

His kiss 201

Chapter 201

“Sorry, Gabriela,” Brenden muttered as he fled, guilt etched across his face.

Left standing by the desk, Gabriela rested her hands stiffly at her sides, waiting for Wesley to speak. When the silence stretched unbearably, she broke it in a low voice. “Mr. Moss, what would you like me to do?”

Wesley finally lifted his head from the book he’d been leafing through, his dark gaze locking with hers.

For a moment, his eyes glimmered with a depth that felt both unreadable and oddly tender.

Everything about him looked immaculate, and from where she stood, he seemed almost dangerously handsome.

Her chest fluttered, her cheeks flushed crimson, and her heart betrayed her with a sharp, unsteady skip.

Catching her flustered expression, Wesley’s mouth curved, and he let out a low chuckle as he extended the book toward her. “Read to me.”

Her fingers brushed the cover as she accepted it, a jolt of recognition ran through her.

Wasn't this the very same book that "NotASaunders" shared in his post? Did that mean both Wesley and Brenden shared the same strange fondness—being read to from this particular book?

While Gabriela tried to steady herself, Wesley never looked away. His gaze lingered on her face, examining every flicker of emotion.

Although Gabriela felt uneasy, she hid it behind a façade of composure.

The corners of his brows tightened.

She knew this book—he was certain of it. Then why was she feigning ignorance?

The book's weight pressed into Gabriela's palms, its presence oddly familiar.

Perhaps it was because she had once owned the same book.

When she flipped open the cover, her eyes landed on a name scribbled in the lower corner—Allan. She found herself wondering who he was.

She flipped to the next page, and an unexpected illustration met her gaze: a saint cloaked in light, arms outstretched as though blessing an endless—

Just as her fingers reached to turn another page, a faint trail of sandalwood, cool and sharp like winter air, signaled Wesley's approach.

The atmosphere shifted instantly, her thoughts scattering like startled birds in flight.

"Start from here." His hand closed gently over hers, guiding the book open to a marked passage.

Gabriela lowered her gaze to the lines he had indicated for her to read.

"Some of us get dipped in flat, some in satin, some in gloss. But every once in a while, you find someone who's iridescent, and when you do, nothing will ever compare."

Gabriela's pulse surged, their close proximity sending an uncontrollable rush through her. She drew back a step, throat tight, then forced herself to steady her voice and begin reading aloud.

Wesley reclined in his black chair, listening in silence, his expression shadowed with thought. The dim corner seemed to swallow him, his presence merging almost seamlessly with the night.

Gabriela noticed the heaviness in his demeanor and realized he truly wasn't in good spirits today. That brief sense of sympathy quickly vanished as her throat grew raw, each word scraping after two relentless days of reading and singing.

Two hours slipped by until her voice finally broke with quiet insistence. “Mr. Moss, it’s already very late. Maybe you should try to rest.”

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Wesley shifted his gaze toward her, the depths of his eyes holding quiet displeasure, the weight of disappointment heavier than his silence.

Gabriela was frustrated. Wesley’s stern expression left no doubt about his displeasure. He reminded her of “NotASaunders” on WhatsApp—always issuing demands, never content with what she offered.

Catching her reluctance, Wesley’s sharp look softened, and he dismissed her gently. “You may go.”

She slipped from the study as though fleeing an unseen pressure. The manor lay in heavy silence. The stillness pressed down until sleep felt impossible.

Her thoughts circled endlessly around the blind girl, Myah. Her mind refused to quiet, pinning her awake beneath the weight of the night.

When morning came, it was New Year’s Day. With the servants gone on holiday, the vast manor seemed even more hollow and deserted.

Gabriela realized that since Myah had shown up, the entire mood in the manor had grown heavy. Even Brenden, usually so irrepressibly carefree, carried a rare weight in his expression.

The first day of the new year slipped by in uneasy silence. They exchanged a few polite greetings, but the lively celebration Gabriela had pictured never arrived. On the second day, a summons from their grandfather compelled Wesley and Brenden to return home for a family dinner.

Gabriela decided she would spend the day visiting Farley instead. Wesley arranged for a driver to take her.

When she reached Farley's home, she was welcomed by the sight of a table overflowing with snacks.

"Happy New Year, Farley!" she greeted warmly.

"Happy New Year to you too, Gabriela!"

Farley passed her a neatly wrapped gift, his face glowing with childlike joy. He hadn't looked this cheerful in years, humming tunelessly as he bustled around the kitchen.

Once the food was ready, the two settled at the narrow dining table, sitting across from each other. Although his dishes weren't exactly refined, Gabriela felt warmed by the simple comfort of his cooking.

He might not have been related by blood, but he was always kind to her—much kinder than Josh had ever been.

“Farley, Marie has agreed to move out after the holidays,” she told him softly.

His head bobbed in approval, eyes crinkling with happiness.

Gabriela went on, her tone steady but full of resolve, “My next step is to slowly take back my mother’s company.”

Back then, without wealth or influence, she had been forced to tolerate Marie’s endless schemes. Now, with three million in savings tucked away, the landscape looked entirely different—she finally had leverage.

She had learned that Marie’s assistant was both a gambler and a notorious womanizer. A man with such weaknesses could be steered easily enough.

Still, the inner workings of the Haynes Group weren’t something Gabriela fully grasped yet. For that, she would need Farley’s guidance.

Hearing her plan, Farley’s whole demeanor shifted. Determination flickered in his eyes as he leaned forward. “Miss Haynes, just tell me what you need.”

She bent closer, lowering her voice as she outlined her ideas. With each word, Farley’s admiration grew.

Gabriela might look gentle and uncomplicated on the surface, but when she set her mind to something, she carried the same sharp edge and brilliance her mother once had.

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After finalizing their next move, Gabriela enjoyed a hearty meal with Farley. Then she carried a deck chair into the courtyard and let herself sink into its gentle embrace beneath the radiant sun.

The sunlight poured over her like liquid gold, warming her skin and brightening the quiet corners of the garden.

Two young olive trees stood sentinel nearby, their branches bowed under the weight of delicate blossoms, filling the air with a heady, sweet fragrance. Gabriela's gaze lingered on the trees, distant and unfocused, as if somewhere else entirely.

Gone was the usual spark of playful innocence in her expression; in its place, her eyes were shadowed, carrying the faintest trace of lingering resentment.

Farley observed her quietly from the side, a soft sigh escaping him.

There had always been a hidden chamber within Gabriela's heart, a shadowed enclave that no light could penetrate.

Since the events of four years ago, she had closed herself off from everyone. Gabriela remained there, still and solitary, until the sun began its slow descent toward the horizon.

Farley strolled over, cradling a jug of homemade wine, his face bright with a mischievous grin. “Gabriela, you have to try my latest batch.”

Her gaze, previously fixed on the olive trees, softened immediately, and she was that sweet, familiar Gabriela once more. She smiled. “Okay, I will take a sip.”

Alcohol always had its peculiar effect on her. While she could usually hold her own, some drinks demanded no more than a single taste to send her reeling, leading to foolish antics she never remembered afterward.

The memory of her last tipsy episode in Wesley’s office still haunted her.

Yet the wine’s rich, intoxicating aroma called to her irresistibly. She found herself unable to resist.

“Relax,” Farley said, pouring the amber liquid into two delicate glasses. “The alcohol isn’t very strong. A couple of sips and you’ll be fine.”

Gabriela, aware that she needed to return to Wesley’s place later, drank with restraint—just two glasses.

As dusk painted the sky, she bid Farley farewell and made her way down the narrow alley, her steps lighter with thoughts of a hopeful future.

She didn't notice the crimson Maserati parked silently along the alley's edge. In the backseat, a young woman with long, dark purple hair leaned back, her oversized sunglasses hiding most of her face. The tight line of her mouth spoke of cold intent.

"Are you sure it's her?" she asked.

The driver, equally masked by sunglasses, gave a curt nod. "Yes. It's her."

A cruel smile twisted the woman's lips. "Hit her. Now."

The driver hesitated, voice low. "Isn't this a bit extreme?"

"What's there to fear?" she snapped. "My brother will take care of the fallout."

A weary sigh escaped the driver. "Shouldn't we check with him—"

"I'm telling you! Go!" she barked, before he could even finish.

Sensing there was no arguing, the driver slammed the accelerator. The red car lunged forward like a predator, aimed at Gabriela.

Instinctively, Gabriela leapt aside, her heart hammering, but the car clipped her, sending her sprawling to the edge of the road.

Pain flared in her elbow as the vehicle roared past, leaving only a fleeting glimpse of a long-haired woman's silhouette in the backseat.

Crouched on the roadside, Gabriela pressed her hand to her throbbing elbow, her mind racing as the red blur disappeared into the distance. Despite her thick coat, her elbow throbbed, each movement sending sharp jolts of pain up her arm.

"Crazy! Who drives in a busy neighborhood like that?" she complained.

The car had vanished too quickly for her to catch the license plate or the occupants' faces; otherwise she would have reported them.

"Are you alright?"

A gentle voice cut through the air, accompanied by a hand extended to help her up.

For reasons she couldn't explain, Gabriela recoiled, avoiding the hand and rising on her own. "I'm fine. Thanks."

She looked up to see a young man standing there, his expression calm, almost casual.

“Looks like that elbow took a hit,” he said softly. “Do you need to go to the hospital?”

Gabriela shook her head. “No need. It’s nothing serious.”

With a polite nod, she thanked him and walked away, quickly booking a car through her phone, which arrived within a few minutes.

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The young man didn’t follow or press further. He simply watched her retreat, a faint smile tugging at his lips as he murmured to himself, “Do I really look like a thug or something?”

Gabriela couldn’t hear him as she was already slipping into the car.

When she returned, only Miriam was left behind, quiet in the vast, empty house. Wesley and Brenden were away at a family dinner, and Loretta had gone back to the countryside.

Gabriela slipped into her room with a first aid kit, carefully dabbing ointment onto her bruised elbow. The sting made her wince, but it was nothing compared to the questions swirling in her mind. She turned the incident over again and again, yet no clear answer surfaced. Aside from Phyllis, she couldn’t think of any woman who held such hatred toward her. And the woman in the car didn’t resemble Vivian at all.

Could it have been nothing more than some spoiled rich girl tearing through the streets, reckless and thoughtless?

That would be far too convenient.

Gabriela picked up her phone and called Tyler. Transferring money to his account, she asked him to pull strings and see if surveillance footage could be recovered from that stretch of road.

Tyler readily agreed but refused the money.

"Please take it, Tyler," Gabriela said. "I'll need your help again in the future."

Only then did he relent. In fact, his bar had been struggling, and he was strapped for cash.

"Don't worry, Gabriela," he said firmly. "I'll have someone look into this."

The enemy of his friend was his enemy as well. There was a dangerous edge beneath his promise, as though he was prepared to go further than she had asked.

"Thanks, Tyler."

After hanging up, Gabriela stared at Wesley's number in her contact list. Her thumb hovered over it for a long moment, but in the end, she let the screen go dark without making the call.

Though Wesley had told her she could turn to him whenever trouble found her, Gabriela knew how busy he was. For something so small, she preferred to bear it alone.

Meanwhile, Wesley and Brenden arrived at their grandfather's residence.

The house stood in the eastern district, its modest façade blending almost too perfectly with the neighboring rows of homes. Only the two stony-faced bodyguards stationed at the entrance betrayed its importance, their presence lending a gravity that the house itself did not boast.

Inside, it was alive with voices. The entire Moss family had gathered to celebrate the New Year.

In the living room, a dozen younger relatives clustered together, their laughter and chatter filling the air—until Wesley and Brenden stepped in.

A hush fell almost instantly, respect laced with unease.

Wesley's quiet dominance seemed to press upon the room, stirring a tangle of emotions in the hearts of the younger generation: envy at his brilliance, jealousy of his standing, fear of his authority, and the burning ambition to one day rise above him.

Before long, the servants arrived with coffee, setting the cups down with practiced grace.

The first to speak was Davion Moss, one of Wesley's cousins. His eyes flicked toward Billy standing behind Wesley, and a crooked smirk tugged at his lips. "Wesley, since when do you bring your assistant to family gatherings? Careful, people might mistake this for a business meeting."

Wesley offered no reply.

Billy, for his part, stood tall and composed, as though he hadn't heard a word. The silence cut deeper than any retort. Davion's smirk faltered, his expression darkening with humiliation.

He quickly pivoted, his gaze landing on Brenden. "Ah, and Brenden's here too? Wesley, it's one thing to drag an assistant into the old house, but why a Saunders?"

Brenden's smile froze mid-curve.

Though his father was a Moss, his parents' divorce had left him carrying his mother's surname. The word "outsider" followed him every time he crossed this threshold.

Yet Wesley never treated him as such. To Wesley, Brenden's blood was Moss through and through.

Still, other members of the Moss family were unfriendly toward him, viewing him as a threat to their share of the inheritance.

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Wesley's face hardened as he cast a sharp glance at Davion and declared, "Though Brenden is a Saunders, he isn't an outsider. He's my cousin." His words made his support unmistakable.

Davion didn't dare challenge Wesley outright, but noticing Brenden's silence, he pressed further. "I heard you were shipped off to Afluena, Brenden. What did you do to mess up?"

Howard Moss, unafraid of Brenden though wary of Wesley, chimed in quickly, "Brenden's quite the playboy, probably too busy chasing women to care about work. No wonder Wesley, who doesn't tolerate incompetence, sent him packing in frustration."

A young woman from a distant branch of the Moss family snickered, adding, "I heard that place is grimy. Brenden must have endured a lot there."

After a few more taunts, Davion turned to Wesley, his voice laced with mockery. "Wesley, Brenden has never been good for anything. Only you would waste time on a leech like him."

Their blatant ridicule, coupled with subtle attempts to drive a wedge between Brenden and Wesley, struck Brenden hard. Though he was usually thick-skinned, the cruel words cut deeply. Aware of his own shortcomings, he stayed quiet, not wanting to burden Wesley further.

Most of the younger Moss family members were present, and seeing Brenden bow his head only made them look down on him all the more, as if he were nothing more than a pitiful fool.

Just then, Brenden's father, Graham Moss, approached.

He merely frowned at the harsh taunts. To him, Brenden was a source of shame, and he made no effort to defend him.

Brenden looked at him, a flicker of hope in his eyes, as if he wanted to speak. But Graham's glare was filled with contempt. "You're a disgrace. Get out of my sight!"

Brenden's eyes reddened, his hands balling into fists.

The sting of his father's disgust cut far deeper than any other wound.

Wesley, who had remained silent, stepped forward in a few swift strides, positioning himself protectively in front of Brenden and fixing Davion with a chilling stare. "To me, Brenden is worth more than you will ever be." Davion's smug grin faltered.

Wesley continued, "Brenden is diligent and competent. He wasn't sent to Afluena for any failure. My company started a new project there, and he was chosen to lead the well-digging team." His icy gaze swept the room. "He's more capable than any of you here."

Though Wesley's tone was even, his look made everyone feel like they were being seen as trash. Their faces darkened, but no one dared retort.

Wesley's authority within the family was unquestioned; even if he insulted them outright, they would stay silent.

Brenden swelled with pride at Wesley's public praise. His tears vanished, and he stood taller. "I'm so thankful to Wesley for sending me to Afluena. The ground there is tough as rock, but I still managed to dig a well!" His face glowed with newfound confidence as he added, "And going to Afluena helped me grow. There's even a great girl who's secretly in love with me."

Nearby, Alden Moss's mouth twitched at Brenden's smugness. How could someone as useless as Brenden still have Wesley's backing? The thought sparked envy.

Unaware of the brewing resentment, Brenden continued boasting about Gabriela's devotion, oblivious to Wesley's expression darkening like an approaching storm.

Billy watched Brenden with a mix of pity and exasperation. This foolish man. If he didn't stop, Wesley might assign him another grueling project.

As Brenden rambled, he suddenly noticed Wesley had stepped aside, which touched him deeply. Wesley had not only defended him but also given him the stage to shine. Wesley was truly kind to him, and Brenden silently promised to repay him someday.

Lost in his own world of newfound confidence, Brenden didn't notice their grandfather, Roger Moss, approaching with several younger family members. Seeing everyone gathered, Roger signaled for the family banquet to start.

As they sat around the table, dish after dish arrived.

Roger, seated at the head of the table, scanned the room before speaking. "Wesley, after the New Year, there's a shareholders' meeting. Clear your schedule to attend it at the Moss Group headquarters."

His invitation was a clear acknowledgment of Wesley's competence.

Was he about to name Wesley as his successor? Or was the Crownridge Group being handed to him?

The family members' faces shifted subtly, though they quickly masked their reactions. Even Davion, often at odds with Wesley, forced a smile and offered congratulations.

Wesley responded coolly, "I'll consider it. My own company keeps me occupied."

Roger, expecting the refusal, didn't push. "The position will be there for you whenever you decide to return."

That announcement cast a subtle tension over the meal, one that even Brenden could feel.

After dinner, Brenden rushed to the car, inspecting it repeatedly.

Billy, curious, asked what he was doing.

With a grave expression, Brenden replied, “Grandpa clearly wants Wesley on the board. Didn’t you see? Everyone looked ready to kill him. I need to check if the car has been sabotaged.”

Billy realized Brenden had a point and promptly called professional bodyguards over to examine the vehicle.

By the time they returned to Wesley’s place, it was late. Loretta was still away in the countryside, leaving the expansive estate quiet and empty.

Only Miriam and Gabriela were in the living room, watching TV. The show’s plot wasn’t clear, but Miriam was teary-eyed, muttering, “That poor girl—her husband’s awful.”

Gabriela, uninterested in melodramatic romances, still comforted her patiently. “Don’t worry, he’ll regret it eventually.”

Their voices broke the stillness. Wesley paused at the entrance, a faint smile crossing his face.

he removed it. “Welcome back, Mr. Moss!”

In that moment, Wesley felt a rare warmth. Despite the hostility and unpleasantness he had endured at the Mosses’ house, coming home to her smile brought him a sense of peace. Then his gaze sharpened. “What happened to your elbow?”

Gabriela froze. She had been sitting with Miriam for hours, yet Miriam hadn’t noticed—while Wesley picked up on it immediately. He was remarkably observant.

“It’s nothing. I tripped on the way back,” she explained.

Wesley’s eyes darkened, realizing she wasn’t telling him the truth. Without pressing, he rolled up his sleeves and headed to the study, Billy trailing behind.

Brenden’s heart raced when he saw Gabriela. Thanks to her, he had held his head high at the Mosses’ house for the first time. Above all, he owed Wesley for giving him the well-digging project.

Suddenly, Wesley turned. “Brenden, come with me.”

Brenden hurried over without hesitation.

In the study, Wesley instructed Billy, "Find out what happened to Gabriela today."

"Right away, sir," Billy replied.

"And..." Wesley paused, then waved him off. "Never mind. You can go."

He had considered pressuring Marie to return Gabriela's house sooner but worried Gabriela would move out immediately if he did. He wanted her to stay a bit longer.

As Billy left, Brenden asked eagerly, "What do you need me to do, Wesley?"

Wesley frowned. "You should go to bed."

"Okay. I'll go rest now," Brenden said, then added, "You're so good to me, Wesley. I truly appreciate it."

Wesley didn't bother responding.

Outside the study, Brenden hesitated, then approached Gabriela with earnest gratitude. "Thank you, Gabriela."

Gabriela froze, baffled, her lips parting as she was about to ask Brenden what on earth he was thanking her for.

But then she noticed the strange gleam in his eyes and the twisted curve of his expression, which reminded her of his schizophrenia. Was he hallucinating—imagining she had done something for him?

A chill rippled through her. Not another episode. Not again.

Who knew what bizarre request he might spring on her this time?

She forced a polite smile. “You’re welcome, Mr. Saunders. It’s late, and I’m really exhausted. If there’s nothing else, I’ll just head to my room and get some sleep.”

Brenden inclined his head with unusual calm. “Good night.”

He watched with growing fascination as Gabriela practically fled, disappearing down the hall.

How interesting. The women before her had always leapt at the faintest hint of his attention, practically draping themselves over him. Yet Gabriela, madly infatuated as she was, ran away the moment he opened the door for something more.

He found her shyness even more intriguing.

Gabriela had braced herself for battle, convinced that “NotASaunders” would send some infuriating message to ruin her night.

But as the clock crept past midnight and her phone stayed stubbornly silent, her tension unraveled, and sleep claimed her.

When she stirred the next morning, sunlight spilled across the room.

First thing, she checked her phone. There were no messages from “NotASaunders,” but a string of texts from Aubrey popped up.

Gabriela discovered that several luxury brands—once loyal partners to Claire—had publicly announced the termination of their contracts.

And to top it off, the production team of a hit romance drama dropped a bombshell on Twitter: Claire, once their leading lady, had been replaced—swapped out for a fresh-faced actress with more talent, if not fame.

Aubrey followed the news with a row of laughing emojis, practically gleeful.

Gabriela typed back a crisp reply. “Serves her right.”

Aubrey wasted no time delivering her theory. “Why did Claire suddenly get blacklisted? Gabriela, this might actually have something to do with you.”

Gabriela blinked. “Huh? Why would that have anything to do with me?”

Aubrey’s reply was swift. “Claire’s been quiet lately. The only thing she’s posted was a couple of updates supporting Phyllis. You know exactly who’s orchestrating Claire’s downfall. This has your protector’s signature all over it. Clearly, this has to be an act of love. But if you still can’t see that, maybe it’s time you open your eyes and figure that part out.”

Her protector?

Yes, Wesley treated her differently from how he treated others at the company. But it had to be something else. Maybe he enjoyed her cooking. Or perhaps Loretta and Miriam favored her, leading him to extend a bit more courtesy toward her.

An act of love? Absolutely not.

Gabriela shook her head vigorously, as if to banish the very idea. Loretta wouldn’t throw around wild claims about her grandson not being interested in women. And really, if Wesley had harbored any romantic feelings for her, that night would have revealed it. The atmosphere had been intimate enough, yet he had restrained himself completely.

Wesley's kindness wasn't personal. It was just who he was. He went out of his way to help her because he was a decent person. And for that, she should find some way to repay him properly in the future.

Gabriela gave herself a sharp mental warning about entertaining ridiculous ideas. She even patted her cheeks briskly, snapping herself back to reality, before scrolling through her unread WhatsApp messages.

Aubrey wasn't the only one flooding her inbox. Phyllis had sent a barrage of messages too.

"Gabriela, everyone insults me now. Vivian won't even talk to me. You've left me with no friends. You must be thrilled!"

"Don't get too cocky! I won't let this slide!"

"Gabriela, you bitch, I'll make your life miserable!"

Phyllis's texts had spiraled, over a dozen messages brimming with curses, as if she'd completely lost her grip. Eventually, when Gabriela still hadn't replied, the tirade sputtered out.

Gabriela skimmed the rants, too disinterested to even roll her eyes. Without bothering to retort, she simply blocked her.

Then, stretching a little, she rose and swept the curtains open, letting the daylight pour in. Outside, a soft rain whispered against the windows, ushering in the first real breath of spring.

Loretta returned from the countryside with two oversized boxes stuffed with local specialties her relatives had pressed on her: creamy artisanal cheeses, jewel-bright jars of jam, and delicate handcrafted chocolates.

Gabriela sampled a few, and her delight was instantaneous. Eyes sparkling, smile blooming, she looked for all the world like a child set loose in a candy shop. Loretta's heart warmed at the sight, though a pang of frustration followed close behind.

The more she liked this girl, the more it stung that Wesley was such a disappointment. How could he not appreciate such a treasure? How would he ever find someone worthy if he couldn't recognize what was right in front of him?

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Her gaze slid sharply toward Wesley, her disapproval practically searing through him. He blinked back, puzzled by the silent accusation.

Meanwhile, Brenden, amused by Gabriela's joy, drawled, "Wesley, you probably won't touch any of these. Why don't you just let Gabriela take them all home?"

Gabriela looked startled. All of it? How could she possibly finish so much on her own?

Wesley's expression hardened, his voice clipped and cold. "Gabriela, these kinds of sweets cause acne. Eat them sparingly. If you come to work with a face full of pimples, it will damage the company's image."

Gabriela bit back the urge to roll her eyes so hard they might get stuck. She couldn't shake the suspicion that Brenden and Wesley were deliberately teaming up to tease her.

Still, as much as she adored the snacks, a girl had to think of her skin. Vanity won out over appetite, and she didn't dare take too many. She offered a courteous smile and sidestepped the comment with ease.

"Saunders, maybe you should try a few more."

Brenden's face brightened instantly. "Then how about we share them?"

Wesley's expression, by contrast, darkened immediately.

Loretta, either oblivious or intentionally ignoring the tension, chimed in with a chirp of cheerfulness, "You two enjoy! I'll fix some honey lemon water; that will get rid of the acne worries."

Wesley's only reply was a sharp, frosty snort before he strode off toward the study.

Lately, he had been prickly—temperamental, even. Gabriela navigated each interaction like walking on glass, taking the farthest seat at the table just to avoid his ire. And yet, the harder she tried to tread lightly, the more his displeasure seemed to grow.

To her relief, her time working part-time was nearing conclusion.

Gabriela's brief stint at the manor had quietly stretched to thirteen days. When Loretta pressed her wages into Gabriela's hands, the sudden sting of gratitude brought unexpected tears to her eyes.

She had assumed Wesley had already advanced her ten years' wages, so this time she was just cooking for free as promised, not daring to expect any payment for her part-time work.

To her surprise, Loretta handed her every last penny and even slipped a small gift into her hand.

"Gabriela, next time you're on break, you absolutely must come back for part-time work. Honestly, having you cook for Wesley has done wonders; he's gained a few extra pounds."

Gabriela beamed. "No problem."

Loretta waved a hand toward Wesley, a teasing sparkle in her eyes. "See for yourself, Gabriela! His cheeks aren't so sharp anymore."

Wesley stiffened, a flash of irritation crossing his face. Compliments should have pleased him, so why did they sting? Because he had always taken care of his physique. All this drivel about adding on a few pounds was just unnecessary.

Brenden grinned and nudged him. “Oh, come on, Wesley. Are you actually gaining weight? I’ve been eating Gabriela’s food too, yet somehow I’m still perfectly slim.”

Wesley’s eyes darkened, his temper shadowing the room.

Feeling the sudden chill, Brenden’s knees threatened to buckle, and he bowed his head so fast it was almost comical.

Gabriela, clutching her wages, had intended to leave immediately—but Loretta had other plans.

“Wesley’s got work tomorrow. You’ll ride back to the company with him,” she declared, almost playfully commanding.

Gabriela paused, hesitation flickering across her expression.

Wesley spoke casually, his tone even. “If you leave tonight, my driver would have to make a special trip to take you back. Just stay tonight and we can head to the company together tomorrow.”

Not wanting to trouble his driver, Gabriela nodded. She might as well stay another night.

After dinner, she wandered into the back garden for a breath of fresh air. To her surprise, she spotted Wesley jogging under the dim glow of the garden lamps.

“Mr. Moss? Why are you running at this hour?” she asked, curiosity in her voice.

He shot her a cool, detached glance. “Your cooking is too good. I’ve gained a few pounds, so I’m working it off.”

Gabriela blinked, never imagining that excelling in the kitchen could provoke dissatisfaction. Carefully, she added, “Perhaps you shouldn’t push yourself too hard. Your heart isn’t in the best condition right now.”

He slowed slightly, conceding, “You’re right. I’ll take it easier. But jogging doesn’t burn many calories, so I need to double the time. And running alone is boring. Why don’t you come along?”

Gabriela froze, stunned.

Yet soon she found herself jogging beside him, trying to keep pace. She couldn’t quite wrap her head around how her gentle concern for his health had led to her becoming his jogging partner.

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Wesley, despite his fragile heart, possessed unexpected endurance and jogged for nearly thirty minutes.

Though they had moved at a leisurely pace, by the time Gabriela finally stopped, fire scorched her throat, her legs quaked with violent tremors that threatened to buckle beneath her, and perspiration drenched every inch of her body. She typically shunned physical exertion, and only in this moment did she understand why Brenden's workout complaints always carried such genuine anguish.

Even Wesley showed signs of exertion, his dampened bangs lending him an unexpectedly rugged magnetism. Yet he maintained that natural grace and distant composure that seemed carved from marble.

He delivered his verdict with unmistakable disdain. "Your endurance is absolutely pathetic."

Gabriela nodded with desperate enthusiasm. Precisely her point—surely this meant future runs were off the table.

But Wesley pressed forward. "Starting tomorrow, you'll dedicate thirty minutes daily to exercise alongside me."

Gabriela's mind reeled in disbelief. She studied Wesley, whose commanding presence dominated the space around them. She traced the lines of his towering, perfectly balanced frame and the defined, sinewy forearms exposed by his rolled sleeves. Then her gaze lingered on his breathtakingly sculpted face.

For crying out loud—his body was already toned enough. Why bother exercising? Suspicion crept through her thoughts: Wesley was orchestrating this elaborate charade purely for his own entertainment.

“Mr. Moss, work begins tomorrow morning. Between commuting and office hours, when exactly would I manage these sessions?” Gabriela retorted.

Rather than responding, Wesley turned the question back on her. “What exactly is my role in your life?”

Gabriela answered without pause, “You’re my employer, naturally.”

“Precisely. You joined my company to resolve challenges, not to seek answers from me,” he stated.

Gabriela found herself cornered without escape. What alternative existed—brazenly continue occupying Wesley’s residence? Absolutely impossible.

The arrangement might have passed scrutiny during the New Year holiday while she worked part-time, but extended cohabitation would inevitably increase the risk of someone finding out. Such revelations would devastate the company’s reputation.

Gabriela retreated to her quarters on unsteady legs and encountered Brenden ascending the staircase. Observing her hollow expression, Brenden experienced a wave of compassion. She would soon depart the estate. Once separated from his presence, how could her heart not shatter completely?

True, he maintained careful distance and feigned indifference, but here she could still glimpse him occasionally, particularly during meals when they faced each other across the dining table. However, departure meant eternal separation. Brenden could already envision her weeping through endless nights. The more vividly he imagined her suffering, the deeper his self-loathing grew.

After retreating to her room, Gabriela went to the bathroom and soon emerged feeling refreshed, the strain from jogging eased. After gathering her scattered thoughts, she felt that Wesley's order was hardly worth her concern. She even harbored hope that he might abandon the scheme by morning.

She slept peacefully and awakened revitalized the following day, though her muscles protested with stiffness.

Noticing her labored movements, Brenden couldn't resist offering, "Gabriela, after breakfast, perhaps I could drive you to the office."

Gabriela's body went rigid with alarm. Brenden had clearly lost his mind. She would never, under any circumstances, accept his transportation.

Wesley fixed Brenden with an icy stare and observed, "You don't even report to headquarters."

Brenden let out a helpless sigh. Poor Gabriela. She faced double punishment—banishment from the estate and separation from his workplace presence.

Following breakfast, Gabriela departed for the office with Wesley.

Despite their wariness, several colleagues witnessed their arrival together. Within hours, word had circulated throughout the entire company that Gabriela had emerged from Wesley's vehicle on her first day back.

Even Tessa's attitude toward Gabriela changed; her manner and speech carried newfound warmth and familiarity.

During lunch break, Aubrey flooded Gabriela's phone with messages demanding to know what was going on between her and Wesley.

Chapter 210

The moment Gabriela joined the cafeteria queue, Aubrey approached her. "Gabriela, are you dating Mr. Moss? How could you conceal something this monumental from me?"

Gabriela let out a sigh. Finding herself thrust into the spotlight felt absolutely mortifying. She gestured toward Aubrey's features, deflecting. "Did you indulge excessively during the holidays? Your face appears noticeably fuller."

For any woman, such observations struck at the core of deepest insecurities. Aubrey immediately clutched her cheeks. "Is the change that pronounced?"

Gabriela confirmed with a solemn nod. "Plus there's a pimple forming right here. Too much sugary food, maybe?"

Aubrey frantically retrieved a compact mirror to locate the offending spot, completely abandoning her previous interrogation.

Having successfully diverted Aubrey's focus, Gabriela exhaled quietly with relief.

Meanwhile, Cali and her two companions had monitored every word, their anxiety mounting steadily. Gabriela's razor-sharp restroom confrontation remained vivid in their memories. They had been navigating their work with extreme caution, terrified that even the smallest workplace transgression might trigger their dismissal.

Now it appeared Gabriela hadn't merely shared Wesley's bed; she had established residence within his personal domain.

Who could predict whether Wesley's future bride might indeed be Gabriela herself?

Waves of bitter regret crashed over Cali and her friends.

Cali summoned enough courage to approach Gabriela and whispered, "Ms. Haynes, those heels must be torturous. Wouldn't you prefer to rest for a moment? I'd be delighted to fetch your lunch."

Unaware of their complicated history, Aubrey bristled with protective indignation. "What's your game here? Gabriela belongs to my circle. Are you attempting to poach my closest friend?"

Cali would never presume to claim Gabriela as a friend. Merely escaping punishment felt like divine mercy.

Gabriela observed Cali and her companions, realization dawning on her. During that restroom confrontation, when she had directed a threat at them, she believed her fate was sealed after crossing Wesley so brutally. She could never have imagined that events would take such a different turn.

She responded with measured composure, “Bear this in mind—disasters bloom from reckless tongues. You’d better think twice before you say anything in the future.”

Cali recognized this warning as her final reprieve. She bobbed her head frantically, showering Gabriela with breathless gratitude.

Aubrey was surprised. Cali, typically so insufferably proud, now cowered before Gabriela like a scolded child.

Yet while some colleagues, like Cali, adopted cautious humility and swift contrition, countless others burned with seething jealousy and bitter resentment.

“I suspected something when Gabriela, barely out of university, climbed the ranks so impossibly fast. Turns out she simply slept her way to the top.”

“Still, you have to admire her strategy. Mr. Moss is absolutely gorgeous. I’d be more than willing to share his bed, no strings attached.”

“Me, too!”

“Oh please, get realistic. With Mr. Moss’s status, do you honestly believe he’d select a bride from peasants like us? His wife must emerge from aristocratic circles—at minimum, some refined socialite.”

“Gabriela merely struck gold because her beauty captured his attention.”

“Yeah, she’s nothing but a fleeting distraction for him. Mark my words—soon enough, he’ll discard her like yesterday’s trash.”

Such venomous observations circulated exclusively beyond Gabriela’s hearing, never spoken boldly enough to reach her awareness. Following lunch with Aubrey, Gabriela ascended to the twelfth floor.

Fiona stood outside the executive office.

The instant she spotted Gabriela, memories flooded back—of that previous visit when Gabriela had maliciously disabled the heating, leaving her wracked with a brutal cold. Even Loretta had maintained careful distance since that incident.

Then Fiona learned that Gabriela had actually resided at Moss Manor during the New Year holiday.

With accumulated grievances surging through her, Fiona fixed Gabriela with glacial hatred and intercepted her path as she emerged from the elevator.

“Did you step from Wesley’s vehicle this morning?” Fiona inquired, her voice sharp as winter glass.

