

His kiss 191

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Gabriela's mind churned with restless thoughts. She even controlled her breathing, wary that Wesley might somehow realize she had already uncovered the truth.

Wesley's voice suddenly cut through the air—cold, clipped, and distant. “Grandma, don't lock the door. I'm not going in.”

Gabriela froze, her chaotic thoughts settling into a tense stillness. Yet, for reasons she couldn't quite name, a faint sting lingered in her chest. Wesley's treatment of her was needlessly harsh, his disdain barely concealed. And it wasn't as if Loretta's actions were malicious; everything she did was for his sake. Why, then, did he respond with such biting indifference?

If he carried himself with more maturity—like someone truly ready to build a life with a partner—perhaps Loretta wouldn't feel compelled to worry and fuss over him every single day.

Swallowing her frustration, Gabriela forced herself to gather the shattered porcelain, each piece cold and jagged against her fingers, eager to retreat to her room once she was done. But Miriam stopped her with a gentle touch and said, “Gabriela, Mrs. Larson made some nourishing soup tonight. Come downstairs and have a bowl.”

Still distracted, Gabriela followed Miriam down the staircase, her mind moving through a fog.

Once they had left, Loretta planted her hands on her hips and launched into a scolding aimed at Wesley. Her reprimand went on for a solid three minutes before Wesley's expression soured.

A wave of discomfort swept through him. He couldn't decide if it was the lingering effect of the soup or the wine he had drunk earlier, but heat pulsed through his body, leaving him restless. He had already changed clothes, intending to slip out to see a private doctor quietly.

Initially, he had hoped to avoid attracting attention—planning to leave and return without anyone noticing. But Loretta had insisted on preparing a midnight snack and personally delivering it to his room. The unnecessary commotion killed his mood for the doctor's visit. What he wanted now was simply the quiet relief of a bed.

Resigned, he admitted fault, offering enough contrition for Loretta to ease her lecture—though she remained firm about one condition: he could not return to the master bedroom.

"There may still be some shards in your room, so you can't sleep there tonight. Go stay with your cousin for the night."

"Impossible!" Wesley's voice carried sharp finality. His mild obsession with cleanliness made the idea unbearable—especially since Brenden snored like a saw through wood.

Loretta countered, "Then sleep in the next room."

Without waiting for his reply, she guided him into another room. Wesley settled onto the soft bed, inhaling the subtle aroma of scented candles. Something about it felt oddly out of place. Yet, since Loretta hadn't insisted on him sharing a room with Gabriela, he reluctantly decided to make do with this room for just one night.

Perhaps Loretta had truly broken those plates by accident. Maybe he really had been overthinking the whole matter.

At that moment, Wesley's thoughts lacked their usual sharpness. Weariness overtook him, and he eventually collapsed onto the bed, closing his eyes until sleep claimed him.

Meanwhile, Gabriela returned to her room after finishing the soup in the dining room with Miriam. Her mind felt clouded, as if wrapped in fog, and she longed for quiet to sort through the link between Wesley and "NotASaunders."

When she made her way upstairs, Loretta blocked her from returning to her own bedroom, offering an odd explanation. "Gabriela, tonight you need to stay away from Wesley's bedroom, now that he is in a sour mood. Please sleep in another room."

Without questioning Loretta's strange reasoning, Gabriela headed straight to the room she'd been assigned.

Inside, she left the light off, sitting in the darkness while scrolling through her old chats with "NotASaunders." There weren't many. From the start, "NotASaunders" had known about her one-night stand with Brenden. Maybe Brenden had told Wesley about it. Perhaps Wesley had added her on WhatsApp purely for his own amusement, tossing out outrageous requests just to tease her.

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The more Gabriela thought about it, the hotter her anger burned. She had stumbled into the wrong room once—and she'd been drunk. She had never wanted to sleep with Brenden. Did Wesley really need to torment her like this?

Her frustration boiled over. Seething, she flopped onto the bed, flailing her arms and legs in exasperation.

Then a strange sensation swept over her. The air carried a faint trace of alcohol, mingled with the unmistakable presence of another person. Someone was in the room.

Her pulse spiked. She snapped on the bedside lamp and turned her head—only to find Wesley lying on the other side of the bed. Her stomach dropped. Instinct screamed at her to run. What if Wesley believed she had deliberately entered his room?

She bolted toward the door—then froze at a soft groan, heavy with discomfort. Loretta had mentioned Wesley hadn't been feeling well in recent days.

Gabriela hesitated. Even though she was furious with him for playing the role of “NotASaunders,” he had been kind to her. He had secured her future with a generous advance—ten years' worth of salary—giving her the confidence to stand her ground against Phyllis and Marie. To her, Wesley was far more than just an employer.

Wesley shifted again, a low, pained sound escaping his lips.

Gabriela bit her lip, concern slowly overtaking her simmering anger. She stepped closer and asked softly, “Mr. Moss, are you okay?”

There was no reply.

She climbed onto the bed and gave him a careful push. “Mr. Moss, are you feeling unwell?”

Even through the thin fabric of his white shirt, she felt an intense heat radiating from him. Alarm prickled through her, and she quickly reached out to touch his forehead. It was burning.

A fever?

Yet his condition didn’t match the usual signs. Could it be...

Her mind flashed to the picture of the wine glass, the faint aroma of alcohol still lingering in the air, and she drew her conclusion—Wesley was drunk.

The possibility left her at a loss for words. She hadn’t even been here for a week, and already she had discovered just how peculiar this family could be. Loretta clung to strangely old-fashioned beliefs, Brenden might have a split personality, and Wesley—well, he was not interested in women. And yet, despite knowing he had a heart condition, he still chose to get drunk at night.

The wealthy truly seemed to have a reckless love for danger.

With a resigned sigh, Gabriela decided to fetch a towel to cool him down. Before doing that, she tried the door, but—just as she expected—it was locked from the outside.

Another sigh escaped her. She would have to tell Loretta, plainly and directly, that Wesley's disinterest in women wasn't something she could fix. Even if they were locked in together for ten days, it wouldn't make a difference.

Settling beside Wesley, she pulled out her phone and began recording. "Mr. Moss, you're drunk right now, and the door's locked, so I can't leave. I'm only here to take care of you, not because I snuck in."

Once she had her video evidence, Gabriela set to work, gently wiping Wesley's face. His brow stayed tightly furrowed. He was in clear discomfort, his body burning with heat. Then the soft press of the warm towel against his forehead seemed to ease him, like a calming balm reaching his very core.

Suddenly, his hand shot up, gripping the slender wrist that held the towel. His eyes opened—dark, deep, and more intense than the night beyond the window—glimmering with a dangerous edge.

Gabriela froze. "Mr. Moss, you're awake. I didn't sneak in..."

Fresh from her shower, the faint fragrance of her skin and hair drifted into Wesley's senses, breaking his last shred of restraint. In one swift motion, he rolled over, pinning her beneath him, his grip on her hand unyielding. Her fingers, still caught in his grasp, brushed against the cold metal of his belt buckle as he moved. Gabriela was utterly stunned.

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Gabriela was dressed in a plain, modest nightgown, not a hint of impropriety in sight. Yet her eyes gleamed brightly, and her lips curved with effortless perfection. In that moment, no man could have resisted her allure.

Wesley's voice came low and husky. "Help me undo it."

Her hand was still pinned against the cold belt buckle. Stunned, she couldn't think, her mind fogged as her gaze fixed on the design engraved into the metal. Then came a faint click. They had undone the buckle.

Gabriela's mind went completely blank. "W-what are you doing?" she stammered.

Wesley braced himself with his hands on either side of her, lowering his face toward hers. A strong wave of his scent enveloped her, making her hold her breath in alarm. The heat of his chest, the steady beat of his heart, the strength in his arms—her thoughts blurred, as if her memories had been tossed into a whirlpool.

Why did he feel so unnervingly familiar, like the man who had slept with her for just one night? But wasn't he supposed to be uninterested in women?

Her fingers clutched the fabric of his shirt at his waist, gripping as if to anchor herself. She felt afraid.

Then, just as suddenly, Wesley slumped to the side, pressing the back of his hand to his eyes. A faint red hue rimmed them. He wanted her—but he couldn't allow himself to act on it.

Gabriela seized the moment to scramble off the bed, putting as much space between them as she could.

His voice came rough and strained, heavy with restraint. "Get out!"

Gabriela was frustrated.

There was no chance anything would happen between them since he wasn't interested in women. But now he seemed to misinterpret the situation, believing she had entered his room on purpose. And the thought of losing her job terrified her.

In a small voice, she explained, "The door was locked from the outside, so I couldn't get out. Your grandmother was the one who let me in."

Wesley exhaled inwardly, realization dawning. Even before those dishes had been broken, this room had been set up. The whole thing had been premeditated. He couldn't bring himself to be angry with Loretta or Miriam, but their schemes had certainly unsettled Gabriela.

When Wesley said nothing, Gabriela hurriedly pulled up the video she had recorded earlier. "I only realized someone was here after I came in. Please, take a look..."

She held out her phone to him. As she leaned closer, that subtle fragrance of hers drifted between them again. Wesley felt the heat inside him spike. It had taken all his self-control to keep his passion in check and let her go. Now, here she was, closing the distance. Did she really not see him as a man at all?

Frustration twisted through him. His hand shot out, gripping hers with such force it nearly crushed her bones. The memory of their once-shared passion surged back. His restraint crumbled—he wanted only to claim her again.

Gabriela, entirely focused on explaining the situation, never expected his sudden shift in mood. She tried to pull her hand away, but his grip was immovable.

“Mr. Moss, please don’t be upset. I’ll call your grandmother now to have her come unlock the door.”

Her voice was soft, almost pleading, and his heart yielded despite himself. He slowly loosened his grip. He knew there was little chance the call would connect.

And, sure enough, the moment the call to Loretta went through, it was cut off. The connection was dead when Gabriela tried again.

A hollow feeling settled in her chest. She was still furious at Wesley for impersonating Brenden just to tease her, yet Loretta’s schemes had muddled the entire situation. She didn’t know what Loretta had done this time, and now the door was closed and Wesley was acting strangely.

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But then—something felt off. Gabriela became acutely aware that she, too, didn’t feel quite right. A slow warmth was spreading through her body.

Wesley’s sharp gaze caught her change immediately, and his thoughts darted to the soup Miriam had insisted she drink earlier. He asked in a soft tone, “Gabriela, do you like me?”

If they both harbored feelings for each other, there would be no reason to keep holding back.

Gabriela, who had been struggling to suppress the growing discomfort in her body, felt a sudden chill creep over her at Wesley's question. Was he testing her again? She shook her head quickly, almost instinctively. "No, I don't."

The truth was, although her heart now raced every time she saw Wesley, she never allowed herself to indulge in unrealistic fantasies.

Her firm denial brought a wave of frustration to Wesley's chest. His handsome features hardened. She claimed she didn't like him, yet she had slipped into the hospital to see him, fretted over his health every single day, and cooked for him without fail. What exactly did she take him for?

Wesley extended his hand with cool indifference. "Give me your phone."

The atmosphere in the room seemed to grow heavier in an instant. Gabriela stayed silent and obediently placed the phone in his palm. Wesley called his private doctor, Melvin Reed, instructing him to come over immediately. "I truly apologize for the late-hour request, but I really need your help."

Though Wesley's tone was polite, Melvin knew better than to delay. He arrived at the estate in less than half an hour. When Loretta saw him step inside, a flicker of alarm crossed her face, and she hurried to unlock the door for Wesley and Gabriela.

Wesley's expression was as cold as winter frost, and Gabriela looked uncomfortable. Everyone shifted into the living room. After a brief examination, Melvin said, "The tonic soup, along with the wine consumed, caused him some discomfort. But it's not serious. I'll prescribe something for Mr. Moss and Miss Haynes. Once they take it and get a good night's sleep, they should be fine by morning."

No one spoke, except Gabriela, who, true to her polite nature, thanked him softly. From Melvin's perspective, Gabriela seemed to have been dragged into this unwillingly. Wesley's expression was downright frightening. Who could say whether he might send her away from the estate tomorrow?

Inside, Melvin was filled with numerous thoughts, yet he maintained his composure on the surface. He handed over the prescription, advising them both to drink plenty of water, then left quickly.

Wesley instructed Gabriela to take the medicine first, then said, "You may return to the bedroom."

Just as she turned to leave, his voice cut through the air. "Your own room."

The icy tone made Gabriela shiver. She gave a quick reply and hurried upstairs.

In the living room, Loretta and Miriam sat watching Wesley take his medication, both realizing they were in trouble. Despite their age, they now looked like children caught in mischief, heads bowed, hardly daring to breathe.

Wesley's anger eased slightly. He spoke in a firm, measured voice. "Miriam, Grandma, I asked you not to interfere in my private affairs, but you didn't listen. You really frightened Gabriela tonight."

He remembered especially the moment earlier when his belt buckle had been undone—her face had turned pale in an instant, as if she saw him as nothing more than a monster. Rubbing his temples, Wesley fought to keep his composure. It was partly his fault—his self-control hadn't been strong enough.

Loretta quickly lifted her head, worry in her voice. "What should we do then?"

"Nothing," Wesley said evenly, straightening his collar. "She might go home tomorrow."

She had been so shaken that it would hardly be surprising if she chose to leave.

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"No way!" Loretta and Miriam blurted it out together.

Gabriela wasn't just a good catch; she was the one they'd both been quietly guarding like treasure. Letting her walk away? Unthinkable.

"You really think a little 'no' is going to stop her? She's my employee, not my property. Where she goes is not up to me," Wesley replied, his voice flat as glass.

A flicker of panic crossed Loretta's face. "You're her boss! Find a way to keep her here!"

"I'm just her boss, nothing else," he said, the words clipped and sharp.

For the first time, his irritation simmered beneath the surface. The sheer decisiveness in Gabriela's rejection was maddening.

"Then give her a raise!" Loretta blurted, eyes sparking as inspiration struck. "Not just a little bump—five times her usual pay!"

Wesley let out a derisive snort. Why would he do that? To Gabriela, he was nothing more than the man who signed her paycheck. Quintupling her salary would only cement that cold, professional distance.

"No," he said, voice hard as stone.

Loretta's stomach sank. Their schemes had spectacularly backfired—rather than drawing Wesley closer to Gabriela, they'd practically sent her running for the hills.

Loretta's glare slid toward Miriam, whose eyes narrowed in thought. Then, all at once, Miriam lit up. "Loretta! Fake an illness. Gabriela's got a soft heart, and she won't leave you if she thinks you need care."

Loretta nodded in approval. Perhaps that could work.

Across from them, Wesley's jaw tightened, his face darkening with barely contained fury. "That's enough from both of you. No more ridiculous schemes, and don't scare her again," he said, massaging his temple as though their antics physically pained him.

If Loretta and Miriam could just rein themselves in, everything else would fall into place.

Now that she was his secretary, each day brought another opportunity for them to spend more time together, and he felt confident he could win her over.

Gabriela was heading upstairs, ready to retreat to her room, when she caught sight of Brenden stepping out of Wesley's. His hair was disheveled, and there was a strange flicker in his eyes.

"What was all that racket downstairs? Who dropped by?" he asked.

"Dr. Reed," she replied automatically, then hesitated, brow furrowing. "Why were you in Mr. Moss's room?"

Brenden was familiar with that name. Melvin would make regular visits to check on Wesley. He was feeling uncomfortable, and his patience was running thin, even for Gabriela. "It's my cousin's room. I come and go when I want. Do I need your permission now?"

Gabriela stayed silent, unwilling to push. Then her gaze drifted down to the bottle of red wine dangling from his left hand and the hardcover book clasped in his right.

“Were you drinking in Mr. Moss’s room?” she asked, perplexed.

Wasn’t Wesley a notorious neat freak? Why would he allow Brenden into his room?

“What do you care what I was doing in his room?” Brenden’s voice was sharper now, his restlessness spiking under Gabriela’s steady gaze. The heat still coursed through him, prickling under his skin. He took two brisk steps back, eyes narrowing. “You’re just a secretary. Stick to your lane.”

So what if she had a crush on him? That didn’t give her the right to poke her nose into his business.

Gabriela nodded. After all, Brenden and Wesley were clearly close, and as Wesley’s secretary, it wasn’t her place to interfere.

Piece by piece, the puzzle fit together. “NotASaunders” had to be Brenden after all. So, she’d had it all wrong.

A hot flush of embarrassment crept up her neck. How could she have been so thoughtless? Someone as rigid and maddeningly arrogant as Wesley pretending to be Brenden? Impossible.

She fled to her room, shut the door tight, and collapsed onto the bed. “Sleep,” she ordered herself. “Just sleep.”

But the silence pressed in. The moment she killed the lights, she could almost hear Wesley's deep, husky murmur grazing her ear, warm and intimate, curling under her skin like a secret. "Help me unbutton..." She had helped him unbuckle his belt, hadn't she? Yet he'd still tossed her off the bed without the slightest mercy.

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The more Gabriela replayed it, the more her frustration simmered. She kicked off the covers and sat up. Wesley was truly uninterested in women. Somehow, she felt an inexplicable sense of dismay about that.

She grabbed her water glass and drained it, but her throat still felt parched. Sleep was a lost cause. She padded to the full-length mirror, studying her reflection. She wasn't plain. Actually, far from it. Her figure was decent, her face more than passable. And yet, when their bodies pressed together, Wesley hadn't shown so much as an inkling of desire for her. Infuriating.

But then, the instant his striking features flashed in her mind, her irritation faded into a hollow ache. He was tall, impossibly handsome, wealthy, and carried himself with an elegance that could slice the air. Of course he wouldn't look twice at her.

Gabriela let out a bitter laugh. Back in college, she had only dated Dustin, a despicable man who cheated on her. Then she entered the workforce and quickly fell for her boss—the unforgivable workplace taboo. And Wesley wasn't interested in women at all. She'd even once convinced herself he was pretending to be Brenden. The shame was unbearable. She couldn't face him again, especially after all this. Tomorrow, she'd make her farewells and disappear from this whole mess.

The next morning, Gabriela stepped into the living room and froze. The space, normally serene and quiet, was bustling with people. Even the chef, who had already left for the holidays, had returned. For a house this size, a large staff was expected, but Wesley liked things calm. Usually, the servants kept to the far wings, well out of his way. Seeing them all gathered together, she realized for the first time just how many people it took to run the estate.

It didn't take long to piece together that Wesley was handing out the New Year's gifts. Every year, the tradition was the same: the staff got their presents early, so they could go home and celebrate properly.

Gabriela's planned farewell caught in her throat. She had helped wrap these very boxes, each packed with something extravagant. And, well... it would be a shame to leave without one. So she sidled into the line of servants, aiming to walk away with her own generous parting gift.

As the minutes passed, she listened to the young servants, their cheeks pink, their voices pitched high with excitement.

"Mr. Moss is just as generous as he is handsome!"

"I know! Usually Miriam's the one who hands them out. I can't believe he's doing it himself this year."

"I'm keeping that gift forever."

Gabriela couldn't help but sigh. Poor things. They could moon over him all they wanted, but Wesley wouldn't even give them a second glance.

He moved through the line briskly, each gift handed off with practiced efficiency. Then, at last, it was Gabriela's turn. A sidelong glance, and then, without a word, the box slid right past her hands and into the next person's waiting arms. It was as if she were invisible to him.

Soon enough, the last box was handed over.

Gabriela blinked in disbelief. “Don’t I get one, Mr. Moss?”

The expectant glint in her eyes made Wesley’s mouth twitch, half in irritation, half in reluctant amusement. After everything that had gone down last night, she still had the gall to stand in line with a composed expression as if nothing had occurred.

His answer was merciless. “The gifts are prepared for the household staff. And technically...” His gaze lingered on her just long enough to sting. “You’re just a temp. Not an official employee.”

The warmth drained from Gabriela’s expression, her smile freezing in place. Wesley, of course, enjoyed every second of it—watching her seethe behind a composed mask, knowing she couldn’t lash out.

Leaning in just enough to make sure she caught the words, he added, his tone all stern authority with a spark of mischief underneath, “Which means—you get nothing.”

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Him

Gabriela stood on the brink of losing her temper.

Her voice rose with sharp insistence. “Mr. Moss, I’m a full-time employee of Apex Group!” Her eyes flicked toward Brenden, frustration boiling over. “Even Mr. Saunders received a gift!”

Why was she the only one being excluded?

Brenden, pulled unwillingly into the quarrel while merely sitting there, straightened at once and replied with practiced calm, “Oh please, Gabriela, Wesley is my cousin. Why would it be strange for him to give me a gift?” As he spoke, he gave her a deliberate blink—a silent warning not to press further.

In Brenden’s view, Gabriela truly did not know her place. How dare she show such disrespect to Wesley? He resolved that he would have a serious talk with her later.

Wesley, however, found the scene oddly entertaining.

The night before, she had been meek as a frightened kitten, yet now she suddenly felt bold enough to outright demand a gift from him.

Deciding to toy with her, Wesley leaned back, his lips curving. “Gabriela, say something nice and I might consider giving you a gift too.”

Gabriela hesitated.

Her gaze dropped to the floor, then drifted back to Wesley—the elegant, wealthy man burdened with heart troubles. A flicker of sympathy stirred in her chest.

After a thoughtful pause, she spoke with plain sincerity. “Mr. Moss, I hope that in the year ahead, and in every year to come, only good things find their way to you, and that misfortune stays far away. May everything unfold exactly as you wish.”

Wesley’s fingers froze mid-motion.

Gabriela’s eyes held such unguarded honesty that he could not doubt she meant every word.

He retrieved a gift box and handed it to her.

“The same wishes for you,” he murmured softly.

Gabriela accepted her gift with unguarded delight, her expression almost childlike.

It had been rare for her to receive a gift since she was eight years old.

Even when Josh bothered to buy presents, Phyllis always found a way to snatch them away.

But ever since joining Apex Group, everything had changed—she received thoughtful gifts, and, most importantly, she now had a seven-figure bank account to her name.

To her, Wesley was more than just a boss. He was the miracle who had turned her life around.

She vowed to stay by his side for as long as she could.

The thought of going home had completely vanished the moment she received a gift from Wesley.

One by one, the servants slowly drifted out of the grand manor.

Gabriela's phone suddenly rang—it was Josh, calling her back home for the family's New Year's Eve dinner.

He murmured, "Gabriela, Marie and Phyllis have realized their mistakes. I will have them apologize to you."

Gabriela had no desire to return. No matter how hard Josh tried, she refused outright.

Phyllis's name still burned across every trending list. Fearing that anyone might recognize her if she stepped outside, she barricaded herself indoors.

Gabriela sneered. Now they wanted her to come back home—who knew what kind of trap they might be setting for her?

When her husband's persuasion failed, Marie abruptly seized the phone. A forced smile stretched across her lips as she cooed with syrupy sweetness, "Gabriela, Phyllis was wrong before. Young people can be impulsive at times, can't they? She has been reflecting these past few days and wishes to apologize to you in person."

"And then?" Gabriela's reply was blunt, her tone sharp. "Secretly take a video and post it online to create the illusion of reconciliation? Aunt Marie, that won't do Phyllis any good. At most, it will only make me appear generous and forgiving."

Marie's expression froze, the smile faltering before her voice turned cold. "You think that with Mr. Moss backing you, you can throw your weight around? I'm your family. When I tell you to return, you must do as I say! Because of your actions, Phyllis is living in fear behind locked doors. What more do you want from—"

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Gabriela's words cut like glass. "I refuse to recognize a shameless thief as family. You stole what was mine and squandered it on your gambling addiction."

Marie's face darkened at the jab. Fury flared, and she spat, "You little bastard. Don't think you are untouchable. Since you refuse to settle this peacefully, then be prepared for what's coming."

With a sharp snap, Gabriela hung up. She had no intention of enduring Marie's senseless scolding.

Marie, blinded by rage, seemed to lose all reason. Right in front of Josh, she hurled the word “bastard” at Gabriela.

Josh froze in shock before snapping, “Marie, how could you say that to Gabriela?”

Marie sneered with disdain. “Calling her a bastard was generous. If not for her, we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

Gabriela’s revelation of their scandals had left scars. Because of her, not only was Phyllis dragged through the mud online, but even the company’s business had taken a hit.

Several clients canceled projects right before the holiday, leaving Marie with painful losses.

All of it, she believed, was the fault of that wretched girl, Gabriela.

By now, Marie had completely lost her composure, unbothered to hide her disdain for Gabriela in front of her husband.

Josh was struck by a surge of anger. He stammered “you” repeatedly, unable to form a complete sentence.

When he remembered the trusting gaze of his sister before her death, guilt twisted through him—and he raised his hand and struck Marie across the face. “Don’t you dare insult Gabriela like that. She is my niece! Everything we enjoy now was left behind by my sister.”

The slap landed with such force that blood appeared at the corner of Marie’s mouth.

Phyllis stood frozen in shock.

Her father, who had always bent to her mother’s will and obeyed without protest, had just hit her mother—for Gabriela’s sake!

“Dad, you’ve gone too far!” Furious, Phyllis glared at Josh before rushing to help Marie back to her room.

Mother and daughter locked themselves away and did not emerge again for the rest of the day, leaving Josh alone in the vast hall, hollow and lost.

He felt the weight of guilt pressing down on him—toward his sister, toward Gabriela. Yet he also knew violence against his wife was inexcusable. A man should never raise his hand against his wife.

The villa fell into a heavy silence, the cold of resentment hanging in the air.

But over at Moss Manor, warmth and joy thrived. Gabriela joined Loretta and Miriam in the kitchen, rolling out pastry dough for savory hand pies and simmering spiced cider.

She noticed Loretta preparing an unusual version—chicken pot pies filled with celery.

Meanwhile, Miriam entered with a plump pumpkin in her arms, announcing she was making a hearty pumpkin stew.

When Gabriela glanced at the ingredients, she spotted artichokes, chanterelle mushrooms, and smoked ham.

She asked curiously, “Mrs. Larson, who are the celery pies for?”

She knew well that Wesley never touched celery.

“We have a guest arriving later. She loves these,” Loretta said, her tone softening, eyes warm with tenderness. “After dinner, I’ll pack all the celery pies for her to take home and enjoy.”

Gabriela’s interest was piqued.

She had been living at the estate for some time but had never met anyone from the Moss family apart from Brenden.

Who could this guest possibly be?

Around five in the evening, a quiet, young woman arrived.

She looked to be no more than twenty, delicate and sweet in appearance. She was blind and used a white cane to guide her way.

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The question startled Gabriela.

She hadn't uttered a word, yet Myah had somehow sensed her presence despite being unable to see.

Gabriela quickly responded, "Nice to meet you, Miss Espinoza. I'm Gabriela—Mr. Moss's secretary. During the New Year, I've been lending a hand in the kitchen."

Her explanation came out longer than necessary, as if she worried Myah might misinterpret her presence, which drew a faint crease across Wesley's brow.

When Myah heard her name, her hand faltered, and the color drained slightly from her cheeks. Her voice sharpened with urgency. "Gabriela? You're from the Haynes family?"

Gabriela blinked. “Yes, that’s me.”

Myah pressed, her tone tinged with agitation. “Don’t you know who I am? It’s me—Myah.”

Wesley stiffened at once, his eyes flicking toward Gabriela. The rest of the room exchanged puzzled looks.

Gabriela’s mind went blank, her voice faltering. “I’m sorry, I don’t recall ever meeting you. You must be confusing me with someone else.”

At her denial, Myah’s expression crumpled. She lowered her head for several seconds before slowly lifting her face again. “My apologies. I thought your voice sounded familiar, but I must have been mistaken. After so many years, it’s possible her voice has changed.”

The faint disappointment in her expression stirred a trace of sympathy in Gabriela, who quickly offered reassurance. “It’s alright.”

Myah lapsed into silence again.

Miriam emerged from the kitchen carrying the dishes, her voice brisk as she called everyone to the table.

During the meal, the household's attention remained largely fixed on Myah. She, however, spoke sparingly, maintaining a polite reserve throughout.

When she finally tasted the pumpkin stew, her lips curved faintly. "This stew is wonderful. Mrs. Larson, your cooking seems to get better every year."

Loretta laughed warmly. "Actually, Gabriela prepared it this time. Her touch outshines mine these days."

Myah paused, taken aback. "Gabriela made this?"

Gabriela offered a gentle smile. "Mm-hmm. If you enjoyed it, come by more often and I'll make it again for you."

"Thanks, Gabriela," Myah murmured, her voice barely above a whisper, before retreating back into silence.

Once the meal ended, she rose almost at once, insisting she had to be going.

Loretta coaxed gently, "Myah, why don't you spend the New Year here at the estate? Your room's already waiting for you."

Myah gave a small shake of her head, her voice quiet but firm. "I appreciate it, but I feel more at ease on my own."

Knowing the weight Myah carried inside, Loretta didn't argue further. Instead, she carefully packed some food and passed it to Delia, repeating her instructions to watch over Myah with extra care.

Myah reassured Loretta, "Even without Delia, I'm capable of looking after myself. You don't have to keep treating me like I'm helpless."

Loretta, however, couldn't shake her concern. She hovered beside her, walking her to the car.

After Myah settled into the seat, Loretta's face clouded with sadness. She sighed over and over, whispering, "That poor girl..."

Wesley also seemed downcast. Once dinner ended, he withdrew straight into the study and stayed there.

Gabriela, meanwhile, found herself intrigued by Myah. The moment Myah heard her name, she had appeared thrilled. And yet, Gabriela knew in her heart she had never seen Myah before. She kept her curiosity tightly reined in, refraining from prying for more information about Myah.

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After dinner, she wandered the garden paths, letting the crisp night air and the scent of pine ease the heaviness of her meal, before retreating to her room to rest.

The estate carried a subdued air—no one seemed inclined to stay up and welcome the New Year.

She considered calling Aubrey on video. Her thoughts were interrupted when Miriam slipped inside.

“Gabriela, didn’t it stir even a little curiosity in you, seeing Myah here today?” Miriam asked, watching her closely, aware of the feelings Gabriela harbored for Wesley.

Most women might have felt a twinge of jealousy seeing another young woman arrive at the estate and receive such affection from Wesley. Gabriela, however, stayed perfectly composed.

Gabriela gave her head a small shake, signaling she had no interest in gossip.

Even though Gabriela claimed not to be curious, Miriam still worried she might get the wrong idea about Wesley and Myah. Wanting to clear the air, she offered a brief explanation. “Wesley owes his life to Myah’s brother.”

Her words trailed off into silence, her expression clouded with a wistful melancholy, as if some sad memory had surfaced. That hint of sorrow drew Gabriela in, and she asked gently, “And what happened to Myah’s brother? Why wasn’t he here for dinner?”

“He’s gone,” Miriam answered with a weary sigh, her voice weighted with sorrow. “Such a good boy—but his life ended far too young, barely past twenty. Poor Myah... she and her brother only had each other, and when he passed, she was left utterly alone.”

Before his death, Myah's brother had asked Wesley to take care of her.

Wesley had tried to bring Myah into the estate, but no matter how many times he persuaded her, she refused. So he bought her a house in another neighborhood and arranged for several maids to care for her.

Miriam fell silent after that, carefully avoiding any mention of how Myah's brother had died, as if the subject itself carried a shadow no one dared disturb. Gabriela sensed it wasn't something she should pry into—every family, especially one this powerful, had its share of secrets. Sometimes ignorance was the safest shield.

When Miriam finally spoke again, she gave Gabriela's hand a gentle pat, her tone quiet but earnest. "Mr. Moss is in low spirits today. If you can spare a little time, would you sit with him for a while?"

Gabriela gave a quick nod. "Alright."

Only after agreeing did it dawn on her—what business did a secretary like her have trying to lift his spirits?

Still, since Miriam had asked, Gabriela rose from her seat, warmed a cup of milk, and carried it carefully toward Wesley's study. The door lingered ajar, the silence behind it heavy.

Inside, Brenden sat with his head bowed like a schoolboy caught in trouble. As Gabriela approached, Wesley's sharp voice cut through the silence, laced with irritation. "Touch my things without permission again, and you'll regret it."

