

His kiss 121

Chapter 121

Brenden's head snapped toward Gabriela, his expression a mix of surprise and mild confusion. "Gabriela? What are you even doing here? And since when am I your boyfriend?"

Her carefully crafted plan to act as though they were strangers unraveled in an instant.

The crowd erupted with sharper, mocking laughter.

"So she's not his girlfriend at all—just a backup option. How pitiful."

"Gabriela, what the hell happened to you? Where's your self-respect?"

Phyllis lingered at the edge of the chaos, watching Gabriela stand alone under the jeers. A slow, satisfied smile curved her lips—she relished every second of seeing Gabriela too humiliated to lift her head.

Gabriela couldn't care less about their snide remarks. She'd already endured a tidal wave of malice back in high school and come out standing.

But then she noticed Josh watching her. His eyes were rimmed red, glistening like he was on the verge of tears. That was the one thing she could never face without flinching—Josh crying. With his fragile heart, she feared even the smallest upset might push him too far.

A slow burn of irritation welled up inside her. Brenden had really outdone himself—choosing the exact wrong time to disappoint her.

Josh stepped forward, gripping her arm with trembling fingers, his voice rough with hurt. “Didn’t you tell me you’d found yourself a great boyfriend? How could he turn out to be some womanizing playboy? You declined to attend the blind date, saying you were already seeing someone. Was all of that just a lie? How could you fool me like this?”

The pointed questions from Josh only deepened the crowd’s contempt, their eyes narrowing on Gabriela as if she were beneath them.

Brenden, still trying to process why a middle-aged man was breaking down in front of him, felt an odd twist of unease.

That was the moment it dawned on him—he might have made a mistake.

Catching the brittle curve of Gabriela’s smile and the way her expression trembled with wounded pride, he guessed that dismissing her so publicly must have stung. A flicker of guilt crossed his features. “I’m sorry, Gabriela. I really didn’t realize you were...”

He didn’t get as far as the last words—“so taken with me.”

Before the awkward pause could settle, Vivian's friend leaned in, her tone sharp with warning. "Mr. Saunders, back in high school, Gabriela was a wild one—always running with the wrong crowd. You'd better watch she doesn't cling to you."

Judging by Gabriela's usual behavior, Brenden knew that accusation was bullshit and cut in, his voice firm, "She's not that kind of person..."

The cheerful buzz in the room abruptly died, every head swiveling toward the hotel entrance. Even the group encircling Gabriela broke off, their eyes drawn to the commotion.

Vivian craned her neck, curiosity piqued. "Who's that? Why's everyone heading over?"

"Not sure. Looks like a VIP just showed up."

A spark of excitement lit Vivian's eyes. She recalled offhandedly telling her brother a few days ago that she wanted him at the wedding. If he really had come, his business clout would have half the room fawning over her for introductions.

Shoving her way through the guests, she hurried toward the entrance.

At that moment, Gabriela's phone vibrated with a short, almost terse text. "I'm here."

It was none other than Wesley who sent the message.

She blinked, momentarily thrown. What exactly did he mean by that?

On instinct, she lifted her head toward the doors, trying to catch a glimpse, but the entrance was packed—a restless tide of bodies blocking her view. She began pushing forward, intent on confirming her suspicion.

Before she could break through the crowd, Josh seized her arm. His eyes brimmed with tears, his voice shaking as he demanded, “Don’t you dare dodge me, Gabriela. Tell me the truth—do you not have a boyfriend at all? How could you lie to me?” Tears streamed down his face in an unending torrent, soaking his cheeks until they glistened.

Gabriela stood frozen, unsure how to comfort him.

All she could do was speak gently, her voice low and steady. “Vivian and her friends have it out for me. They dragged Brenden here just to humiliate me. I swear I have a boyfriend—I’m not making this up. Please, Uncle Josh, stop crying... people are staring.”

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But he seemed beyond caring, completely consumed by grief, his sobs shaking his shoulders.

At this rate, if she didn’t present a boyfriend soon, she feared his tears might break her before they stopped.

Outside the hotel, Wesley finished tapping out a message just as Billy stepped forward to open the car door. He waited in silence, posture straight, while two rows of towering men in sharp black suits flanked the entrance, holding back the curious crowd pressing for a better look.

The air felt charged, almost oppressive, as if the entire lobby were holding its breath.

Wesley stepped out of the car in a dark-gray classic suit that exuded quiet authority, instantly drawing every gaze his way.

Marie marched right toward him, only to halt when a wall of stone-faced bodyguards blocked her path.

Without slowing, Wesley strode into the hotel, his polished shoes clicking against the marble floor.

Recognition rippled through the crowd. “That’s Mr. Moss from Apex Group, isn’t it?” “It is!”

“My God, what on earth is he doing here? The Haynes family actually got him to show up? I didn’t know they had that kind of pull.” “Think it’s Phyllis’s doing, or maybe Dustin’s connections?”

“Come on—let’s edge closer. Once those bodyguards ease up, it’ll be the perfect time to greet Mr. Moss and make an impression.”

Escorted by his black-suited entourage, Wesley cut a direct path to Gabriela. “Sorry, I’m late,” he remarked, his voice a low, velvety rumble. His expression stayed coolly composed, yet his gaze on her was unmistakably warm.

Josh still clung to Gabriela’s hand as she tried in vain to calm him.

Then, out of nowhere, the impossibly polished Wesley stood before her in the very suit she had chosen for Brenden. She froze, breath catching in her throat. Catching

The distant look in her eyes, Wesley’s brows drew together as he queried, “Why are you just standing there? Come here already!” The shock of seeing him here left her momentarily speechless.

Whatever had brought him, gratitude swelled in her chest. His poised, unshakable presence was like a lifeline she hadn’t known she needed until now. She drifted over, still looking a touch bewildered, and murmured, “What brings you here, Mr. Moss?”

Somehow, his expression seemed to shadow instantly at the question. Gabriela swallowed whatever she’d been about to say and simply remained at his side, quiet and still.

Josh’s tears had finally dried, leaving him staring at Wesley as if he couldn’t quite believe his eyes. That was Gabriela’s boss. Why would he attend this wedding when they hadn’t sent him an invitation at all? Could it be possible that he was Gabriela’s boyfriend?

A grin broke through Josh’s stunned expression, and he strode forward, voice bright with relief. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Moss. So you’re Gabriela’s boyfriend? Now I get why she kept you away from the family.”

Wesley inclined his head in a curt nod that served as a greeting. Then he turned to Gabriela, one brow arching. “What’s this—am I someone you need to keep hidden away?”

Gabriela was taken by surprise by his question. Was Wesley leaning a little too hard into the role? Well, she decided to roll with the act. With a coy smile, she stepped closer, her voice low and teasing. “When you’re this incredible, of course I need to keep you a secret.”

His lips curved in quiet approval. “Wise choice.”

The other guests who heard their playful banter were at a loss for words. A neat wall of bodyguards cut the space in two, leaving Wesley and Gabriela standing alone in the cleared center as if the rest of the guests had ceased to exist.

On both sides, people strained to see past the human barrier, their curiosity burning. Every gaze was fixed on Gabriela now, the sudden star of the evening. Across the room, Phyllis’s smile had soured, her complexion turning an envious shade.

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Phyllis wasn’t the only one with a sour expression.

Vivian, in particular, lost all color in an instant.

Wesley was Gabriela's boyfriend? The thought made her stomach drop. How could that even be true? Yet the memory of those suffocating three days in detention crept back in, and suddenly it all fit together. If there'd been nothing between them, why else would Wesley have gone out of his way to shield a mere employee?

Her pulse kicked up, unease tightening in her chest. If her brother caught wind of today's events, she was bound to get another scolding.

Around her, her friends were buzzing with barely contained astonishment. "That's really Wesley Moss, isn't it? I've only seen him in interviews—he's even better-looking in person."

"Come on—him and Gabriela? No way. They have to be faking this!"

"No way! He's all about staying low-key and keeps his distance from women. What kind of pull could Gabriela possibly have to get him to play along?"

"We were just circling Gabriela, mocking her and trying to humiliate her. Damn, we're in trouble."

One by one, their bravado cracked. Each replayed the snide remarks they'd tossed out, wondering if they'd gone too far—and whether Gabriela might decide to make them pay for it. A few attributed the slight toward Gabriela to Vivian's influence. If it hadn't been for helping her seek retribution, none of them would've gone after Gabriela in the first place.

Vivian's chest tightened with a mix of fear and loathing. Her brother had once told her that the Crownridge Group—owned by the Moss family—was a multinational powerhouse, holding the number two spot in global revenue for nine consecutive years. The Moss family's fortune was vast beyond measure, but its family tree was a snarl of rivalries, the infighting cutthroat.

Wesley had steered clear of that mess, refusing to be pulled into the feud. Instead, he'd built his own empire from the ground up, and in just a few short years, he had carved out a place among the elite. He even had an office tower bearing his company's name.

Plenty of young blood in the Moss family had brains and ambition, but Wesley was the only one his grandfather had openly acknowledged as the future heir. If nothing went wrong, he would become the head of the Moss family.

The more Vivian dwelled on it, the sharper her envy became. Out of everyone in the world, it had to be Gabriela who caught Wesley's attention? The whole thing was downright insane.

Soon, the banquet started. Josh was the only one the bodyguards didn't turn away. With his usual cheer, he remarked, "Mr. Moss, Gabriela, don't just hover there—sit down, have a bite, and let's talk."

The sight of the guests penned in behind a wall of black suits wasn't exactly flattering. For Josh's sake, Gabriela gave Wesley's sleeve a light, almost pleading tug. Seeing that she was wearing the bracelet he had given her, he let a faint softness creep into his expression. A silent look passed from him to Billy.

Billy replied with a subtle nod and signaled for the bodyguards to ease back.

Across the room, Vivian's fingers shook even harder. Gabriela held this much sway? If she complained to Wesley, Vivian suspected her brother wouldn't just scold her—he might keep her locked at home for half a year.

Spotting an opening, Marie swept in with a bright, obsequious smile, angling to guide Wesley toward the head table. But he dismissed her smoothly, his voice even. "I've got an urgent issue to handle, so I won't be joining you at the table."

The edges of Marie's smile stiffened, threatening to crack. He'd clearly come solely for Gabriela—and now he was about to walk right back out without even bothering to wait for the wedding ceremony to finish. It was as good as slapping Phyllis in the face in front of all the guests.

If Phyllis became the object of mockery, how would she salvage her reputation, let alone conduct business later?

Marie flicked several meaningful glances at Josh, silently urging him to pressure Gabriela into doing something.

But Josh, oblivious as ever, squinted at her instead. "What's with your eyes, Marie? Haven't been sleeping enough these last two days?"

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Her chest tightened in frustration, words lodging in her throat. Once, she had relished how readily Josh bent to her will, eager to accept whatever she handed him. Now, his cluelessness left her feeling utterly exasperated.

Wesley paid them no mind, resting a light hand on the crown of Gabriela's head. "Something's come up. Come with me and we'll deal with it."

Gabriela found her eyes fixed on his hand and felt her pulse skip. Almost without thinking, she nodded, dazed, a faint warmth spreading through her chest. Oh my God. He was distractingly good-looking... and maybe she was just a little too taken with him.

His tone gentled even further as he went on, "Let your uncle know first. I'll be waiting outside."

Even with urgency tugging at him, Wesley was giving her every courtesy—bringing her along, yet allowing her the dignity of a proper farewell to her family. A warm surge of confidence swelled inside her. Once again, Wesley had stepped in without hesitation, the steady safety net always there when she needed it. She marveled at how fate had been so generous, placing her in the hands of a boss like him.

After murmuring an apology to Josh, she broke into a light jog to catch up with Wesley—only for a man to suddenly block her path. "Excuse me, are you Ms. Gabriela Haynes?"

Blinking in surprise, she found herself facing a sharply dressed man in his late thirties. The black suit fit him to perfection, his square jaw and upright stance giving him a commanding presence. Like the think tank specialists who often flanked Wesley, he radiated a polished, high-society refinement from head to toe.

Yet Gabriela was certain she had never seen him before.

“Sorry,” she replied politely, her tone cool but courteous. “I think you might have the wrong person.”

Erik McKay’s brows lifted slightly, as if her blank look caught him off guard. A man who prided himself on never forgetting a face, he was confident he was speaking to the right person.

“I’m with Williams Group, overseeing our software development,” he swiftly explained. “We’ve got a smart braille program nearly ready for launch. You were the one who set it in motion—don’t you remember?”

“I’m afraid you’ve got the wrong person, sir.” Gabriela lingered for a beat, searching her memory, then gave a small, decisive shake of her head. “Sorry—someone’s waiting for me. I have to go.”

She brushed past him without another glance, ignoring the flicker of confusion that crossed his face.

Her steps quickened until she reached Wesley, who had been watching the exchange with a measured calm. As she drew closer, his voice carried a casual edge. “So... how exactly do you know someone from Williams Group?”

Gabriela tilted her head, brows knitting in mild puzzlement. “Must be some mix-up. I’ve never met him.”

Her wide, luminous eyes only grew more guileless when she blinked and let them widen ever so slightly, the picture of sincerity. It really seemed like she was telling the truth.

Wesley studied her a beat longer, then gave a short nod. “Get in the car.”

Billy, trailing just behind, kept his observations to himself. He’d crossed paths with the Williams Group before and knew their inner circle well. Erik, the CEO’s right-hand man, was razor-sharp and far too discerning to confuse Gabriela with anyone else—especially when her features were this utterly striking.

Since Billy would dig into it later, Wesley saw no need to dwell on the encounter. He stepped forward and pulled open the driver’s side door. Noting that he intended to drive personally, Gabriela slipped into the passenger seat without hesitation, the movement smooth and swift. The sight drew more than a few startled glances from onlookers—it was hard to miss the quiet tenderness in his gesture.

Billy blocked Brenden from following them and then slid into another car with a couple of bodyguards.

Gabriela fastened her seatbelt in silence, resisting the urge to ask where they were going. Wherever Wesley led, she was prepared to go.

His lips curved in a faint, knowing smile as the engine turned over, and the car eased away.

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Wesley’s car offered generous space, yet the air inside seemed saturated with his presence—an unshakable, magnetic force that pressed in on Gabriela until it was almost stifling.

She sat quietly for a long while before she finally gathered the nerve to murmur, “Thanks for stepping in earlier, Mr. Moss.”

Her tone was soft, her posture modest, which earned her a quiet, low chuckle from him. “And what exactly am I being thanked for?” he asked, a trace of amusement curling at the edge of his voice.

“For pretending to be my... boyfriend,” she admitted.

Without his intervention, she would have been left defenseless against Josh’s emotional outburst. She could only bring herself to utter it in a voice full of courtesy and sincerity.

Wesley slid her a sidelong glance, the motion slow and deliberate, before giving the faintest nod. His profile, carved in the cool light, carried an imposing elegance that made him seem even more unreachable.

Gabriela couldn’t quite put her finger on why his mood had darkened so abruptly, and the shift left her slightly on edge. Still, she ventured with quiet concern, “Weren’t you and Mr. Clarke supposed to be in Athea for a project?”

“Just stepped off the plane hours ago,” Wesley said.

What he didn’t mention was how he’d crammed his schedule into an exhausting blur just to shave a day off the trip—enduring Billy’s complaints and the think tank’s protests the entire time. The instant he touched down, he’d swapped into the tailored suit she’d picked for him, headed straight to the Deluxe Hotel, and let everyone see, without question, that she was his girlfriend.

Yet even with that unspoken declaration, the little fool still clung to formality. Catching the faint weariness in his eyes made Gabriela's chest tighten with an unfamiliar ache. She meant to have felt that way—not given her place—but she did.

When her gaze slid toward him again, she realized her coat and his suit were almost a perfect match, as if they'd dressed for each other without knowing it. A sharp breath snagged in her throat.

The gown she'd worn to the wedding, the one she'd thought was a casual favor from Brenden, had actually been handed to her by Wesley himself. Maybe it had never been Brenden's gift at all.

She opened her mouth to ask, but the car eased to a stop before she could speak. "Get out," Wesley said, his voice low but firm.

Stepping onto the pavement, Gabriela blinked in surprise at the stretch of open sea before them. "Why bring me here?" she asked, curiosity threading her tone.

Wesley's gaze dropped to meet hers. He had spent years moving through glittering circles, surrounded by elegant women draped in designer gowns. Yet he couldn't ignore how Gabriela stood apart—her beauty sharpened by those clear, luminous eyes that held no pretense.

A salty breeze teased at the hem of her skirt, sending it swaying, and her faintly furrowed brows gave her an almost childlike innocence that tugged at something deep in his chest. This was the woman he had set his heart on.

He took a step toward her, but the sky dimmed and a fine drizzle began to fall, the air turning crisp in an instant.

Gabriela, who moments ago had been stiff with nerves, brightened suddenly. “I’ll get the umbrella!” she blurted, her voice laced with purpose. Ever since she’d become his personal secretary, she’d made it a habit to stash an umbrella in the trunk of his car. She only hoped no one had taken it out.

Hurrying over, she popped the trunk. Relief washed over her—the umbrella was still there.

She returned to Wesley, the handle gripped firmly in her hand. Rising on tiptoe, she tilted it over his head, her gaze lifting to meet his as the rain whispered down around them. The wind roared in from the sea, nearly yanking the umbrella from her grasp, but Gabriela tightened her hold, determined to shield Wesley from the pelting rain.

She might have looked delicate, yet she stood braced against the storm, refusing to yield an inch. Wesley reached over, taking the handle from her while his other hand slipped around her right arm, steadying her against the wind.

He wore no cologne, yet as he leaned in, she caught a fresh, clean scent from him—cool, yet threaded with an unshakable authority that made her pulse jump.

Heat rushed to her cheeks.

“M-Mr. Moss... let me do it,” she stammered, reaching for the handle again. A boss who paid her such a generous salary wasn’t supposed to be the one holding the umbrella over her head.

“Why are you shaking?” Wesley’s brows drew together, his voice carrying a husky edge. “Come here. Don’t let the rain soak you.”

Gabriela instinctively lifted her gaze and was caught by the unwavering intensity in his eyes.

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Something about this felt wrong. She was just his secretary—yet he’d rushed straight from the airport to the hotel to stand up for her. And now... he was holding her.

Out of nowhere, Aubrey’s playful voice echoed in her mind. “Mr. Moss came to your rescue and drove you home—was there a little chemistry?”

Gabriela had once laughed off Aubrey’s wild talk about the boss, dismissing it as nothing more than idle nonsense. But now, even she felt a reckless spark of curiosity—could Wesley actually be interested in her?

Heat flared in her cheeks as she buried her face in her hands, her pulse thudding against her palms. The flutter in her chest could have been excitement, yet a heavy, aching sadness curled beneath it.

Wesley was not just handsome—he was striking, with the kind of effortless elegance and staggering wealth that made him seem untouchable. He had always been her crush. And if by some impossible chance he liked her in return, she could imagine herself agreeing before he even finished the question, nodding until she was dizzy.

But the thought of saying yes came tangled with dread. Because the moment she dared step closer to Wesley, she knew Brenden would find out—and that discovery could shatter everything.

Word was, Brenden was Wesley's cousin—and nothing thrilled him more than ratting someone out. She knew he'd have no trouble turning her in. If he found out about her one-night stand with Brenden, would he think she'd been two-timing him?

That would be the end of her career.

Absolutely not. She couldn't afford to lose her job.

Across from her, Wesley watched her face cycle through surprise, worry, and defiance, clearly amused by the constant flicker of emotion. Maybe he didn't love her with the depth of a lifelong passion, but for years she'd been the one who mattered most to him. Her presence coaxed smiles from him without effort. He was willing to have her stay by his side forever.

In his head, a sharp whisper demanded, "Now's the time—tell her!"

What he didn't realize was that, in the span of seconds, her mind had veered from romantic fantasy to cold, practical considerations about her career. He drew a breath, squared his shoulders, and said, "Gabriela, I think you're extraordinary. Would you be willing..."

Her lungs caught, and in the boldest rush of words she'd ever managed, she cut in. "I'm sorry!"

The emotion still blazing in Wesley's eyes dimmed with stunned disbelief, the edges reddening as if the shock itself had scalded him.

Gabriela studied Wesley's face with cautious precision, trying to read the flickers of his expression. This was the CEO of the Apex Group—wealth, status, and authority wrapped in one man—and she had just turned him down.

Desperate to soften the blow, she blurted the first excuse that popped into her head. "I've always wanted a boyfriend I could look straight in the eye. You're... far too tall for my taste."

Her words stopped him cold. Even she felt the jolt of shock as they left her lips. She hadn't just turned him down—she'd picked him apart, piece by piece.

Damn. She was done—had to kiss that job goodbye.

The uneasy silence was broken by a sudden volley of fireworks bursting in the distance. Brilliant blooms splashed across the dark sky, unfurling into shimmering heart shapes before fading into the drizzle.

Beneath the umbrella, both of them glanced up in faint surprise.

Gabriela's gaze lingered on the vibrant display, her thoughts a tangled knot of wonder and restraint.

Seaside air, rain-slick night, and heart-shaped fireworks—by all rights, it was the perfect setting for romance.

Yet in her mind, the steady hum of a paycheck still rang sweeter.

After all, no matter how beautiful the moment, fireworks couldn't pay the rent or fill the fridge.

While Gabriela was still caught in that flicker of regret, a figure emerged from the far edge of the dimly lit boardwalk—Billy, cradling a lush bouquet in his arms like a precious offering.

As Wesley's ever-resourceful assistant, Billy took pride in staying two steps ahead of his boss's needs. And today, the moment Wesley's feet touched home soil, he had gone straight for Gabriela, his purpose written plainly in every move.

Billy, sharp enough to catch the unspoken, had made sure fireworks were set to blaze the sky and flowers were ready to seal the moment.

With such flawless foresight, surely he deserved a generous bonus. He pictured it already—Wesley's curt but approving nod, maybe even the faint curl of a smile. Feeling rather pleased with himself, Billy advanced toward them at an easy pace, bouquet poised in both hands.

He was just drawing a breath to present it when Wesley's gaze cut to him—cold, razor-sharp, and merciless. The look hit him like a bucket of ice water, prickling his skin and freezing his steps mid-stride.

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Billy's hands shook with unease. Could he have gotten it all wrong?

Was it possible that Wesley didn't harbor any romantic feelings for Gabriela? If that were true, then what explained his relentless push in Athea these last few days?

For a long beat, Billy hovered in doubt, uncertain whether to pass the bouquet over to Wesley.

By this point, any trace of tension had long drained from Wesley's face. As the CEO of Apex Group, he wasn't the kind of man to crack under embarrassment over something as insignificant as a failed love confession. Composure was second nature to him, and now was the moment to steer things toward a calmer, more sustainable footing between them.

Burying every flicker of emotion behind a cool gaze, he addressed Gabriela evenly. "I think you've got the wrong idea. Women like you don't interest me in the least. The only reason I brought you here..."

Gabriela held her breath, mortified by her blunder, as Wesley continued in a flat and mechanical tone, "was to ask if you wanted to hang around and watch Billy propose to his girlfriend."

Billy, who had been single for years, went rigid, caught completely off guard. Most of his adult life had been swallowed by the relentless grind of working for Wesley—through crises, tight deadlines, and endless business trips—leaving little time to even think about dating. And now, how on earth was he supposed to conjure up a girlfriend out of nowhere?

Gabriela's shoulders loosened as a faint sigh of relief slipped out, but her surprise quickly shifted to incredulous amusement. Seriously? Wesley cared about something like this?

Apparently, even the most imposing man had a taste for juicy gossip. The moment she turned, her gaze caught Billy with an enormous bouquet of red roses. Honestly, watching a live proposal was far more entertaining than scrolling through some over-the-top drama series.

Billy, looking like a man headed for the gallows, darted a glance at Wesley—only to be met with an icy stare that all but said, “Want me to assign you to a nightmare project with Brenden?”

The implied threat made his knees wobble, but Billy swallowed hard and forced himself to address Gabriela. “Well, what a pleasant surprise to see you here, Miss Haynes. So... do you think I have any shot at pulling this proposal off?”

Gabriela knew him as a relentless workaholic, a man who married deadlines instead of romance. Yet today, he was suddenly playing the part of a lovestruck man. She flashed him a quick, encouraging fist bump. “You’ve got this. Go knock her off her feet.”

“Appreciate it.”

Squaring his shoulders, Billy turned toward the distance with exaggerated drama, as if his girlfriend might appear at any moment, stepping right into a carefully staged scene.

Half an hour later, drizzle clung to his hair and soaked through his jacket, leaving him shivering. Gabriela's playful curiosity faded, replaced by quiet sympathy. Poor guy—after all that careful preparation, his girlfriend hadn't even shown. Had she actually stood him up?

Billy risked a sideways glance toward them, no doubt checking if Wesley's anger had simmered down. Catching his disheartened expression, Gabriela felt a twinge of sympathy and offered gently, "Don't let it get to you, Mr. Clarke. Maybe the rain's what kept her away. You're good-looking and have a solid paycheck. A lot of the women at work think you're a catch."

Wesley's expression, however, only grew a shade darker. Billy stiffened under Wesley's cold, cutting stare. Her attempt at cheer only deepened the slump in his shoulders.

Picking up on it, Gabriela pressed on, her voice light but teasing. "Sure, fireworks and roses are sweet, but they're also a total cliché. You'd make a bigger impression by sliding her an unlimited credit card and telling her to use it however she wants."

The absurdity hit her a beat later, and she waved her hands in quick retreat. "Alright, maybe that would just blow the whole thing up and make her angrier. Honestly, the real problem is you don't even have a ring. Show up with one next time, and she won't be able to turn you down."

Her words instantly soured Wesley's mood, as those things she mentioned should have been prepared, yet he hadn't arranged any of them at all.

His expression tightened, and with a sharp tug at his tie, he pivoted and strode away.

Gabriela leaned toward Billy, murmuring a quick word of encouragement, then quickened her pace to catch up with Wesley.

He threw her a sidelong glance as he pressed, “What’s this—planning to come home with me?”

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She gave a small shake of her head. Something in his clipped tone told her he was in a foul mood. Was it possible the deal in Athea had fallen through?

Trying to be a thoughtful subordinate, Gabriela held back from trailing after him, not wanting to push his temper any further.

Wesley had gone only a few strides when the absence of footsteps made him glance over his shoulder. She lingered in place, eyes wide and uncertain, like a stray kitten left out in the rain.

Something in him eased at the sight. His unmet desire wasn’t her burden to bear. What sense was there in taking out his frustration on her for that?

Suppressing a sigh, he said, “I’ll take you home first.”

In a hesitant whisper, Gabriela inquired, “What about Mr. Clarke? Shouldn’t we bring him along?”

The cold bit through the air, and the rain was falling harder by the minute. She doubted Billy’s girlfriend would ever appear.

Wesley let out a dry snort. “He’s still waiting on his girlfriend. Planning to stick around and wait with him?”

Billy quickly cut in, “Miss Haynes, you should go ahead with Mr. Moss. I’ll wait here a little longer.”

Though he knew his so-called girlfriend would never show up because she didn’t exist at all, he had to maintain the facade.

The drive back to Rosemont Gardens passed in heavy, unbroken silence. When they arrived, Gabriela found the door locked, and repeated calls to Josh went unanswered.

The wedding was probably still underway, and Josh was no doubt occupied. Wesley’s brows drew together as he watched her make call after call with no answer. “You don’t have a key?” She actually lived here without one? Did she often end up stranded like this?

“It’s usually Ken who lets me in, but he’s helping at the hotel right now,” Gabriela murmured.

Turning away, she felt a small wave of gloom settle over her. It looked like she’d be paying for another hotel room. She pivoted too quickly, frustration tugging at her focus, and her heel slipped. Wesley caught her before she fell, but the left heel of her shoe snapped, sending a sharp twist through her ankle. A soft cry escaped before she could stifle it.

Though a flicker of concern crossed his mind, he masked it, keeping his voice even. “What happened?”

Gabriela tilted her face up, forcing a faint smile. "It's nothing."

She'd already made a fool of herself earlier—no way was she letting him think she was so hopeless she could injure herself just walking.

All of a sudden, Wesley bent down and scooped her into his arms in one smooth motion. Her feet left the ground so suddenly that instinct had her looping her arms around his neck.

"I can walk by myself, Mr. Moss," she protested, her voice quick and flustered.

Wesley's expression stayed impassive as he remarked, "Don't read into it. I don't have feelings for you. I'm just making sure you won't aggravate your sprain to the point where you'll have to hobble into work and force the company to assign someone to babysit you."

The bluntness left her momentarily speechless. Clearly, whatever she'd imagined back at the beach—that fleeting, ridiculous thought he might actually like her—had been nothing but a foolish fantasy.

Wesley slid Gabriela into the passenger seat and pulled onto the road without missing a beat.

"Could you just drop me at the nearest hotel, Mr. Moss?" she blurted out hastily.

Keeping up his façade as the attentive boss, he replied, “Let me see if any hotels still have vacancies tonight.”

Pulling out his phone, he made a quick call. Ten minutes later, he said evenly, “I had Billy check. Every nearby hotel is already full.”

Gabriela’s brows drew together. That didn’t make sense.

It was the holiday season—shouldn’t most people be at home with their families? How could the hotels be overflowing?

Then she blinked in surprise. “Hold on—Mr. Clarke’s still at the beach, isn’t he? Waiting for his girlfriend?”

For the briefest moment, Wesley’s composure slipped, but he quickly smoothed it over. “She turned him down—said fireworks and roses were tacky.”

So Billy had not only pulled holiday overtime but also endured a doomed proposal.

“Poor Billy,” Gabriela murmured, a faint note of sympathy threading her voice. “All that charm and money, yet he’s unlucky in love.”

Beside her, Wesley—wealthy, magnetic, and fresh from his own failed love confession—kept silent, though his jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

Chapter 129

Sensing the sudden heaviness in the car, Gabriela bit back whatever she'd been about to say.

The vehicle slipped free of the city's noisy streets, gliding down a broad stretch of asphalt. Towering plane trees arched overhead, their rain-slick leaves catching the faint glimmer of streetlights. With the drizzle gone, the night air felt still, almost watchful. Little by little, the noise faded, leaving the streetlights to bathe everything in a soft, golden haze.

Gabriela's brows drew together—was her boss seriously giving her a late-night scenic drive? But with the simmering force radiating from him in the seat beside her, she decided it was wiser to keep that question to herself. She felt like a mere afterthought in his world, powerless to change whatever plans he had for her. Wherever he meant to take her, the safest choice was to follow without a word.

As the road curved, the skyline opened up, revealing a towering building ahead, its facade crowned with gleaming letters that read "Moss Manor." Only then did it dawn on Gabriela—this was Wesley's private estate.

Two massive iron gates guarded the entrance, their dark metal both forbidding and sleek with a modern design. At the first glimpse of Wesley's car, the gates stirred to life, parting in a slow, deliberate sweep. Without breaking stride, Wesley steered through the grand opening, the drive winding for several minutes before the car finally rolled to a stop before the mansion's main entrance.

Gabriela guessed the sprawling estate had to stretch across several thousand acres. Her awe hadn't even peaked when her gaze caught on two immaculate lines of servants outside, each dressed in neat blue-and-white uniforms, standing at attention to welcome Wesley home.

Startled, she leaned toward him and murmured, "Mr. Moss, your place could pass for a five-star hotel."

From the poised staff to the endless manicured grounds, the gleaming facilities, and the fountains spilling into elegant gardens... even the most extravagant hotel might struggle to match this level of opulence.

Thinking her compliment might coax some warmth from him, she glanced over hopefully. A deeper shadow crossed his features. "So, you think my house isn't homely enough?"

Gabriela found herself tongue-tied, her mind blank in the face of his unreadable mood. Wesley, as always, seemed to interpret reality through some private lens no one else shared.

When her silence stretched, he stepped out of the car with a glacial air. A uniformed servant approached at once, bowing slightly as he reached for the keys. This servant, used to nothing more dramatic than parking Wesley's car, froze when Wesley strode around to the passenger side and, without a word, lifted a striking young woman into his arms. For a heartbeat, the servant simply stared.

Cradled against Wesley's chest, Gabriela stiffened, her voice edged with embarrassment. "Mr. Moss, please—put me down. I can walk just fine."

His reply came low and clipped. "If you'd prefer not to limp by the end of the night, stay still."

Gabriela, unwilling to risk upsetting Wesley, instantly went slack against him, nestling into his arms without the slightest resistance.

Even after Wesley's tall frame vanished through the grand entrance, the servant remained rooted to the spot, clutching the car keys, his mind spinning in disbelief. In all his years of service here, he had never once seen Wesley bring a woman home—let alone carry one inside. Wesley had never been linked to any romance. Whispers among the staff even claimed he might not be interested in women at all.

Chapter 130

Yet tonight's scene had shattered that notion. Whoever had been spreading those ridiculous rumors was in for a rude awakening.

From somewhere deeper inside the manor, a voice called, "Has Mr. Moss returned?"

Miriam Torres, the long-time housekeeper of the manor, rushed out at the sound of the car, hastily draping a coat over her shoulders. When her eyes landed on Wesley carrying a young woman in his arms, she froze mid-step, stunned into silence for several seconds.

Her eyes shifted to Gabriela, scanning her delicate features and wide, uncertain gaze. There was something disarmingly sweet about her—an innocence that softened the starkness of the moment.

Miriam's tone, warm yet probing, broke the silence. "Mr. Moss, who is this lovely girl? Is she hurt?"

She bore the marks of the years gracefully—fine lines fanning from the corners of her eyes, a natural halo of soft curls framing her face. The kindness in her eyes was matched by the gentle smile that curved her lips, her entire demeanor radiating the reassuring warmth of a beloved grandmother.

Noticing Wesley had no plans to speak for her, Gabriela leaned in with a faint smile and said softly, “I’m Gabriela. Just a little ankle twist—nothing worth worrying over.”

A warm glow spread across Miriam’s features. “Pleasure to meet you, dear. I’ll go fetch the first aid kit.”

After lowering Gabriela onto the sofa, Wesley spoke up, his tone carrying a sharp edge. “Don’t get up. Stay right where you are.”

From the moment she’d been set down, Gabriela hadn’t dared shift an inch, yet she still got scolded by Wesley. Now she was convinced her boss was in a foul mood.

Miriam froze mid-step, the medical kit clutched in her hands, as her gaze took in Gabriela’s white dress layered beneath a pale gray overcoat. Recognition flashed in her eyes—this was no ordinary outfit. She remembered when Wesley had personally commissioned the dress over two weeks ago, along with a custom dark gray suit tailored by his private designer. It had been a matching set, unmistakably a couple’s ensemble.

Back then, she’d quietly wondered if the elusive Wesley had finally taken an interest in someone. Now, seeing Gabriela in the dress, she no longer needed to speculate. The answer was written plainly before her.

Now that Wesley was at last entertaining romance, Miriam intended to make the most of it—nudging every opportunity to draw the two of them closer. She passed the first aid kit into Wesley’s hands. “Mr. Moss, I’ve got soup simmering in the kitchen. Make sure you treat her properly.”

He accepted it without a word, his sharp features set in a cold, focused expression.

After a pause, he crouched in front of Gabriela, his movements deliberate as he eased her shoe off.

Her foot was small and delicate, but the purplish swelling at her ankle made the injury look far worse than she’d expected.

Unwilling to inconvenience him, she murmured, “Mr. Moss, I can manage it myself.”

His gaze flicked to hers, voice clipped. “Don’t move.”

Flipping the kit open, Wesley took out the disinfectant, spraying it over the bruise before smoothing on a layer of pain-relief ointment. His fingers were firm yet unexpectedly gentle as he worked the medication in, his touch careful despite the chill in his expression.

He was obviously out of his depth with such delicate work, his movements hesitant and a touch clumsy. Still, there was a quiet determination in the way he worked the ointment into her skin, each motion deliberate as he eased the sprain with painstaking care.

