

His kiss 131

Chapter 131

Gabriela found her eyes drawn to Wesley again and again. A stray lock of hair fell forward, shadowing his eyes and making his expression unreadable, lending him an unexpected air of mystery. For all his reputation, her boss was capable of surprising gentleness.

The tension in the room gradually melted into something softer, warmer. Wesley lifted his head without warning, his voice low but intent. “Is it starting to feel any better?”

In that moment, the clean lines of his face caught the light—refined features framed by a strong jaw, his calm composure offset by a quiet magnetism that was impossible to ignore. Even in a crouch, he carried himself with an effortless nobility, the kind that made the air around him feel sharper and cooler.

Gabriela’s gaze darted away, heat blooming in her cheeks as her heart thudded—this was the first time she’d ever seen the CEO’s face so close. Handsome didn’t even begin to cover it.

Snapping back to reality, she realized he’d only asked if she felt better, yet she’d frozen like an idiot and looked away.

To cover her awkwardness, her eyes drifted toward the carved wooden chess set on the side table, and she forced a too-bright smile. “Mr. Moss, is this cedar? It’s gorgeous.”

Wesley’s answer was nothing more than a clipped word. “No.”

His tone was curt, the word wrapped in a cool detachment that made it clear he wasn't interested in small talk. Gabriela, still unsure of the wood's type, felt heat creep up her neck.

"It's walnut, not cedar," Miriam corrected warmly, her smile bright as she stepped closer. "Are all the injuries taken care of? I just made soup—come warm up with a bowl."

Wesley rose at once, his movement brisk, a faint stiffness in his posture. "I'm not hungry," he said, his voice low but final. He glanced at his watch. "I've got a quick meeting to handle. Make sure she's settled in somewhere comfortable."

Miriam promised him she'd handle everything. Without lingering, Wesley strode toward the study, his steps measured and unhurried, while Gabriela swallowed the urge to protest staying here—she could already imagine him scolding her again.

Miriam turned back with an easy smile. "Come on, Gabriela. Have some soup while it's hot."

Gabriela accepted the bowl with both hands, her gratitude genuine. "Thanks."

Once she finished the hearty soup, Miriam guided her upstairs. Balancing on one foot, Gabriela hopped after her like an awkward, fluffy rabbit. Miriam's fondness for Gabriela only deepened with each passing glance. After a brief moment of thought, she led Gabriela into one of the manor's more generous guest rooms.

The instant Gabriela stepped inside, her breath caught. Wesley's wealth was unmistakable—even a guest room sprawled out like a luxury suite. The cool, muted tones of the walls and drapes exuded a quiet elegance, while the tasteful, modern furnishings radiated understated sophistication.

Miriam soon returned with an armful of necessities—freshly laundered towels, a neatly boxed toothbrush, and a set of sleepwear.

Yet “sleepwear” was hardly the right word; what Miriam laid on the bed was a silky light-blue slip dress, its delicate spaghetti straps and fluid fabric whispering of indulgence rather than rest.

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Gabriela hesitated, then asked in a low voice, “Miriam, do you happen to have any warmer pajamas?”

Miriam’s tone stayed light. “No need, dear. The heating’s more than enough to keep you cozy.”

Gabriela was at a loss for words. She’d been hoping for something with a bit more coverage, but as a guest, she couldn’t bring herself to push. With a small nod, she accepted the slip dress without protest.

“Will you be alright washing up on your own?” Miriam asked.

“Of course,” Gabriela answered quickly.

She’d weathered far worse injuries on her own before; this little sprain was nothing in comparison. Wesley’s and Miriam’s concern left her a little dazed, the warmth of their kindness pressing in on her.

Miriam gave a reassuring nod. “Go on and freshen up. I’ll be right outside. There’s shampoo and shower gel ready in the bathroom. Call me anytime if you need something.”

Gabriela murmured her thanks more than once before slipping into the bathroom with the slip dress draped over her arm.

Inside, she paused, once again struck by the opulence of the upper class—even the guest bathroom was larger than her entire bedroom. Though her foot ached, she felt oddly self-conscious about using the bathtub in Wesley’s home.

Opting for the shower instead, she turned on the water. Standing was awkward and unsteady, and the process dragged on until she finally finished.

Fresh from her shower, Gabriela slipped into the slip dress, a prickle of self-consciousness creeping over her at how little it actually covered. To her relief, she wouldn’t have to step outside the room in it.

She towel-dried her hair as she stepped out of the bathroom—then froze mid-stride.

A tall man stood by the bed, his suit jacket draped neatly over a chair, fingers unclasping the strap of his watch.

At the sound of movement, he turned his head, his hand stalling over the watch. Gabriela’s breath caught. She whipped a hand over her eyes. Her voice wavered. “M-Mr. Moss...”

Why on earth was he in her room? His white shirt hung open, every button undone, revealing a stretch of toned skin beneath.

Wait a second—this was her room.

Why was she covering her eyes like a startled child when he was the one who'd stumbled into the wrong room?

Snapping back to her senses, Gabriela folded her arms tightly across her chest, her glare sharp enough to cut glass. "W-what exactly do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

Wesley, fresh from an intense meeting with his think tank, looked entirely unfazed. After a full day cramped in an airplane seat, all he'd wanted was to sink into a scalding bath. Who could possibly explain why Gabriela was in his room?

And why was she standing there in such a skimpy dress, hardly suited for the winter chill? Those long, delicate legs—how could she bare them so openly?

A sudden rush of heat burned through Wesley, and he jerked his gaze away. "Care to explain why you're in my room?" he asked.

The irritation in his voice made Gabriela falter. Had she somehow wandered into the wrong place? No, that couldn't be—it was Miriam who had led her here.

She straightened and replied quickly, “Miriam was the one who brought me.”

A dull throb began to build behind Wesley’s temples. What on earth had Miriam been thinking?

He refastened his shirt buttons with brisk, precise movements, then draped his suit jacket over Gabriela’s shoulders before calling Miriam inside. With a faint edge in his voice, Wesley asked, “She’s a guest, Miriam. Why would you put her in here?”

Wesley caught the flicker of emotions crossing Gabriela’s face and let out a quiet sigh before declaring coolly, “I’ll take the study tonight.”

Gabriela blinked, momentarily thrown. This was his bedroom—she couldn’t just sprawl here as if it were hers, even if he wasn’t using it.

Chapter 133

Seeing her teeter on the verge of tears, Miriam assumed Wesley’s sharp tone had rattled her. She stepped closer, her voice warm with reassurance. “It’s fine, dear. I should’ve planned the room assignments better. Sleep here for now, and I promise the best and largest guest room will be ready for you by tomorrow.”

Gabriela stared at her, stunned. Tomorrow? She was expected to stay here another night? Spending even a single night here had her pulse hammering so wildly she could hardly breathe. Another day under

this roof and she might not make it to the end of the holidays—never mind the return to work. “No need to trouble yourself...”

“It’s fine,” Miriam cut in with brisk warmth. “Just get some sleep. I’ll run an extra quilt over to Wesley.”

Quilt in hand, Miriam stepped out, a nagging thought tugging at her. Earlier, her gaze had drifted to Gabriela—those elegant curves, that unmistakable hourglass frame. Her face was another kind of rare beauty entirely, the sort that lingered in memory. And yet, with such a breathtaking woman right here, Wesley had still chosen to sleep in the study.

Could the rumors be true—was Wesley really not interested in women? Was that the real reason he had never shown the slightest spark of interest in Gabriela?

The servant responsible for parking Wesley’s car vowed to hunt down the source of the rumors. Crouching around the corner, he caught every word of Miriam’s under-the-breath musings. The shock nearly knocked him backward. Miriam and Wesley were practically family. He never imagined the rumors about Wesley had started with her.

Well, he wasn’t about to invite trouble. With a wary glance over his shoulder, he melted into the shadows and slipped away.

Meanwhile, Miriam smoothed the thick quilt across the study, her brow faintly furrowed. After a pause, she asked with quiet insistence, “Why not just stay in the same room with Gabriela?”

Wesley let out a slow, measured breath, his gaze steady as he answered, “Keep things natural, Miriam. And for heaven’s sake, don’t frighten her.”

Miriam's brows lifted in surprise. From the sound of it, he hadn't managed to win Gabriela over—so that was why he was choosing to sleep in the study. A spark of inspiration flashed through her mind, bright and sudden.

Unaware of any schemes brewing beyond the door, Gabriela remained frozen in place, hesitant to move. Only after several long moments did she dare inch toward the bed. She could still picture Wesley standing there not long ago, sliding off his jacket with unhurried ease. Though he had left, the cool, commanding air he carried seemed to linger in the room, wrapping around her like an invisible shroud.

A charged, almost tangible energy clung to the air—the sheer presence of Wesley, the man who had set her pulse racing only hours earlier. Forcing steady breaths, she lowered herself to the bed's edge, her tender ankle allowing no other option. The mattress cradled her in decadent softness, far more luxurious than she'd imagined.

After battling the pull of sleep for half an hour, her resistance faltered; with her eyes drifting shut, she surrendered to the comfort and let herself sink into slumber. The moment she did, the earlier scene replayed vividly in her mind—Wesley's shirt hanging loose, revealing the firm, sculpted lines of muscle that carried both strength and an unspoken sense of safety. Even his waist had looked strong and lean.

She pressed her palms over her face, a ripple of regret tugging at her. Why on earth had she covered her eyes with her hand? Would it really have mattered if she had stolen a few more glances?

Chapter 134

Restless thoughts of Wesley kept Gabriela from drifting off, her mind circling back to him no matter how she tried to distract herself. Each time she shifted in bed, her sore ankle brushed against the sheets, sending a quick, sharp jolt through her and drawing a wince.

The whole day had felt cursed from start to finish.

After rolling over a few more times, she snatched up her phone and fired off a message to “NotASaunders,” venting her irritation. “What exactly was that stunt at the wedding today? You showed up with a girlfriend and didn’t even warn me?”

She waited for what felt like forever, but her screen stayed blank.

Frustration bubbling over, she typed out another message. “If you weren’t going to help me, you should’ve said so. I could have rented a boyfriend myself. You told me to buy the suit—so why set me up to look like a fool?”

Yet again, silence was all that came.

Her temper flared so hot she nearly sent another message demanding the hundred thousand dollars back immediately. For a spoiled heir like Brenden, that kind of money was no more than a night’s pocket change. For her, every single bill had been fought for and earned.

At last, after what felt like an eternity, a reply popped up: “Idiot.”

Gabriela stared at the screen, stunned. What the hell was that supposed to mean? After humiliating her in public, wasting her money, and making her the butt of the joke, Brenden had the audacity to throw that at her?

Fury coursed through her as she smacked the mattress with her palm—then froze mid-swing. This wasn't even her bed. If she broke it, she wouldn't be able to afford the damages.

She pushed herself upright, drawing in a few steadying breaths until the tightness in her chest began to ease. Her thoughts drifted back to the whole ridiculous business of having Brenden pretend to be her boyfriend, and the more she replayed it, the clearer it became—he had never been committed. Even after returning from Afluena, he'd hesitated.

She was supposed to notice the warning signs at that moment.

Yet he'd told her to buy a suit, even gone so far as to present her with a gown, and that kindness had sparked her hope again. Then, on the wedding day, he'd shown up late—while girlfriend number forty-one had already been waiting at the venue. If Wesley hadn't stepped in, Josh would probably still be sobbing into his champagne.

From the very beginning, Brenden had been playing her. The realization sent heat surging through Gabriela again, and she silently vowed to return the humiliation at the first opportunity. For tonight, though, revenge could wait. Sleep came first.

Gabriela slid beneath the covers without hesitation, letting the mattress swallow her up in warmth. The pillow carried a faint trace of shower gel, layered with a subtle masculine scent that wrapped around her like an invisible embrace. Heat crept into her cheeks as she curled deeper into the blanket, the phantom sensation of Wesley's arms lingering in her mind.

True to her nature, she didn't linger on unpleasant thoughts. Once she'd shaken off the last of her earlier frustration, her breathing slowed and sleep claimed her. Her dreams spiraled into a collage of vivid, disordered moments—every one of them centered on Wesley, his tall frame and sculpted muscles impossible to ignore.

By morning, the knot of tension had unraveled. She woke feeling unexpectedly light, her ankle tender but far less painful. It seemed the ointment Wesley had rubbed in worked.

After a quick wash, she slipped back into yesterday's clothes, tugged on the cheerful slippers Miriam had set out for her, and padded toward the stairs. Wesley sat on the sofa, the morning paper spread neatly in his hands. At the faint sound of footsteps on the stairs, he lifted his head.

Instead of his usual tailored suit, he wore a pale knit sweater, the casual attire softening the crisp, imposing edge he normally carried and lending a quiet warmth to his striking features. When she faced him, Gabriela's pulse quickened and unbidden images from last night's dreams rushed back, making it impossible for her to meet his gaze.

"Morning, Gabriela," he said, his voice smooth and clear.

The early hour left a subtle huskiness in his tone, and the sound rippled through her in a way she couldn't quite name. She straightened slightly, answering with careful respect, "Good morning, Mr. Moss."

Wesley's gaze flicked to her ankle, noting she was able to stand evenly now, a clear sign the injury had eased. The faintest crease in his brow smoothed away.

Chapter 135

“Good morning, Gabriela!” Miriam called warmly as she stepped out of the kitchen. “Come, have breakfast.”

One after another, the breakfast plates appeared, filling the table with inviting aromas. Wesley had already taken his seat, so Gabriela, unwilling to keep him waiting, quickly slid into the chair beside him. She reached for the serving ladle, pouring oatmeal into a bowl for Wesley, then filled one for herself and Miriam with practiced ease. Her movements were fluid and confident—little gestures she’d performed countless times, so natural they barely needed thought. Miriam’s opinion of her rose another notch.

Settling beside Gabriela, Miriam asked with genuine concern, “Is your ankle feeling any better? You should let Wesley put some more ointment on it later.”

Gabriela had just lifted a spoonful of oatmeal to her lips when Miriam’s comment made her pause. She set the spoon down, shaking her head with a small smile. “That’s not necessary. It barely hurts now. I can take care of it myself.”

She prided herself on not being fragile, and the thought of asking Wesley to tend to her injury again felt excessive. Miriam, however, wouldn’t budge. “Don’t brush it off. If I say you need it, you need it.” Her tone left little room for argument.

Gabriela was at a loss for words. Still, no matter how firm Miriam sounded, she wasn’t about to let Wesley near her ankle again. Wesley, noticing she could walk without difficulty, didn’t press her either.

Not long after breakfast, Billy appeared with the six-member think tank in tow. The Athea project might have been wrapped up, but other ventures still needed their final touches.

Billy strode in with brisk confidence, energy radiating from him, the neatly dressed team at his back exuding an air of polished authority.

Gabriela's gaze lingered on Billy longer than she intended. No wonder Wesley held him in such high esteem—his presence carried an effortless authority even in the role of an assistant. Was that quiet satisfaction in his eyes because his proposal had gone off successfully last night? If that were the case, she was genuinely glad for him.

Offering a warm smile, she called out, "Good morning, Mr. Clarke. I didn't expect to see you here."

Billy froze for a beat, caught off guard by the sight of Gabriela—striking, poised, and far too dazzling for the early hour. Hadn't Wesley's love confession been a bust? Then why was she here now, at this time of morning, clearly not just arriving? Could it be Wesley had found another way to win her over?

Still, Wesley wasn't a man whose affairs one dared to speculate about. Billy smoothed his expression at once and spoke in a courteous tone. "Good morning, Miss Haynes. I'm here to give Mr. Moss an update on the project."

"I see." Gabriela's lips curved in a teasing wink paired with a warm smile before she moved down the line, greeting each team member in turn. "I'll let you all get to your meeting," she added lightly.

She pivoted away at an unhurried pace, the faint hitch in her step betraying a limp.

Billy's brow furrowed, and beside him, Aaron's curiosity got the better of him. "Why's Miss Haynes walking like that? Did she hurt herself?"

Realization dawned on Billy, hitting him so suddenly it left him momentarily frozen in place. Wesley had never been the romantic sort, the kind of man who could go decades without so much as a flicker of affection for anyone. Yet when that rare spark finally took hold, it roared to life with an intensity no one could have foreseen.

It appeared Wesley had shared a passionate night with Gabriela.

Meanwhile, Gabriela sank into the sofa beside Miriam, the soft yarn pooled in her lap as she learned the delicate art of knitting socks. From the time she was small, life had been a constant balancing act—each day spent tiptoeing over thin ice, working herself ragged just to keep food on the table and stay in school. Every waking hour had been shadowed by the need to guard herself, to brace for the next cruel, calculated scheme Phyllis might unleash.

A simple, comforting pastime like this was something she had never even dared to imagine for herself.

Miriam guided her with patient precision, her voice low and steady, while Gabriela leaned in over her work, intent on perfecting every stitch. She was so focused that she missed the odd, lingering gleam in Billy's eyes.

Chapter 136

Wesley sat in his study, the rustle of turning pages the only sound as he immersed himself in his book. When the think tank members arrived with Billy in tow, he barely looked up, only instructing them to

keep things concise—this was, after all, their final meeting before everyone scattered for the New Year holiday.

In meetings, Wesley's presence carried a natural weight. His cold, unreadable stare was enough to make people drop their gaze, and he usually steered discussions with effortless control. Yet today, Billy's sidelong glances kept breaking the rhythm. Wesley's brow tightened. Was Billy still sour about being left to wait in the rain at the beach last night?

Despite the undercurrent of distractions, the agenda moved briskly, each point settled with Wesley's usual precision. The meeting wrapped up, and, as was customary, Wesley distributed year-end bonuses to the team.

This time, though, he went further—Billy received not only the bonus but also a sleek black Cayenne from his garage, a car so pristine it might as well have just rolled out of the showroom.

"The company's had a great year. I appreciate your hard work, Billy," Wesley said, his tone calm but firm.

Though their own bonuses were nothing to scoff at, the think tank members couldn't help a flicker of envy at the lavish gift. Billy, on the other hand, stood frozen, staring at the car keys, trying to gauge whether this was pure generosity... or Wesley's way of buying his silence. After all, he knew more than anyone else about what was going on between Wesley and Gabriela.

Still, who could turn down the temptation of a gleaming luxury car?

Billy wasted no time snatching up the keys, flashing a grin. “Relax, Mr. Moss. Last night stays between us.”

Wesley could only stare at him in silence. Half an hour in a light drizzle and Billy was acting like a martyr?

The car was supposed to be a bonus, not some consolation prize for getting wet. If Billy wanted to spin it that way, Wesley wasn’t about to correct him.

As Billy and the think tank filed out of the study, the team couldn’t help but shoot envious glances his way over the prize Wesley had given him.

“I’ve seen Mr. Moss take that Cayenne for a spin—it’s a stunner.”

“Now I’m tempted to trade my car in for something flashier.”

Passing through the living room, Billy waved the others on and drifted toward Gabriela. With a clenched fist for emphasis, he murmured, “If you run into trouble, just come find me. I’ve got your back.”

Gabriela blinked in mild confusion. It seemed Billy’s recent triumph in winning over his girlfriend had put him in such a generous mood that even she—a lowly secretary—was swept up in it. A pang of guilt pricked at her as she remembered how Billy had been left standing in the rain while she stayed warm and dry beneath an umbrella, quietly watching everything unfold.

Feeling a flicker of embarrassment, she gave him a small nod. “Thanks, Mr. Clarke.”

Noticing the shadow in her eyes, Billy offered a reassuring pat on her shoulder. “Come on, cheer up—you’re amazing.” With that, he pocketed the car keys, straightened his tie, and strode off toward his new car, his steps practically humming with excitement.

Gabriela watched his buoyant energy and couldn’t help murmuring, “Love really is a beautiful thing.”

Miriam wasted no time in chiming back. “Your turn will come soon enough.”

By then, she had already spotted the freshly knitted mitten in Gabriela’s lap. She accepted the knitting from Gabriela with a warm smile. “Your hands are so nimble, Gabriela. Every stitch is perfectly even—absolutely lovely.”

Gabriela’s cheeks warmed under the praise. “That’s only because you taught me so well.”

With a playful glint in her eyes, Miriam reached for a bundle of soft, pale yarn. “Come on, I’ll show you how to knit a scarf.”

Gabriela’s face lit up. “I’d love to.”

As they worked, Miriam's natural gift for chatter spilled out—she wandered from talking about the vases and coffee sets around the house, to Wesley's preferred coffee blend, and even the blooms in the backyard. Even if Gabriela merely listened and nodded, Miriam kept the conversation flowing.

...listened, Miriam could fill the room with easy conversation for hours.

Chapter 137

When Wesley finally appeared, the sight that greeted him was quietly endearing. Gabriela was sitting close beside Miriam, their heads nearly touching, hands busy with needles and yarn, sharing gentle talk over the small, comforting details of daily life. The scene radiated quiet contentment. A faint smile tugged at Wesley's lips, a wave of warmth and ease settling over him. After lingering for a moment longer, he retreated to his study and picked up his book again.

Gabriela, oblivious to his brief visit, kept her focus on the scarf in her hands. Her injured foot kept her mostly anchored to the couch, and the steady rhythm of knitting felt like a pleasant novelty. She spent much of the afternoon there, and by the time dinner rolled around, half the scarf was done. The design unfurled into a delicate pattern of branching leaves, refined enough to draw the eye whether examined up close or admired from a distance. Gabriela's lips curved in quiet satisfaction.

A voice spoke from nearby, warm and matter-of-fact. "Your hands really are skillful."

Thinking it was Miriam, Gabriela laughed lightly. "I actually find knitting a scarf easier than making mittens. Here, look..."

She turned, scarf in hand, and froze. Standing beside the couch was an old woman she didn't recognize. The woman wore a neat, plain blouse, its simple lines immaculate. Her gray hair was neatly combed, and

though time had etched fine lines into her face, hints of the beauty she once possessed still lingered in her features.

It took Gabriela a moment to recover before she asked politely, “Hello, ma’am. Who are you here to see?”

The visitor was none other than Wesley’s grandmother, Loretta. Loretta’s sharp gaze swept over Gabriela, taking in every detail. The young woman’s beauty was undeniable—exactly as Miriam had claimed. In looks, she could stand beside Wesley without drawing any complaints. Her character, though... that remained unclear for now.

Before Loretta could respond, several servants appeared, arms laden with oversized bags. They bowed slightly as one of them asked with deference—

“Where would you like these placed, madam?”

“Set them in the backyard—find a spacious spot,” Loretta instructed briskly.

Once the orders were given, she pivoted back to Gabriela, her tone abrupt. “Your name?”

Though the old woman’s manner held little warmth, Gabriela kept her poise and answered with quiet courtesy, “Gabriela Haynes.”

“What do you do? How are you connected to my grandson? And what brings you here?”

Gabriela caught on immediately—this had to be Wesley’s grandmother—and answered with a polite smile, “I’m Mr. Moss’s personal secretary. I’ve injured my foot...”

Loretta cut her off. “So, a secretary.”

Her mind went straight to what Wesley had once mentioned about a young woman Fiona had trampled over. Recently, Fiona had been quietly using a fortune-teller to feed Loretta the belief that she was the perfect match for Wesley. To Loretta, that notion still held firm—Fiona was, in her eyes, a woman blessed by fate and destined to be with Wesley.

When Miriam phoned to announce that Wesley had brought a girlfriend home, Loretta’s first response was a flash of disapproval. In her eyes, it was hardly proper for a young woman to stay at a man’s house before marriage. Finding out that Gabriela was Wesley’s secretary only intensified her hostility.

Her gaze swept over Gabriela with quiet scrutiny. Gabriela’s face was small and exquisitely proportioned, every delicate line of her bone structure lending her an elegance that would hold its beauty for years. Large, luminous eyes tilted upward at the corners beneath finely arched double lids, their warmth offset by a slender, well-shaped nose. The combination gave her an air both innocent and faintly alluring.

Despite her reservations about Gabriela, Loretta murmured, “You really are beautiful.” Fiona had beauty, but Gabriela outshone her.

Gabriela, unable to hear those quiet words, tilted her head politely. “Pardon me, madam—what did you say?”

Loretta blinked as if roused from a daze, then curtly said, “Come with me.” Setting aside her half-finished scarf, Gabriela rose and followed.

Loretta’s stride was quick and sure, the product of decades of farm work that kept her spry even in her later years. Gabriela, slowed by her aching foot, lagged several paces behind.

Unaware of Gabriela’s injury, Loretta mistook the lag for frailty. Her disapproval settled even deeper.

Chapter 138

The servants carried the two bulging bags into the backyard. At the far edge, a wide stretch of square-brick paving caught the sunlight. After instructing them to return to their duties, Loretta crouched beside the bags and unfastened them.

The tops fell open to reveal a heap of fresh scallions, their green stalks still glistening faintly from the previous day’s rain. When Gabriela stepped closer, Loretta lifted a handful, her hands moving briskly as she said, “These are from our own garden, not dried yet. Yesterday’s rain left them damp, so they’ll need a few more days in the sun.”

She shot Gabriela a brief look as she went on, “While there’s still light, come help me.”

Gabriela agreed and mirrored her movements, laying the scallions out in an even layer. The ache in her injured foot made each bend forward a slow, careful effort. Noticing her sluggish pace, Loretta's brow furrowed. "In my day, we had to work hard just to keep food on the table."

Gabriela's cheeks warmed with shame. She hadn't always been so delicate. Memories surfaced of the night before the college entrance exams, when Phyllis had deliberately poured scalding water on her arm in the dead of night. Even with a fever the next morning, Gabriela had sat through every test, gritting her teeth against the throbbing pain until the final paper was done. She'd earned her place at the university she'd dreamed of, slowly clawing her way out from under Phyllis's shadow.

So how had she grown fragile over something as minor as a sprained ankle? Maybe it was because Wesley himself had applied the ointment, or because Miriam kept fussing over her, letting her slip into the unfamiliar luxury of being cared for.

Determined to shake it off, she picked up her pace, a thin sheen of sweat glistening at the tip of her nose.

"What are you two doing out here?" Wesley's voice came from nearby, deep and steady.

He crossed the short distance in a few long strides, his expression calm yet edged with a concern so faint it was almost hidden.

Loretta cast him a brief look before answering in an unhurried tone, "Can't you tell we're laying scallions out to dry?"

“Why didn’t you give me a heads-up before coming?” Wesley, ever patient with her, pressed. “I could’ve at least sent someone to pick you up.”

She dismissed the offer without hesitation. “I can make my own way here. No point wasting time and gas driving back and forth.”

While she went on grumbling, Wesley’s gaze drifted to Gabriela, noting the fine sheen of sweat clinging to her nose. “Gabriela, go take a seat over there,” he urged.

At his cue, Miriam promptly guided Gabriela to perch on the low flower bed nearby.

Loretta’s expression tightened with irritation. She jabbed a finger toward Wesley and snapped, “I only asked your secretary to help with a few scallions, and now you’re upset about it?”

Fiona had even helped her earlier, pulling out a bunch together.

Wesley let out a weary sigh as he clarified, “Her foot’s injured—getting around isn’t easy for her right now. Whatever needs to be done, someone else can handle it just as well.”

Loretta shot back, planting her hands on her hips, “Do you keep useless people here for decoration? Everyone in this estate has their duties. She’s sitting there knitting something as if she’s on vacation.”

A hot flush of embarrassment crept over Gabriela's cheeks. Miriam's kindness had lulled her into forgetting her place. A secretary spending her day knitting in her boss's home—it did look improper.

Chapter 139

"Please be reasonable, Grandma," Wesley responded evenly. "She's injured—she can't stand for long stretches."

Loretta's expression darkened as she continued, "Are you saying I'm being unreasonable? Fine then, I'll go. I won't bother coming here again."

She had never been fond of lingering at the estate, and even during New Year celebrations, her visits were scarce. This time, Miriam's casual mention that Wesley had brought home a girlfriend had piqued her curiosity enough to come and see for herself. She intended to gauge Gabriela's grit—yet the girl hadn't even broken a sweat before Wesley began hovering protectively over her.

Loretta began bundling the scallions, acting as if she were on her way out. Wesley, well-versed in her little performances, let out a quiet sigh but still stepped forward. "Here, let me give you a hand."

"How could I trouble a big shot like you?" she muttered, arching a brow at him.

"I'm just sitting in the study reading," he replied mildly. "Not exactly swamped with work."

Scooping up a small bundle, Loretta peeled away a few wilted yellow leaves with deft fingers. "Even the finest things need a bit of trimming now and then. Don't you think?" she remarked.

Wesley caught the implication in her words and answered in a flat tone, “You’re right.”

Gabriela stayed silent. The sight of Loretta chiding Wesley while he responded with the calm indulgence one might show a stubborn child was startling. For the first time, the man she’d always known as cool and distant seemed warmer—human, even—someone she could almost imagine speaking to without feeling intimidated.

“I’m just helping you put your secretary to the test,” Loretta remarked sharply.

Wesley pressed his fingers to his brow with a muted sigh before turning to Miriam. “Miriam, would you bring me some dried scallions?”

Loretta had always sent her home-grown ones to the estate, carefully cured in the sun until they were ready. Miriam returned in moments, a small handful resting in her palm.

Wesley plucked one and held it out for Loretta to see. “Notice how this one’s wrapped in more withered leaves, the outer layers tinged red? Sometimes even the loveliest things need layers that seem needless, just to keep them safe.” With deliberate care, he peeled the skins away, one after another, until the tender white heart was revealed. “If not for those red layers, the fresh core wouldn’t stay crisp for months—sometimes even half a year.”

Loretta knew he was making a point, but still muttered under her breath, “You’re shielding her like this... do you have feelings for her?”

A quiet sigh escaped Wesley as he responded, “She’s just a guest, for now.”

“I just think it’s inappropriate—she hasn’t even married you, yet here she is at your home,” Loretta said, her frown deepening.

Wesley cut in gently, guiding her a few steps aside. “Gabriela’s an orphan. Her cousin got married yesterday and locked her out late at night, leaving her nowhere to stay. She was going to check into a hotel, but she twisted her ankle and couldn’t walk, so I brought her here. She works for my company, after all. I couldn’t just abandon her.”

At that, a glimmer of sympathy softened Loretta’s expression. “She’s such a bright, lively girl. How could she...”

Her voice trailed off, the unspoken misfortune hanging between them.

“She’s upbeat, compassionate, and competent at her work,” Wesley said, calm but resolute. “That’s why I respect her—and why I chose her as my secretary.”

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Though unwilling to admit she’d been too harsh, Loretta knew she’d crossed a line. She kept up her gruff act, but her stance had eased. “Fine. I won’t make her dry scallions. Happy now?”

Though Gabriela couldn't make out their words, she caught the flicker of irritation clouding Loretta's face and offered quietly, "Mr. Moss, my ankle's feeling much better. I can help out."

Loretta shot her a sharp glare, masking her embarrassment over the false accusation. "Why are you meddling? Just stick to knitting that scarf."

Gabriela stared, momentarily at a loss.

Wesley closed the gap in a few swift strides, lowering his voice so only she could hear. "Is your ankle in pain? Can you move on it?" His eyes held hers, dark and unreadable, his tone deep and controlled.

"It aches a bit, but it should be fine tomorrow," she replied quickly.

"Make sure you rest it."

His hand lifted as if to ruffle her hair, hesitated, then fell as he turned away.

The squabble over drying scallions ended under Wesley's firm handling, yet Miriam still looked uneasy. She ushered Gabriela back toward the living room, then tugged Loretta into a quiet corner. Leaning close, she murmured, "Why didn't you tell me you'd be dropping by?"

"I wanted it to be a surprise," Loretta said with a knowing lift of her chin. "And I need to see for myself what kind of woman has caught Wesley's eye and become his girlfriend."

"She's not his girlfriend—nowhere close," Miriam replied with a rueful sigh. "Last night, I even arranged for Gabriela to stay in Mr. Moss's room..."

She quickly recounted the events of the previous evening, ending with a weary shake of her head. "He is over thirty, and he still doesn't have a woman by his side. Do you have any idea what people are saying behind his back?"

"Spit it out," Loretta pressed.

"They think he's into men, not women," Miriam said, lowering her voice to an even more hushed whisper. She cast a quick glance around before adding, "I never dared tell you before, afraid you'd be upset about it."

"Don't be silly," Loretta countered, her expression hardening. "How could he not like women? These rumors are nothing but nonsense."

No wonder Wesley hadn't even glanced Fiona's way when she tried to introduce them. The grandson she'd raised with such care attracted to men? That was unthinkable.

"Last night, he brought Gabriela home," Miriam pressed on, "and for a moment I thought he'd finally found a woman he truly cared about. But when a lovely girl like her appeared in his room wearing a slip dress, he didn't so much as reach for her, barely even looked at her. I called you here so we could figure out how to push things along between them. But instead, you showed up and played the villain."

Loretta was left staring at Miriam in stunned silence.

“And now,” Miriam went on with a sigh, “Gabriela probably thinks less of him than before. At this rate, he’ll end up alone for the rest of his life.”

“That’s bullshit!” Loretta shot back, her worry flaring. “Wesley’s an exceptional man—what woman wouldn’t be drawn to him?”

In her mind, Wesley was flawless—the one who did the choosing, not the other way around. The idea of a woman not liking him was outrageous.

“But maybe... Wesley’s gay,” Miriam whispered.