

His kiss 171

Chapter 171

Wesley's tone carried that familiar imperial chill. "I specifically ordered the finance department to work overtime calculating your compensation. Now that you've received it, you can't return it."

Gabriela's breath caught in her throat. A decade's salary now sat in her account—a windfall that should have thrilled her. But Wesley's icy tone sent dread pooling in her stomach.

"I'm generous enough to waive interest on this ten-year advance. In exchange, during your annual leave periods you'll provide cooking services at my residence. Unpaid, naturally." Gabriela's thoughts came to a halt.

Her mind raced through the calculations. Apex Group provided at least half a month of paid vacation annually. Using Loretta's previous offer as a baseline, she'd forfeit forty-five thousand dollars each year. The realization crushed her spirit.

Wesley had lived up to his ruthless reputation. No matter how gentle or approachable he appeared, beneath that disarming exterior lurked the same calculating businessman—only wearing a more attractive mask. She should never have mentioned the advance payment.

Wesley observed Gabriela's thunderstruck expression with barely contained amusement. Fighting back laughter, he delivered the final blow. "Additionally, since you've accepted this ten-year advance, you're forbidden from leaving my supervision during business hours. Any leave requests require my personal authorization."

Gabriela stood frozen. For the next decade, not only would she receive no additional compensation, but she'd essentially become Wesley's indentured servant. Life truly wielded a double-edged sword—joy and misery dancing together as eternal partners.

She'd just orchestrated Phyllis's downfall, only to deliver herself completely into Wesley's clutches. With this crushing realization weighing on her shoulders, Gabriela lost all desire to admire the surrounding flowers. Even if those blooms were worth fifteen million dollars, they held no meaning for someone trapped in golden chains.

Listless and defeated, she dragged herself back into the living room, steeling her resolve to assist in the kitchen despite everything weighing on her spirit.

Loretta's heart twisted at the sight of Gabriela's dejected posture. She yearned to confront every soul who had ever tormented this girl, forcing them to crawl back with groveling apologies.

Dinner hour arrived with merciless punctuality. Gabriela had crafted a dish and presented it before Wesley like an offering.

They all settled into their seats as the evening meal commenced.

"Mr. Moss, I prepared this barbecue pork belly specifically for you," Gabriela announced, her voice bright with forced enthusiasm. "No artificial seasonings. It's wholesome and captures the pork's pure, rich essence. Please, taste it."

Wesley found her earnest pride thoroughly entertaining. With elegant precision, he selected a generous piece and deposited it onto her plate. “Thank you for your kitchen efforts. You should sample it first,” he declared.

Gabriela stared at the glistening ivory chunk of fat-marbled meat occupying her plate, and her stomach revolted.

Loretta, thrilled to see Wesley showing concern for Gabriela, chimed in enthusiastically, “Gabriela, please eat up. You’re far too slender.”

Gabriela longed to protest, but under Loretta’s nurturing gaze she could only force down the fatty pork. The moment she swallowed the last morsel, she craved nothing more than to flee to the opposite end of the continent from Wesley.

As Gabriela discreetly shifted her chair away, her attention snagged on Brenden, who sat across from her, methodically devouring his fish with singular focus. The longer she observed him, the more confusion prickled at her consciousness.

During their WhatsApp exchanges about meal preferences, Brenden had explicitly rejected numerous dishes. His dietary restrictions had mirrored Wesley’s with uncanny precision. Yet the Brenden before her possessed an adventurous palate that defied all logic. Not only did he consume bland fish daily, but he devoured onions, celery, and even cilantro with apparent relish.

Chapter 171

Wesley’s tone carried that familiar imperial chill. “I specifically ordered the finance department to work overtime calculating your compensation. Now that you’ve received it, you can’t return it.”

Gabriela's breath caught in her throat. A decade's salary now sat in her account—a windfall that should have thrilled her. But Wesley's icy tone sent dread pooling in her stomach.

"I'm generous enough to waive interest on this ten-year advance. In exchange, during your annual leave periods you'll provide cooking services at my residence. Unpaid, naturally." Gabriela's thoughts came to a halt.

Her mind raced through the calculations. Apex Group provided at least half a month of paid vacation annually. Using Loretta's previous offer as a baseline, she'd forfeit forty-five thousand dollars each year. The realization crushed her spirit.

Wesley had lived up to his ruthless reputation. No matter how gentle or approachable he appeared, beneath that disarming exterior lurked the same calculating businessman—only wearing a more attractive mask. She should never have mentioned the advance payment.

Wesley observed Gabriela's thunderstruck expression with barely contained amusement. Fighting back laughter, he delivered the final blow. "Additionally, since you've accepted this ten-year advance, you're forbidden from leaving my supervision during business hours. Any leave requests require my personal authorization."

Gabriela stood frozen. For the next decade, not only would she receive no additional compensation, but she'd essentially become Wesley's indentured servant. Life truly wielded a double-edged sword—joy and misery dancing together as eternal partners.

She'd just orchestrated Phyllis's downfall, only to deliver herself completely into Wesley's clutches. With this crushing realization weighing on her shoulders, Gabriela lost all desire to admire the surrounding

flowers. Even if those blooms were worth fifteen million dollars, they held no meaning for someone trapped in golden chains.

Listless and defeated, she dragged herself back into the living room, steeling her resolve to assist in the kitchen despite everything weighing on her spirit.

Loretta's heart twisted at the sight of Gabriela's dejected posture. She yearned to confront every soul who had ever tormented this girl, forcing them to crawl back with groveling apologies.

Dinner hour arrived with merciless punctuality. Gabriela had crafted a dish and presented it before Wesley like an offering.

They all settled into their seats as the evening meal commenced.

"Mr. Moss, I prepared this barbecue pork belly specifically for you," Gabriela announced, her voice bright with forced enthusiasm. "No artificial seasonings. It's wholesome and captures the pork's pure, rich essence. Please, taste it."

Wesley found her earnest pride thoroughly entertaining. With elegant precision, he selected a generous piece and deposited it onto her plate. "Thank you for your kitchen efforts. You should sample it first," he declared.

Gabriela stared at the glistening ivory chunk of fat-marbled meat occupying her plate, and her stomach revolted.

Loretta, thrilled to see Wesley showing concern for Gabriela, chimed in enthusiastically, “Gabriela, please eat up. You’re far too slender.”

Gabriela longed to protest, but under Loretta’s nurturing gaze she could only force down the fatty pork. The moment she swallowed the last morsel, she craved nothing more than to flee to the opposite end of the continent from Wesley.

As Gabriela discreetly shifted her chair away, her attention snagged on Brenden, who sat across from her, methodically devouring his fish with singular focus. The longer she observed him, the more confusion prickled at her consciousness.

During their WhatsApp exchanges about meal preferences, Brenden had explicitly rejected numerous dishes. His dietary restrictions had mirrored Wesley’s with uncanny precision. Yet the Brenden before her possessed an adventurous palate that defied all logic. Not only did he consume bland fish daily, but he devoured onions, celery, and even cilantro with apparent relish.

Chapter 173

Gabriela swallowed the last bite of fatty meat with difficulty, her mind still wrestling with Wesley’s sudden shift in demeanor. A wave of melancholy washed over her, souring what should have been a pleasant meal.

Wesley disappeared into his study immediately after dinner, burying himself in his reading. Loretta and Miriam shooed Gabriela away from the cleanup duty, insisting she unwind or lose herself in her phone instead. These two wonderful women genuinely treasured her presence, and their kindness stirred something deep within Gabriela’s chest. In that moment, she realized that returning here annually to cook without payment wouldn’t feel like such a burden after all.

Wesley might be a heartless businessman, but she could set aside her frustrations with him for the warmth Loretta and Miriam offered. The bitter cold kept Gabriela indoors that evening; she retreated to her room and settled in to scroll through her phone.

Her name continued trending across social media platforms, with countless netizens offering apologies while unleashing criticism on Phyllis. After scanning through the flood of comments, Gabriela switched to lifestyle content.

As she watched, Brenden's unusual eating preferences surfaced in her memory. Curiosity overwhelmed her restraint, and she opened WhatsApp. Her conversation with "NotASaunders" remained frozen at their last exchange from several days prior—when she had confronted Brenden about his wedding behavior, only to receive his terse response: "Idiot."

Gabriela's mind drifted back to those first two months of her company internship. She had worked in the sales department while Brenden commanded all four sales divisions as general manager, creating frequent opportunities for interaction. Her memories painted him as an incurable charmer—every beautiful woman became his target.

His generosity toward his girlfriends flowed freely, and his words dripped like honey from his lips. Never once had Brenden called any woman an "idiot"—this much remained crystal clear in her recollection. Yet their WhatsApp history revealed multiple instances of him hurling that exact insult her way. The person who actually favored that word around her was...

Gabriela's pulse hammered against her ribcage. Her memory confirmed it—Wesley had indeed branded her an "idiot" on several occasions during face-to-face encounters. She reread their entire chat thread, mentally superimposing Wesley's personality onto each message, her astonishment growing with every line. "NotASaunders" possessed a communication style that mirrored Wesley's with startling accuracy.

Another vital clue lurked in his username: “NotASaunders.” Perhaps the person behind these messages wasn’t Brenden at all. Could it possibly be...?

The instant this thought crystallized, Gabriela shook her head in violent denial. How could Wesley possibly masquerade as Brenden? What purpose would such deception serve? Here was a man who generated millions in mere minutes—why would Wesley squander his precious time on WhatsApp messages with her? She must be mistaken.

But if “NotASaunders” wasn’t Brenden, then who could it be? Despite her carefree exterior, Gabriela possessed a proactive core. Once suspicion took root, she demanded immediate confirmation. She headed downstairs in search of Brenden.

He was sprawled across the couch, fingers dancing across his phone screen. His casual posture created a jarring contrast with the somewhat distant “NotASaunders” persona from WhatsApp. Though the sight caught her off guard, the timing was perfect—no one else was nearby. Gabriela steeled her resolve and called out, “Mr. Saunders.”

Her voice triggered an immediate transformation. Brenden bolted upright, straightening his spine, smoothing his clothes, and running his fingers through his disheveled hair, embarrassment coloring his features.

Relaxation came naturally to him, and his cousin’s couch possessed an almost supernatural comfort. The familiarity had made him completely forget that Gabriela was staying in the house and could descend the stairs at any moment.

He wondered if his slovenly appearance had diminished her opinion of him. After clearing his throat, Brenden asked, his tone earnest, “Gabriela, is there something you need from me?”

Chapter 174

Gabriela summoned her courage and pressed forward. “Actually, yes. When will you return what belongs to me?”

Confusion clouded Brenden’s expression. “I’m not following you.”

“I mean the item I left with you.”

Gabriela couldn’t bring herself to mention their one-night stand. Besides, she wasn’t even sure whether Brenden was the man who had slept with her. Explicit details were absolutely out of the question.

“Something you left with me?” Brenden’s bewilderment deepened. “I have no recollection of you leaving anything in my possession.”

Gabriela’s breath caught as her mind began to spin. Had “NotASaunders” truly not been Brenden? To confirm this, she posed another question. “Mr. Saunders, please stop this charade. You explicitly promised that if I prepared something delicious for you, you would return what’s mine. So much time has passed—please don’t delay any further.”

Sympathy pierced Brenden’s heart as he observed Gabriela’s pallor and the careful hesitation in her voice. Harshness toward beautiful women simply wasn’t in his nature, especially when Gabriela ranked as the most stunning woman he had ever encountered. He searched his memory desperately, trying to recall what precious item of hers might have fallen into his possession.

Suddenly, her obvious crush on him flashed through his mind, and he wondered with growing incredulity if the thing she had left with him was... her heart. Gabriela even thought that by cooking for him, he might develop feelings for her.

Was this the real reason she had chosen to sacrifice her holiday and work as a chef here?

A complex mix of flattery and unease stirred within Brenden's chest. While his natural charm drew admirers, the notion that Gabriela harbored such profound feelings—enough to surrender her heart entirely—felt staggering. What had sparked such overwhelming devotion within her?

A strange tension crossed Brenden's face—just enough to make Gabriela second-guess herself. She ventured forward with delicate uncertainty, "Mr. Saunders?"

Wesley emerged at that precise moment, a glass of water in hand, and the scene before him brought his steps to an abrupt halt. Brenden gazed down at Gabriela with unmistakable smugness painted across his features, while she waited for his words with an almost childlike vulnerability.

A cold snort escaped Wesley's lips as he swept his gaze over Gabriela with withering brevity, then strode past without acknowledging their existence.

Gabriela froze. That fleeting look Wesley had cast her way—subtle and seemingly emotionless—carried the weight of crushing judgment. Her mind raced with questions about how much of their conversation he had witnessed and whether his sharp intellect had already pieced together the fragments. Anxiety bloomed like poison in her veins, making her desperate to flee to the sanctuary of her room.

But Brenden's voice suddenly cut through her spiraling thoughts. "Gabriela, forgive me. I cannot provide what you're seeking."

The realization of her deep-seated affection sent a brief surge of euphoria through Brenden, but reality quickly doused that flame. Every woman who had graced his life—from minor celebrities to runway models—had been drawn like moths to the golden glow of his wealth; their affections were as artificial as stage makeup. He understood the transaction perfectly and had never minded, since his own heart remained equally shallow. Gabriela represented something entirely different—a rare gem of authenticity in his world of calculated relationships.

As someone who fled from commitment like it was a contagious disease, he couldn't offer her the fairy-tale ending she deserved, nor could he bear to string her along with false promises.

Brenden delivered his verdict with unwavering finality as the resolution crystallized in his mind. "Moving forward, we should sever all contact between us. If our paths cross again, we must behave as complete strangers."

He pivoted on his heel and left without a backward glance, his footsteps echoing with decisive determination. Gabriela stood frozen, bewildered.

What did Brenden mean by that?

Chapter 175

Even after Brenden's figure vanished from sight, Gabriela remained frozen, her mind reeling. She had suspected that "NotASaunders" wasn't Brenden at all, but judging by his reaction moments ago, had she been wrong?

And what had Brenden meant when he claimed he couldn't give her what she wanted? Was he planning to keep whatever she'd left in that hotel room?

Fury blazed through Gabriela's chest. Brenden showered other women with generosity, yet treated her with such calculated cruelty. He kept stalling, refusing to return what belonged to her. What an absolute bastard!

Gabriela drew a shuddering breath and forced her rage into submission. When she considered it rationally, this outcome worked in her favor. Brenden had suggested cutting contact himself, which meant no future scandals to worry about. Besides, she couldn't even recall what she'd abandoned in that hotel room—she probably didn't need it anyway.

Her thoughts churned through a dozen emotions, and gradually satisfaction replaced her anger. The crushing weight that had pressed against her ribs finally lifted. She inhaled deeply and transformed back into the carefree woman she'd always been.

"Gabriela."

Wesley's frigid voice cut through her reverie like a blade. Her euphoria had made her forget he still lingered in the living room. Thank God she hadn't been too explicit while testing Brenden earlier—Wesley probably hadn't deciphered their cryptic exchange.

She flashed him a brilliant smile. "Mr. Moss, getting some water? I won't keep you."

Having said that, Gabriela bolted toward her room. She indulged in a scalding shower, so blissful she nearly burst into song. After toweling off, Gabriela scrolled through her phone until 11:30 p.m. crept up on her.

She'd planned to stay awake another half hour, but tomorrow's responsibilities crashed back into her consciousness—Loretta needed help decorating the house and trimming the garden's overgrown trees and flowers. She would have to rise at dawn.

Gabriela powered down her phone, burrowed into her blankets, and set her alarm. Just as sleep began to claim her, WhatsApp's distinctive chime pierced the silence. It rang several times in succession.

Gabriela cracked open her phone to discover a message from "NotASaunders": "Are you sleeping? I can't rest. Could you sing something for me?" Gabriela stared at the screen in disbelief.

Brenden had just declared he wouldn't return her belongings or contact her again, and now he had already changed his mind? What an asshole.

Having already confronted Brenden directly, Gabriela felt no need for diplomacy. Her reply dripped with venom. "Brenden Saunders, do you possess the memory span of a goldfish? What is it—three seconds before everything evaporates? You explicitly said never to contact me again, so why are you messaging me now?"

Wesley had been battling insomnia for days. Gabriela's rejection had wounded him, though he convinced himself he wasn't particularly attached to her. Since she possessed such abysmal taste as to criticize his physique, he certainly wouldn't waste another moment's consideration on her. He'd assumed he would get over her quickly.

Chapter 176

But recently, she haunted his vision constantly. He learned that she had endured absolute darkness in the past while still maintaining such radiant optimism. Rather than moving on from her, his fascination intensified.

Tonight, he'd tossed and turned, his mind replaying the scene of Gabriela standing before Brenden. He was frustrated. Damn—what was so special about Brenden that had drawn her to him?

Irritation drove Wesley to message Gabriela, requesting a song.

He hadn't anticipated provoking such fierce indignation. Reading her message, in which she furiously berated Brenden, somehow lifted Wesley's spirits considerably. Her fiery temper amused him.

He responded cheerfully, "Oh, it's Gabriela? I thought this was girlfriend number forty-three. Sorry, wrong recipient."

Finding that insufficient, Wesley added, "My forty-third girlfriend happens to be a little singer. If you can outperform her, I'll return your possessions immediately."

Gabriela's blood boiled. Why was he tormenting her in the dead of night? She needed to wake early tomorrow to assist Loretta with decorating. Gabriela marshaled her fury, prepared a verbal assault, and readied a voice-message bombardment when "NotASaunders" sent another text.

“I’m a free spirit; naturally, I change my mind constantly. Forget what I said earlier. Tonight, you will sing for me.”

Gabriela was about to explode. But what choice did she have? Her own reckless behavior had created this mess—getting drunk over trivial matters, which had attracted this relentless pest. Terrified that Brenden might broadcast their one-night stand, Gabriela swallowed her rage.

She clenched her jaw and typed, “What song do you want?”

The response materialized instantly. “Something romantic.”

Gabriela’s blood chilled. What kind of delusional romantic was Brenden, demanding love songs in the dead of night? Even if she knew a hundred romantic ballads, she wouldn’t feed his twisted fantasies.

“I don’t know any romantic songs,” Gabriela shot back.

“Then find one. Sing something sweet once you’ve chosen. I have all night—I’ll wait.”

Gabriela drew a savage breath, mentally executing Brenden a dozen different ways before hitting record. Her voice emerged barely above a whisper. “If I could do just one thing for you...”

This marked the first time she’d ever performed for someone through her phone. Shyness scorched her cheeks; initially her voice trembled with embarrassment.

The recording automatically transmitted when it reached the sixty-second limit.

Gabriela's voice wasn't classically beautiful, but her tender singing caressed the listener like whispered secrets.

Wesley had initially found it enchanting, even losing himself in her melody as he contemplated which song to request next. But as the lyrics unfolded, his smile withered. "Love you so deeply, so I'll set you free..." Wesley's expression turned thunderous.

Loving someone so profoundly, yet releasing them? Encouraging them to choose another? Shouldn't loving someone mean clutching them desperately and never letting go?

These lyrics were absolute poison.

Wesley fired back immediately, "Awful. Choose something else."

Gabriela, who had been pleased with her performance, recoiled at his brutal dismissal.

Chapter 177

Gabriela rolled her eyes when she read the message. Brenden thought her singing was awful. Well, fine—she didn't feel like singing anymore anyway.

She quickly fired off a reply. “I think my singing’s terrible too. It’s late, and I need to sleep. Goodnight, Mr. Saunders!”

Wesley, whose irritation had briefly subsided, experienced a fresh surge of annoyance. He typed back with barely contained frustration, “No sleeping. Keep singing.”

Something strange stirred in Gabriela that night—an unusual patience that surprised even her. “What would you like to hear this time?” she asked.

Wesley rarely indulged in pop music, but after scrolling through options he typed, “We Will Rock You.”

Gabriela stared at her screen in disbelief. The urge to reach through the digital barrier and throttle this man nearly overwhelmed her. She fired back without hesitation, “I don’t know how to sing that song.”

“Then learn it. If you can’t master it in one attempt, try ten times. You’ll eventually succeed.”

Gabriela’s eyes rolled skyward as she replied, “This song is incredibly challenging. I wouldn’t master it no matter how long I practiced.”

“Oh? Should I broadcast our one-night stand to the world?”

Gabriela inhaled deeply, forcing down the rage that threatened to consume her. Another message from “NotASaunders” appeared on her screen: “Take your time learning. I’m in no hurry.”

He wasn’t in a hurry, but sleepiness overtook Gabriela. During her university years she had absorbed countless pop songs, so learning this one wouldn’t prove impossible. After summoning her courage and steeling her nerves, Gabriela delivered a few ragged lines into her device.

Wesley struggled to define the emotions coursing through him.

Gabriela’s voice wasn’t a perfect classical instrument, but its tender timbre usually suited gentle songs. Tonight, however, it clashed terribly with the chosen tune.

He typed mercilessly, “You call that singing? You’re shrieking. It’s sonic assault—my ears are bleeding.”

Gabriela’s throat burned from the effort, and she could no longer endure the criticism. She launched herself from the bed, grabbed a coat, flung open her door, and marched toward Brenden’s room with fierce determination. Her steps were swift, each movement purposeful.

But when Brenden opened the door, Gabriela’s fury evaporated like morning mist. What was she doing here? Would she demand an explanation or force a confrontation? If she pushed the issue, Wesley—along with Loretta and Miriam—might learn what had happened between her and Brenden. Losing her job would pale beside seeing the shock in Loretta’s and Miriam’s eyes. She adored them and treasured their affection like precious gems; she wanted to spend the coming year celebrating New Year’s with them.

Brenden, roused and still groggy from sleep, stared at her. His initial irritation faded the moment he saw the sorrow on her face. “Gabriela, why aren’t you sleeping yet?” he asked.

Gabriela studied him, taken aback by how convincingly he could play oblivious. She pierced him with an icy glare, spun on her heel, and stalked back to her room. She slammed the door and snatched up her phone with renewed determination. If Brenden thought her singing was atrocious, she would unleash a vocal onslaught until he begged for mercy.

Gabriela channeled every ounce of her fury and let loose—roaring through the entire song with fierce abandon.

Wesley could taste Gabriela’s resentment as he endured the genuine risk of permanent hearing damage to listen to her entire performance.

He finally delivered his verdict. “You make my forty-third girlfriend sound like a Grammy winner.”

Gabriela had anticipated this exact response. Brenden always imposed impossible demands, and when she finally met them he began a surgical dissection of her efforts. Damn—he clearly had no intention of showing her mercy.

Fine. No one should expect an easy night.

Gabriela typed with calculated sweetness, “Mr. Saunders, have you heard ‘I Will Always Love You’? It’s another challenging, high-pitched song. How about granting me another opportunity to attempt it?”

Wesley, lounging against his bed, chose not to expose her transparent strategy and replied with a single word: "Sure."

Chapter 178

Gabriela's eyes gleamed with newfound purpose. This time she initiated a voice chat instead of sending a recording—she was determined to discover if the voice on the other end truly belonged to Brenden.

After connecting, silence stretched between them. Even when Gabriela greeted him, no response came.

She cleared her throat with theatrical precision. "Alright, I'll begin singing."

The opening of "I Will Always Love You" flowed gently, and combined with Gabriela's naturally sweet voice it created an unexpectedly pleasant sound. Wesley's lips curved upward in the faintest smile.

But the next moment her phone erupted with piercing high notes; her voice cracked under the strain. Gabriela had no proper technique—she relied on raw volume for the high notes, producing an ear-shattering performance.

Wesley nearly hurled his phone across the room.

Gabriela sang with increasing intensity. After enduring the complete song, neither of them felt victorious.

Gabriela, her voice now completely hoarse, asked, “Mr. Saunders, was it good?” When silence greeted her question, she pressed on, “I have another song prepared, and wonder if you—”

Before she could finish, the voice call ended abruptly. “NotASaunders” sent a message. “This performance was marginally better than your previous attempt. Practice more.”

Gabriela’s throat felt like it was on fire, and seeing the message made her head throb with mounting frustration. But Brenden’s unpredictable nature proved too formidable to challenge. Gabriela recognized she was outmatched. Forget it. Exhaustion had claimed her. No more battles tonight. She surrendered.

Gabriela sipped warm water, burrowed under her covers, and soon fell asleep. In her dreams she kept singing song after song. When she woke in the morning and reflected on those dreams, she felt awful.

She dressed and descended the stairs, colliding directly with Brenden. The dreams still blazed through her mind, and Gabriela fixed him with a murderous stare.

Brenden recoiled under her venomous glare, then noticed the dark shadows beneath her eyes—guilt twisting deeper into his chest. What had possessed such a wonderful woman to develop feelings for him?

After delivering her withering look, Gabriela turned to discover Wesley seated on the sofa, absorbed in his newspaper. Today he wore a black turtleneck sweater that transformed him into something both devastating and untouchable—handsome yet shrouded in mystery. When he noticed her presence, Wesley offered the slightest nod of acknowledgment.

Gabriela's heart performed an unexpected somersault. Last night, suspicion had crept through her thoughts like poison—could “NotASaunders” actually be Wesley? Now she found that possibility absurd. How could such a magnificent CEO stoop to impersonating Brenden? The very idea contradicted everything about his character. Besides, Wesley had no interest in women—definitely not the man who had slept with her.

Gabriela exchanged polite greetings with Wesley before escaping to the kitchen's sanctuary.

Loretta and Miriam had already risen, their voices filled with maternal concern as they urged Gabriela to rest. “Let me handle breakfast. Your foot is still recovering—go sit outside,” Loretta cooed.

“Yes, spend time with Mr. Moss. It will strengthen your working relationship,” Miriam chimed in.

But Gabriela stood her ground with stubborn determination. “My foot healed ages ago. Please, let me take care of this.”

Faced with Gabriela's unwavering resolve, they reluctantly abandoned the kitchen.

The moment solitude embraced her, Gabriela swiftly prepared honey lemon water. After her night of vocal torture, her throat felt like sandpaper, and even the soothing mixture provided minimal relief.

Righteous anger burned in her veins as she began crafting something special for Brenden. Her hands moved with vengeful efficiency, completing the meal preparations with remarkable speed.

Finally, she positioned her carefully orchestrated breakfast before Brenden, her smile radiating deceptive sweetness. “Mr. Saunders, I noticed you had a restless night, so I prepared something special to energize your morning.”

Brenden’s expression clouded with confusion. He had been sleeping peacefully yesterday when Gabriela’s unexpected visit shattered his dreams.

Wesley, drawn by their conversation, folded his newspaper with precise movements and approached them.

Chapter 179

Before Brenden sat a dish of baked custard studded with apples. The apples, thinly sliced and artfully layered, were nestled in a creamy custard baked to a golden, firm finish. Regardless of its flavor, the dish was undeniably visually appealing.

Wesley’s lips tightened, his eyes turning cold. She had clearly put genuine effort into Brenden’s breakfast—after all, she had previously made some awful greasy fried meat for him—but this looked exquisite.

Unaware that his dish was a disaster, Brenden was so moved he nearly welled up. Since childhood, aside from Loretta, no one had shown him such kindness. At that moment, Loretta and Miriam joined them at the table.

Deeply touched, Brenden declared, “Gabriela made this special breakfast for me. Of course I’ll savor every bite.”

He scooped a generous spoonful of custard. The instant it hit his tongue, his pleased expression faltered, replaced by a grimace. It was unbearably salty. Had Gabriela emptied the entire salt canister into it?

Catching her glance, he noticed a flicker of smug triumph mixed with quiet anger, and it clicked. In his mind, Gabriela's affection had twisted into mischief. If she couldn't have him, she'd sabotage him. Well, it was all because of his undeniable charm. Having let Gabriela down, he figured he deserved her punishment.

Brenden forced down the custard, maintaining a neutral expression. With a bright smile, he lied, "Gabriela, your cooking is incredible. This is truly delicious."

Gabriela stared, at a loss for words. Wasn't that much salt enough to make him wince?

Noticing her icy glare, Brenden fell silent but continued to choke down the custard. Leaning toward Wesley, he whispered, "I think Gabriela's way too into you."

Wesley shot him a cold glance, saying nothing.

Brenden pressed on, "This breakfast is overly salty, but it must've taken her ages to make. She's punishing me with this because I couldn't return her feelings. Gabriela's such a great girl. Why would she fall for someone like me? I've really disappointed her."

He muttered as he ate, unable to contain himself. His overwhelming charm demanded to be acknowledged, or his ego would burst. Wesley's fists clenched subtly, tempted to silence him.

Wesley picked up an apple and said casually, “Grandma, Brenden’s eating something this salty so early. It is not good for his health. He needs some exercise.”

Due to Wesley’s past health concerns, Loretta was particularly attentive to the younger family members’ well-being. Alarmed, she tasted the custard and found it unbearably salty. Yet Brenden had already consumed over half.

Loretta promptly declared, “Brenden, after breakfast, you’re exercising with me.”

Brenden protested, “No need, Loretta. I’m fine.”

Loretta was resolute. “It’s not up to you. If I say you need it, you do!”

Brenden respected Loretta deeply. Thus he didn’t dare defy her and reluctantly agreed. Gabriela silently admired Loretta’s decisiveness. Well played!

After breakfast, Loretta sent Brenden on a short walk to aid digestion. Thirty minutes later, he was to exercise in the garden’s fresh air.

Then Loretta turned to Gabriela, her tone warm. “Is your foot fully healed, Gabriela?”

Chapter 180

Gabriela nodded quickly. "It's been fine for two days now."

"Could you help me hang the New Year's garlands?" Loretta asked.

Gabriela's eyes sparkled. "I'd love to!"

She'd never participated in such meaningful traditions before. This year, she could finally join in.

Pleased with her enthusiasm, Loretta turned to Wesley. "You'll hang the garlands and Gabriela will assist."

Wesley's face clouded with a touch of reluctance. Such tasks were typically left to staff. As CEO of Apex Group, was he really being asked to do something so mundane?

Noticing his hesitation, Loretta planted her hands on her hips. "Well? Are you doing it or not?"

Wesley didn't want to upset her, so he relented. Sighing, he stood. "I'll do it."

"Change your clothes first," Loretta instructed. "It's the New Year, and you're always in black or white. What's that about? Look at Gabriela in her vibrant red—so festive."

Gabriela's red coat highlighted her delicate complexion, enhancing her beauty. The more Loretta observed her, the more she adored Gabriela. She wished that Wesley would marry Gabriela right away.

"Do I really need to change?" Wesley protested. His wardrobe was almost entirely monochrome.

"Yes," Loretta insisted, producing a red T-shirt she'd prepared. "Wear this."

Wesley's expression darkened at the sight of the T-shirt. Under Loretta's firm gaze, he reluctantly donned it, rolled up his sleeves, and began hanging the garlands.

Gabriela watched in quiet awe as Loretta accomplished what no one else could—silencing Wesley's objections with a single look and bending him to her will.

Loretta glanced at her. "Why are you just standing there, Gabriela? Go help."

A quiet satisfaction warmed Gabriela's chest—Loretta had engineered this moment perfectly. She hoped their relationship would blossom.

Brenden, watching the scene unfold, was caught off guard when Loretta turned to him. "Brenden, let's go. Time to exercise."

He trailed her into the garden, quietly calculating that at her age she wouldn't last long with exercise. To his dismay, a chiseled, forty-something man awaited—Cassius Padilla, a well-known personal trainer with over a million Instagram followers. His presence during the New Year was thanks to Wesley's personal request.

Brenden's confidence wavered. This wasn't looking good.

Loretta instructed Cassius to give Brenden a thorough workout, then returned with Miriam to watch Gabriela and Wesley. Wesley stood atop a ladder, with Gabriela passing garlands to him.

For novices, they worked in surprising harmony, their striking appearances making them a captivating sight. Still, Loretta felt a pang of worry. "Wesley is not interested in women. I wonder if Gabriela could work her magic and make him fall for her," she murmured.

Miriam's eyes sparkled with an idea. "Remember that scarf Gabriela knitted a few days ago? What if—"

Loretta hesitated; Miriam's schemes had never succeeded before. "This time it'll work," Miriam said confidently. "Mr. Moss is not as cold-hearted as he appears. If he really rejects a lovely woman's advances..." Loretta's heart skipped a beat. Would it mean he'd never be interested in women? "Don't worry," Miriam added calmly. "If that's the case, we'll use our trump card." Though doubtful, Loretta decided to trust her.