

His kiss 181

Chapter 181

Although the servants hovered nearby, eager to assist, Loretta briskly shooed them away to tend to other duties. That left Wesley alone at the front door, wrestling with the decorations. He soon found his hands stained with grimy dust, and his left cheek bore the marks as well.

The sight of the usually composed, untouchable man in such an unexpectedly comical state made Gabriela burst out laughing. “Mr. Moss, your face is covered. You look so silly.”

Her laughter rang light and melodic, though it seemed to grate on him. Without a word, he leaned forward and brushed his hand across her cheek. “There! Now yours is dirty too!”

Gabriela froze, momentarily stunned. Was he truly being this childish? She rolled up her sleeves and boldly reached for his other cheek with her dirty hand. Her fingertips skimmed his skin, light as silk.

The touch shouldn’t have meant anything, and yet Wesley’s chest tightened as if she’d struck a chord he didn’t know existed. In one swift motion his hand closed around her wrist. His gaze locked on hers—dark and unwavering—the kind of stare that made the air feel heavier.

Gabriela’s pulse skipped. Perhaps she had taken things too far. After all, he was her boss, and she shouldn’t have teased him like this. It was very inappropriate.

One corner of his mouth twitched as he let her go, though the weight of his hand lingered like a brand. “Stop messing around.”

“Understood,” she said quickly, absently tracing the very spot his hand had touched. His presence made her breath hitch, and a flush warmed her cheeks. Tugging at her collar, she shrugged off her jacket to cool herself.

Beneath it, a soft lavender T-shirt hugged her frame, the round neckline drawing attention to her collarbones. Wesley’s gaze flickered there for a split second before he turned away. “Stop dawdling. Some of us have real work to do.”

Gabriela bent to retrieve the decorations, and the hem of her T-shirt rose, offering a fleeting glimpse of bare skin. Wesley’s eyes flickered and immediately averted. Who could have guessed that hanging streamers and ornaments would test him more than sealing billion-dollar contracts overseas?

Fortunately, his earlier warning had her working with the focus of an employee on a strict deadline. With her newfound seriousness, the second floor was finished in no time. Loretta’s orders didn’t end at the villa—now the garden’s trees and flowers were waiting for their festive touch.

Gabriela trailed after Wesley, but before they could begin, a sharp, pained cry split the air. “Ah! Stop! That hurts. Don’t push it any further!”

The source of the commotion became clear a moment later. It was Brenden, locked in an unfortunate stretching session with Cassius. Or rather, Cassius was doing the stretching, and Brenden was doing the suffering.

Brenden, clearly unaccustomed to anything more strenuous than lifting a wine glass, was flailing under Cassius’s iron grip. “Cassius, I swear my leg’s about to snap. I don’t want muscles like yours. Just take it easy, alright? No need for the full drill-sergeant routine!”

Cassius's expression didn't budge. "What do you think I'm being paid for? Standing around?" With merciless precision, he pressed Brenden's bent knee down even further. Another tortured yell ripped from Brenden's throat.

Gabriela's eye twitched with part sympathy, part schadenfreude. What a way to spend the holiday season. Then again... maybe he deserved it.

Beside her, Wesley shot a glacial look, holding it for several long seconds before his voice came, cool and cutting. "Grandma told you to decorate the garden. Not stand around gawking."

Gabriela quickly tore her eyes away, fumbling for an excuse. "I wasn't gawking. I was admiring that man's muscles."

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Wesley's brow furrowed, his mood souring. Muscles? He had muscles. He even had abs, for heaven's sake. Why didn't she choose to admire his instead?

Gabriela, oblivious to the silent offense, noticed Wesley's expression and sighed inwardly. He was upset again, but by now she was accustomed to his unpredictable moods.

"Mr. Moss," she said quickly, "how about we start with that tree?"

Without waiting for his reply, she strode toward the tree and pressed a bright red decoration onto its trunk. The shift in her focus seemed to cool his irritation, and Wesley joined her.

Soon the sprawling garden was draped in festive reds and golds. Gabriela stepped back to admire their work. “Much better. Now the place feels cozy.”

Wesley surveyed his meticulously curated garden—where every bush and blossom usually existed in perfect harmony. Now, the gaudy decorations clashed like cymbals in a symphony. His jaw tightened, but he swallowed the criticism. Loretta’s orders trumped aesthetics.

A few hours later, the last ribbon was tied and the final ornament hung. Wesley retreated to his room with the thought of changing out of his glaringly red clothes, but he paused, remembering Gabriela in her own red jacket and the way it had made her eyes sparkle. In the end, he didn’t change.

At the sink, he splashed water on his face, yet the memory of her bright, mischievous eyes—and the way she brushed her dirty hands across his cheek—returned unbidden, making his heartbeat quicken.

That silly girl.

Meanwhile, Gabriela, having finished her tasks, could still hear Brenden’s pitiful yells drifting from his training session with Cassius.

Loretta’s brow creased. “So young, yet Brenden can’t get through two hours of exercise without screaming? Truly pathetic.”

With New Year's just around the corner, summoning Cassius again felt inappropriate. After a brief exchange, Loretta and Miriam decided to arrange for two strong, young servants in the coming days to help Brenden with his leg stretches. Even during the holidays, exercise couldn't be overlooked.

Their discussion concluded, and both women turned to Gabriela, their smiles warm and genuine. "Gabriela, you've worked hard today. Skip lunch; you don't need to cook," Loretta told her.

Gabriela hesitated, about to protest— even as Wesley's unpaid cook, she never let her duties slide.

Miriam stepped in smoothly. "Mrs. Larson has another task for you."

Gabriela's curiosity was immediately piqued. "Oh? What task?"

"The villa is fully decorated; surely there is nothing you need to help with." Loretta's eyes softened. "Where's that scarf you were knitting last time? Let me see it."

Without a second thought, Gabriela dashed back to her room to retrieve the scarf. Loretta and Miriam admired her handiwork, then exchanged a glance before Loretta asked, "It still needs a little more. Why haven't you finished it yet?"

Gabriela's cheeks flushed. "I've been a bit busy lately."

“Don’t worry,” Loretta said with a reassuring smile. “Start knitting now, and by evening it’ll be ready for sure.”

Gabriela hesitated for a moment, unsure of Loretta’s intentions—but she couldn’t refuse. “Alright, I’ll do my best.”

Then Gabriela settled into her room, her hands moving rhythmically over the scarf as Loretta and Miriam busied themselves in the kitchen preparing lunch.

As mealtime approached, Miriam slipped into the study to summon Wesley. He entered to find a table laid with dishes, their aroma unmistakably Loretta’s handiwork.

“Isn’t Gabriela cooking today?” he asked, eyebrows slightly raised.

Miriam’s smile was deliberately cryptic. “She’s got a very important task. She’s knitting a scarf. I heard she wants to finish it before New Year’s and give it to the person who means the most to her.”

Wesley’s chest tightened, and his heart skipped a beat. The person who meant the most to Gabriela—who could that be?

Chapter 183

Miriam shot Loretta a sly, conspiratorial glance, and Loretta instantly caught on, turning toward Wesley. “Whoever that person is, Gabriela must really like them. Wesley, who do you think she’s giving the scarf to?”

Wesley's face stayed composed, but the subtle curl of his fingers at his side betrayed him, his knuckles whitening under the strain. His voice was cool, almost bored. "How the hell am I supposed to know?"

Loretta's brow creased as she exchanged a puzzled look with Miriam. Why the sudden frost? Just earlier, while they were decorating the villa, there had been a flicker of connection.

Miriam, ever the strategist, flicked her gaze at Loretta in a silent warning not to push him. If the scarf didn't draw him out, she still had a far more cunning play up her sleeve.

Meanwhile, Brenden lingered nearby, his ears pricked, drinking in every word. Every muscle in his body throbbed, his legs so sore he could barely stand, yet his towering narcissism refused to take a second off.

Oh no. Was Gabriela actually considering giving the scarf to him? And if she did, what then—accept it, refuse? They had agreed to cut ties, to walk past each other like strangers. Why couldn't she just let that be? She was hopelessly taken with him, and it complicated everything between them.

Brenden let out an exasperated sigh, muttering complaints under his breath. Wesley heard every word, his face an unreadable mask. So, still self-absorbed. Clearly, one trainer hadn't been enough for Brenden. Wesley was planning on bringing another.

When Gabriela finally stepped into the dining room, her gaze collided with Wesley's, his eyes burning with restrained fury. A pang of unease tugged at her. She knew how valuable his time was, and yet here she was, making him wait. Perhaps she really had been pushing her luck.

Gabriela couldn't bear to meet Wesley's gaze any longer. As soon as she turned her head, there was Brenden, slouched over the dining table, one hand braced against his waist, looking thoroughly pitiful.

The sight stirred a strange mix of satisfaction tinged with sympathy. What was the point of hurting each other like this? She really should find a moment to talk to Brenden. That night still haunted her with regret. Still, she clung to the belief that time could mend even the deepest rifts. If Brenden would just let her go, maybe then, given enough time, she could forget what happened between them.

Determined to ignore Wesley's simmering stare, Gabriela focused on her meal, eating quickly. Afterward, the moment she was waiting for arrived—a chance to pull Brenden aside and speak with him privately.

To the left of the manor lay a still pond, a jagged mass of artificial rock guarding its edge. Brenden, desperate to avoid Loretta roping him into yet another round of exercise that afternoon, slipped behind the stone, hiding like a fugitive. After an hour and a half of brutal leg stretches that morning, his knees no longer remembered how to bend. Slumping against the cold rock, he let out a sharp hiss of pain.

So this was what happened when a woman didn't get the man she wanted. The outcome was absolutely terrifying. Still, the moment Gabriela's delicate features floated into his mind, the irritation drained away. Fine. No more pushing her buttons. Rubbing at his aching knees, he decided that once the New Year season was over, he'd head back to his own place—putting much-needed distance between them.

He was mid-thought when Gabriela's voice suddenly drifted over. "Mr. Saunders?"

He jolted upright in alarm and instantly regretted it. Pain tore through his knee like it had been struck with an iron rod. His face twisted, but he still managed to throw up a hand. "Don't come here!"

Gabriela froze mid-step.

From a cautious three meters away, she said loudly, "I'm sorry about this morning."

"Stop." The moment her face came into view, Brenden's pulse kicked up. He tore his gaze away, unwilling to risk looking at her too long. "We agreed yesterday—no more contact. Nothing more than strangers, even if we cross paths again."

Gabriela froze. Was he serious? Would this be the final verdict, or would he change his mind by evening? Maybe she should record it for proof.

His expression didn't budge. "Of course I'm serious. You should leave. No more little stunts to get my attention. We're not suited for each other. Best to go our separate ways."

Chapter 184

Gabriela understood his words perfectly, yet a stubborn doubt lingered, making it impossible for her to truly believe him. Her stillness—the faint shadow of hurt in her eyes—made Brenden's resolve waver for a heartbeat. But he was a man who stuck to his decisions once made.

"You need to leave now. And never come looking for me alone again. Oh, and don't give me anything, either."

Gabriela blinked, stunned all over again. She had no intention of giving him anything. She only wanted to retrieve what was hers.

When her lips parted to speak, Brenden cut her off with a pained look. “Why are you still standing there?”

From his tone and the weariness in his eyes, it didn’t seem like an act. He truly wanted no part in any connection with her. For now, she decided to believe him.

Turning away, she returned to her room and resumed knitting the scarf. Loretta had been urging her to finish it, though Gabriela still didn’t understand why.

From behind, Brenden watched her go. Her slender back stirred an unexpected pang in him, a flicker of sentimentality he didn’t care to examine. He snapped out of it, giving himself a sharp slap. Gabriela was a good woman, yes, but there was still a gulf between them—one that couldn’t be crossed.

Meanwhile, Gabriela kept to Loretta’s request, finishing the last stitches on the scarf.

Loretta’s face lit up the moment the scarf was in her hands. “Gabriela, your craftsmanship is incredible. Even the expensive scarves in boutique windows can’t compare.”

Gabriela flushed at the praise. “Actually, it’s my first time knitting. I’m really not that skilled yet.”

“It’s already wonderful,” Miriam chimed in, then added casually, “Gabriela, would you mind giving this one to Mrs. Larson?”

Gabriela smiled. "Of course not."

Aside from Farley, Loretta and Miriam were the people closest to her. Even if Loretta asked for ten scarves, she'd knit every last one.

No sooner had Loretta taken the scarf than she shooed Gabriela toward her room. "You've had a long day. Get some rest in your room."

The swiftness of her dismissal made Gabriela pause. But what could Loretta possibly be scheming against an ordinary, unpaid cook like her? Choosing not to press, Gabriela returned to her room.

The moment she was out of sight, Loretta snatched up the scarf and hurried off to find Wesley.

All afternoon, Wesley's mind had been elsewhere, his attention slipping despite the book in his hands. When the door opened to reveal Loretta, a faint flicker of disappointment crossed his eyes, so fleeting he didn't notice it himself. What exactly had he been expecting?

Loretta stepped inside without preamble, holding the neatly folded scarf. Wesley's fingers stilled mid-turn of a page. After a pause, he closed the book and asked with deliberate casualness, "What's this?"

"It's from Gabriela," Loretta said, lowering her voice as if sharing a secret. "She made it herself—knitted it stitch by stitch. Then she came to me and practically begged me to make sure it reached you."

The corners of Wesley's mouth lifted, almost imperceptibly. So, she'd gone to the trouble of knitting a scarf for him. He fought back the grin threatening to give him away, settling instead for a lazy sneer. "Then why didn't she give it to me herself?"

"She's probably too shy," Loretta replied. "Not everyone shares your indifference to romance—while you've never had a girlfriend, your cousin's exes outnumber..."

"Fingers on both hands." Her glare could have cut glass. "Well? Are you taking it or not?"

Wesley had half a mind to roll his eyes straight into the back of his head. The scarf seemed just an excuse; Loretta's real mission was clearly to lecture him. With a resigned sigh, Wesley reached out. "Alright, fine. I'll take it."

Loretta's eyes narrowed, her tone sharp. "You should wear it today. And I'm warning you—don't you dare pull that bored, disdainful face of yours."

That caught him off guard. What on earth had Gabriela done to win Loretta over so completely? He gave a defeated nod. "Alright, alright. I'll play along."

Loretta pressed the scarf into his hand. It was wonderfully made—warm, soft, and somehow disarming. Wesley lowered his gaze to the white yarn, each stitch neat and deliberate, not a single hint of haste or carelessness. It happened to be a shade he liked very much.

And in that quiet moment, he knew he wasn't just anyone in Gabriela's heart—he was the one.

Chapter 185

Loretta studied Wesley's impassive face, uncertainty curling in her chest. Did he like the scarf Gabriela had knitted?

"Here, take this scarf," she urged, pressing it toward him. "Later, put it on and walk past Gabriela. Let her see it. Make her believe you're fond of it. Do it for her, alright?"

Wesley inclined his head, answering flatly, "Alright."

Was he really expected to wear it immediately, parading it just to prove something to Gabriela? If she cared for him deeply, why had she acted like a stranger before? She had even nitpicked his long legs, as if that small complaint could disguise her true feelings.

What a sly woman.

The instant Loretta came out of the study, Miriam, who'd been lingering nearby, quickly approached. "Well? How did it go?"

"He accepted it, but he didn't look the least bit excited," Loretta muttered, a crease in her brow. "Honestly, what's wrong with him? Gabriela gives him something so meaningful, and he can't even bother to smile."

With every word that left her lips, her irritation only deepened. “Such a ridiculously good-looking man, yet he still can’t find himself a girlfriend!”

Miriam leaned close, her voice soft and steady. “Don’t let it get under your skin. Let’s test Gabriela’s feelings first.”

If Gabriela truly harbored feelings for Wesley, then whether his heart stirred or not didn’t matter. Their carefully crafted plan would have to unfold tonight.

With their minds set, Loretta and Miriam headed off to find Gabriela.

At that very moment, Gabriela was chatting on the phone with Farley. “I’ll come to see you in a few days. And don’t forget—I need another taste of those pork chops of yours.”

A sharp knock sounded at the door. Gabriela hurried to end the call and rose to answer.

Loretta and Miriam slipped into the room, quietly shutting the door behind them. They scanned the hallway to ensure no one lurked nearby. Their secretive expressions sent a prickle of unease down Gabriela’s spine.

“What’s going on?” she asked, her voice tight.

Loretta caught Gabriela's hand, her face clouded with distress. "Do you remember what I told you about Wesley—"

Gabriela cut her short, her tone cool and measured. "Don't circle around it. Just say what you mean."

When it came to Wesley's tangled affairs, she wanted no part of them. Now that she had money in her own account, all she wanted was to savor a life free of messy entanglements. As a result, she needed to steer clear of the wealthy family's drama altogether.

"Just be honest with me," Loretta pressed with quiet insistence. "Has Wesley truly treated you well?"

"Of course," Gabriela responded right away.

He might treat her with cool detachment at times, teasing her for being clumsy, yet whenever she was cornered and defenseless, he unfailingly stepped in—her silent shield, her unshakable anchor. With him at her back, she found the strength to push against anyone who tried to wound her. A boss like him was truly one of a kind.

Loretta drew closer, her tone probing. "And what about Miriam and me? Are we good to you as well?"

"Of course you are!" Gabriela said with a gentle smile.

"Then I'd like to ask a favor. Would you be willing to help me with something?"

Her first instinct was to nod, but Loretta's grave expression pulled her up short. Gabriela narrowed her eyes slightly. "What kind of favor?"

"The scarf you gave me earlier—Wesley seemed to take a liking to it, so I passed it on to him. Could you say you knitted it especially for him?"

Gabriela blinked in confusion. "Why would I do that?"

Turning her face aside, Loretta squeezed out a few tears. "You know Wesley's past thirty now, and he still hasn't brought home a girlfriend. The rumors outside are vicious. People whisper that he isn't into women at all. Some even spout the ridiculous claim that he's impotent."

Beside her, Miriam was all but flapping her lashes in warning, her frantic winks looking like they might spasm out of control. Loretta was definitely overdoing it.

Frowning in doubt, Gabriela noted, "Mr. Moss is young, accomplished, and widely respected. Even if he hasn't settled down, who would dare spread such nonsense about him?"

Loretta sighed. "He lost his parents when he was just a boy. I poured my whole heart into raising him, always hoping one day he'd build a family of his own. Now, all I ask is that he at least have a girlfriend before my time runs out."

Gabriela kept her lips pressed together. She understood Loretta's concern, but how on earth did that relate to her giving Wesley a scarf?

Loretta leaned in, her eyes sharp with intent. "If Wesley took your scarf, it shows he feels something for you. Why not step into the role of his girlfriend just to silence the rumors?"

The suggestion jolted Gabriela. "No. That's impossible." Her heart thudded at the thought. With Brenden living under the same roof, pretending to be Wesley's girlfriend would only spark chaos.

Miriam blinked, caught off guard. The night Wesley had brought Gabriela home, she'd seen the girl's cheeks flush pink at his presence. That wasn't nothing. Gabriela had definitely been interested. Could it be that Wesley's disinterest in women had extinguished Gabriela's spark? Oh no, that only proved it was time to push their final plan forward—without delay.

Miriam chimed in, "How about this? When people are around, Loretta drops a hint that you're Wesley's future wife. You don't need to confirm it—just don't deny it."

Gabriela immediately recoiled from the idea. If Brenden caught wind of this, he might run straight to Wesley and tell him about their one-night stand, portraying her as some conniving woman. Gabriela didn't want to lose her job and couldn't stomach the thought of Wesley seeing her as a calculating opportunist. It had only been a reckless, drunken night—nothing more.

Loretta, though, refused to let up. With tears trembling in her eyes, she pleaded, "I'm already old, and yet I still have to endure others gossiping about my dear grandson. Gabriela, please—just do me this favor."

Watching an elderly woman cry twisted Gabriela's conscience. Against her better judgment, she finally gave a subtle nod.

Brenden had already made it clear they would treat each other like strangers anyway. That suited her just fine. He probably wanted the whole drunken fiasco buried as much as she did. And if he made a fuss, she could always find a way to explain things later.

At dinner, Gabriela caught sight of Wesley descending the stairs and went rigid where she stood. His long black coat swayed around him, a white scarf resting neatly against his throat, lending him an effortless air of elegance. He was so devastatingly handsome.

She only managed a fleeting glance before dropping her gaze, too timid to look twice. This was her ultimate crush—the man whose bed she had once woken in, whose arms had once wrapped around her, whose warmth had once burned against her skin. Now, every time she laid eyes on him, her chest thudded with sudden speed.

Maybe she truly had fallen for him. Yet she knew he could never return those feelings. The realization pinched like a blade behind her ribs, leaving her chest aching. With a quiet sigh, Gabriela turned her face aside, swallowing her sorrow.

Wesley's brow tightened in irritation. He had gone so far as to change into an outfit chosen to match that scarf, and yet Gabriela refused to spare him even a second glance. Instead, she turned her back on him. Outrageous.

Brenden, never one to keep quiet, broke the silence with a teasing tone. "What's with the fancy getup at this hour, Wesley? And a scarf, too? I've never seen you wear one before. Where'd you even get it?"

Wesley didn't bother acknowledging him, keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead. Loretta had already grown weary of Brenden's chatter and decided she'd drag him out for another round of exercise after dinner.

Before he could continue, Miriam cut in brightly, "This scarf looks perfect on you, Mr. Moss. Whoever made it clearly has some skill with their hands."

Wesley flicked Gabriela a sidelong glance, his voice flat and unreadable. "Not bad."

The words pierced Gabriela harder than she expected. She had spent two full days knitting the thing, and all she got in return was "not bad"? Loretta had said he liked it—so why didn't it sound like it at all?

Miriam leaned forward, unwilling to let it go. "Wait, isn't that the scarf Gabriela knitted? How did it end up with you?"

Wesley gave a slight nod. "She kept insisting, leaving me no choice but to accept."

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When Wesley finished speaking, Gabriela stayed composed—but Brenden looked as if he'd been struck, staring at her in disbelief. He'd only told her not to contact him anymore, and she'd gone and given the scarf to his cousin. Even if she had been rejected, shouldn't there have been a period of heartbreak, of struggling to move on before starting something new?

Resentment burned in Brenden as he glared at Gabriela through the entire dinner. Gabriela, meanwhile, felt tense. She knew she shouldn't have agreed to Loretta's request—Brenden was clearly unhappy. If he broadcast their one-night stand now, she could lose her job.

She decided to placate him. "Mr. Saunders, you seem unwell. Are your legs bothering you? I know a way to ease the pain..."

Brenden scoffed coldly. "No need." If she no longer cared for him, why pretend to be concerned?

Wesley's expression shifted as well. He glanced at Brenden's shorter legs, then at his own longer ones. What was wrong with having long legs? Why didn't Gabriela like them?

After dinner, Gabriela wanted to clarify the scarf misunderstanding to keep Brenden from saying anything reckless. Brenden was lurking near the artificial rock. Before she could approach, he waved her off dramatically. "Stay back. Since you chose to give the scarf to Wesley, commit to him fully."

Gabriela hurried to explain, "Mr. Saunders, you've got it wrong. It's not what you think."

Brenden's mind raced with an audacious thought. Had Gabriela given the scarf to his cousin deliberately to spark his jealousy? To capture his attention, she dared to provoke Wesley. How bold!

With a grave expression, Brenden said, "Gabriela, Wesley's not someone to trifle with. Keep your distance."

Gabriela was stunned. Was he losing it? Why was he saying things she couldn't understand?

Brenden continued, "I stand by what I said. Do not approach me in private again. And don't provoke Wesley again, whatever your motives. Understood?"

His warning tone weighed heavily on Gabriela. She knew Brenden wouldn't just stand by if she got close to Wesley. She quickly clarified, "Your grandmother asked me to deliver the scarf..."

"I don't want excuses. Leave," he insisted.

"I'll go, but can you promise not to tell Mr. Moss about us?"

Brenden's eyes widened. She was using Wesley to make him jealous but feared Wesley finding out. So timid, yet she'd gone to such lengths for him. How could he betray her? He bristled. "What do you take me for? You think I'd spread gossip like that?"

With Brenden's assurance, Gabriela was eager to put distance between them.

Meanwhile, Wesley had been quietly pleased with the scarf—yet as dinner concluded, Gabriela's attention never once flickered in his direction. His mood soured further. Post-dinner, he skipped reading and an important gathering, choosing instead to change in his room.

Glancing at the scarf, his irritation grew. He grabbed his phone and messaged Gabriela. "Can't sleep. Read something to me."

Gabriela regretted not recording their earlier talk when she received the WhatsApp message from "NotASaunders." Determined not to give in, she sent a voice message. "You jerk! Get one of your friends to read to you. I warn you, if you harass me again, you'll regret it."

Unsatisfied, she resolved to confront Brenden in person.

Chapter 188

At that moment, Brenden was being pulled by Loretta for more exercise. His legs trembled, and using a bathroom break as an excuse, he rushed to Wesley for help. He hoped Wesley could intervene; continuing like this would leave him exhausted.

"Wesley, save me!" Brenden burst into Wesley's room without knocking, as was his habit.

He overheard a voice message playing on Wesley's phone. "You jerk!"

Wesley didn't seem offended. In fact, he looked almost pleased. Who was this woman daring to scold Wesley? The voice sounded familiar. But that wasn't the point. Brenden realized that Wesley actually enjoyed being scolded—perhaps only by women.

"Why didn't you knock?" Wesley asked, frowning.

Under that cold gaze, Brenden's back straightened. He blurted an apology and hurried out to process this new information. Wesley rubbed his temple and locked the door. Brenden's manners were atrocious—perhaps he needed not just a trainer, but an etiquette tutor.

When Gabriela came looking for Brenden, she found his door wide open. He sat on the bed, muttering to himself. She couldn't make out every word, but caught fragments: "I was wrong... only by women..."

A chill crept over her. Was Brenden a completely different person at night? Could he have a split personality? Or was there some mental disorder at play? Why did he seem like one person in daylight and someone entirely different once night fell?

She slowly backed away, holding her breath, and returned to her room. How terrifying. The Moss family was full of secrets, and she'd only been here a few days. If they realized how much she knew, would they silence her?

The thought sent another shiver down her spine as she looked again at the reading request. She shouldn't provoke someone who might have two personalities. Picking up her phone, she sent a new voice message in a softer tone. "Mr. Saunders, I wasn't in a good mood earlier. My tone was harsh, I'm sorry. Which book would you like me to read?"

Wesley listened to the deliberately sweetened voice and let out a cold laugh. He typed out a line from the book, instructing her to find that exact edition: "But every once in a while, you find someone who's iridescent, and when you do, nothing will ever compare."

Gabriela paused. It was from a book she had once loved, but had lost and nearly forgotten.

"I don't have that book with me," she typed.

His reply came fast, sharper than before. "If you don't have it, find a way to get it. Apex Group hired you to solve problems, not make excuses."

Gabriela was stunned. Why was Brenden suddenly angry? And besides, it was Wesley who paid her salary, not him. Being his cousin didn't make him special. She was willing to challenge anyone—except Brenden, whose mind she wasn't sure about.

Finding the book online, she started reading to him. Her voice was bright with a touch of sweetness, pleasant to hear. Yet Wesley took no enjoyment from it. Why was she surrendering to his demands so effortlessly? Did no one ever teach her she was allowed to say no? Worse still, after all this time, she still hadn't remembered anything about him. Her memory had more holes than the scarf she'd knitted.

Chapter 189

Wesley ended the voice call, reached for a bottle of wine, and poured a modest half glass before stepping onto the balcony. His heart condition kept alcohol to a rare indulgence, limited to the occasional sip of red wine.

Gently swirling the crimson liquid, he leaned against the railing, gazing at the velvet night sky. A luminous moon glowed overhead, reminiscent of the one that had illuminated his first encounter with Gabriela four years prior.

Those had been the darkest days of his life. Gravely ill, with doctors issuing a grim prognosis, his usually carefree cousin Brenden had wailed as if the heavens were collapsing. Wesley had strictly forbidden

anyone from informing Loretta. His grandfather remained coldly detached, while the rest of the family seemed almost eager for his demise.

In those desolate moments, he would sit alone on his hospital bed, reflecting on how fiercely he had fought to survive, how many trials he had endured—only to remain powerless against death’s approach. It was at the moment he resolved to surrender that Gabriela entered his life. Her eyes were the most mesmerizing he’d ever seen—bright, vibrant, and brimming with vitality.

The day after meeting her, he underwent successful surgery. From then on, Gabriela would stealthily visit him in the hospital. She thought her visits went unnoticed, but he sensed her presence the instant she arrived. On her final visit, she realized she’d been spotted, panicked, and fled, leaving behind a book.

After that, she vanished, and he never saw her again. Four years later, she had come back into his life. There was no need to hurry—after all, they had a lifetime ahead.

Wesley set down his wineglass, retrieved the book, and opened it on the coffee table.

On Gabriela’s end, the call had cut off abruptly. She fired off a message, “Mr. Saunders, do I no longer need to read the book to you?”

No response came.

Suddenly, she noticed “NotASaunders” had posted a WhatsApp status update. She’d never seen him post before and had even suspected he’d blocked her from his feed. Curiosity piqued, she opened it and saw a photo.

On a balcony sat a small table, holding half a glass of red wine and a book. Gabriela's lips curved into a pout. Brenden, usually a playboy, revealed an unexpectedly romantic side under the night's veil.

Her eyes sharpened suddenly. The book on the table looked familiar. Zooming in, she confirmed it was the same book she'd been reading moments earlier. It was open to a page with a wavy blue underline highlighting the exact line that "NotASaunders" had sent her earlier: "But every once in a while, you find someone who's iridescent, and when you do, nothing will ever compare."

Gabriela magnified the image further and spotted her name scrawled beside the highlighted line. Was this her book? The handwriting wasn't hers. What was Brenden playing at?

She scrutinized the photo again. The balcony felt oddly familiar, but she couldn't pinpoint why. After minutes of racking her brain, she gave up and messaged "NotASaunders" again. "Should I keep reading?"

Still, no reply came.

Just as Wesley posted the photo, a knock sounded at the door. Loretta stood there, holding a bowl of soup. "Wesley, you've looked exhausted lately. I made this for you and Brenden to—"

"Boost your strength. Drink it," she urged.

Wesley sighed. "I was just about to turn in, Grandma."

Since his previous serious illness, Loretta had taken to crafting all manner of peculiar tonics for him. He appreciated her care but inwardly recoiled at the thought of consuming them.

Loretta fixed him with a stern glare. “No excuses. Drink it. Brenden’s already finished his. Don’t make me repeat myself.”

Resigned, Wesley took the bowl and swallowed its contents in one go, wincing at the bitter taste. Only when the bowl was empty did Loretta depart, satisfied.

The concoction left a warmth spreading through him. Remembering how he’d cut off Gabriela’s call, Wesley checked his phone and saw two unread messages. Had she grown addicted to reading to him?

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His gaze cooled. He finished his wine and poured another. After three glasses, the heat of the alcohol spread through him, making his entire body feel extremely warm. He switched off the heater and leaned back on the sofa.

The moment he closed his eyes, the memory of that night surged back—Gabriela beneath him, soft and obedient, letting him take his fill. Those intimate images replaying in his mind made him feel increasingly restless. He suddenly rose and headed for the bathroom. Even after a shower, the heat wouldn’t fade. A dull ache pulsed at his temples, and drowsiness crept in. He hadn’t felt like this in years, not since he began taking meticulous care of his health.

Ten minutes passed, and instead of fading, the discomfort worsened. Wesley got dressed and decided he needed to see a doctor.

Outside his bedroom, Loretta and Miriam spoke in low voices.

"I just hope Wesley's body can take it," Loretta murmured, concern flickering in her eyes.

Miriam replied, "Don't worry."

When she decided the timing was right, she nudged Loretta toward the next step of their plan.

Loretta glanced at the dishes and the bowl of soup she was holding. "We've used this trick before. Will it still work?"

"Trust me," Miriam said confidently.

Just as their conversation ended, Brenden appeared, face flushed. He tugged at his collar, fanning himself. "What did you give me earlier, Loretta? I feel hot all over."

"What exactly is wrong?" Loretta asked quickly.

Brenden hesitated, embarrassed. "Just... warm. Everywhere."

“That’s a good thing! It’s a normal reaction after having that tonic soup.” Loretta shot him a glare. “If you’re not going to practice your exercises, then stay in your room and behave.”

Thinking back to the day’s training, Brenden’s knees went weak. His muscles still ached from practice—he wasn’t going anywhere. Defeated, he returned to his room.

Meanwhile, Gabriela emerged from her shower and noticed “NotASaunders” still hadn’t replied. Unbothered, she grabbed her hair dryer, ready to go to bed after drying her hair.

Suddenly, a loud crash sounded from outside. She quickly opened her door to look. Her room was right next to Wesley’s, and as she stepped out, she saw him standing in his doorway. His hair was still damp, yet he was neatly dressed in a white shirt and black trousers, a suit jacket draped over his arm—looking ready to go out. His expression was hard, his irritation plain.

Loretta stood beside him, her expression equally displeased. Gabriela frowned as her gaze landed on the shattered plates scattered across the floor in Wesley’s room.

What now?

Gabriela instantly regretted stepping outside, not wanting to get involved in their argument.

She was about to retreat when Loretta spotted her. “Gabriela, come here.”

Remembering how Loretta had recently coaxed her into sharing a room with Wesley, Gabriela felt reluctant to approach her. As she tried to think of an excuse, Loretta came over and lowered her voice. "I just brought some food to Wesley, but I accidentally dropped the plates."

Gabriela thought it was hardly worth fussing over.

Loretta went on, "Wesley is upset with me. Could you please help clean it up?"

Gabriela nodded. "No problem."

Loretta patted her hand. "Sorry to trouble you. I'll give you a gift tomorrow."

If things went according to plan tonight, Loretta intended to give her far more than a gift—perhaps even Wesley himself.

Gabriela stepped into Wesley's room and began gathering the broken pieces. Her eyes wandered toward the small balcony table. She hesitated, then stepped closer. A half-full glass of red wine and an open book sat there.

Gabriela froze.

It was no wonder the balcony in the photo shared by “NotASaunders” had looked familiar—it was Wesley’s balcony.

Could it be that “NotASaunders” was Wesley all along?