adding Leo on WhatsApp. How had he suddenly appeared in her contacts list? Her phone had broken recently, and she had lost everything saved from years ago — including any greeting message she might have sent.

Leo replied quickly. "Yes, it's me."

Gabriela assumed that Presley or someone else had passed her number along to him without mentioning it. She did not dwell on it — she sent a handshake emoji in return and turned her attention back to the traditional embroidery piece in front of her.

Chapter 970

Back in Silvermoon Village, Adalynn was already at her limit. Seeing her son still fixed on his phone, she exploded. "What are you doing? Just because you have a job doesn't mean you can ignore your own mother!"

Leo had not originally intended to use Stewart's suggestion. Yet somehow, in that moment, he turned his phone toward her and asked, "Mother, do you remember a girl named Gabriela?"

The name stirred something in Adalynn, though she could not place it immediately. Leo continued, "About two years ago, a young girl named Myah came to our village seeking treatment for her eyes."

At that, Patrick lifted his head to listen.

Adalynn's expression cleared. "Yes — a young woman came with her. Her name was Gabriela." She remembered her well. Gabriela had been strikingly beautiful and an excellent cook. Adalynn had been very fond of her. After giving Gabriela Leo's contact, though, there had been no further word, and she had long since stopped wondering why.

She studied her son with sudden suspicion. "I remember her. So what? She had a boyfriend."

Gabriela had visited Silvermoon Village twice, and each time a handsome man had been at her side, helping her with everything. Such a wonderful girl — with so much time passed, she was likely married with a family by now.

"She doesn't have a boyfriend," Leo said.

Adalynn blinked. "With qualities like hers, how could she not?"

"She's a single mother, raising her child on her own."

He had not intended to delve into Gabriela's private life. But Gabriela had once been quite well known, and her history with the Moss family's young heir was no secret — a brief inquiry revealed it all. Adalynn drew a sharp breath, and understanding settled across her face. "Son — don't tell me you have feelings for Gabriela."

Although Adalynn desperately wanted her son to marry, she had not prepared herself to welcome a woman who already had a child with someone else. Compared to that, Maura seemed the more sensible choice.

"I do like her," Leo admitted plainly. "But she is focused on her career right now, with no interest in marriage — and she certainly wouldn't look twice at me." A quiet resignation crept into his voice. "Mother, it isn't that I don't want to marry. I simply can't win over the person I care about."

Adalynn had always assumed her son loved his freedom too much — that it was wanderlust, not heartache, that had kept him single for so long. She had never imagined he carried a quiet attachment to a woman like this.

She sank into her chair, one hand pressed to her chest, staring blankly ahead.

Leo spoke with quiet sincerity. “Mother, Father — I know you only want what is best for me. But if you force me to marry Maura, I won’t be happy for the rest of my life.”

Patrick took a long drag from his cigarette and said nothing.

Adalynn’s expression shifted between conflict and resignation. “When did you start liking her? Is she truly the only one for you?”