

His kiss 341

Chapter 341

Farley reacted at once, stepping in front of Wesley before he could move.

Memories flashed of Gabriela back in North Village, often using Tessa as her cover story. Farley lied smoothly, "It's Tessa's baby. She's a close friend of Gabriela's. Sometimes she stops by with her little one to play."

The response was exactly what Wesley had anticipated, yet disappointment still tugged at him. He sank back onto the sofa without protest, suddenly uninterested in Tessa's baby.

Meanwhile, upstairs, Truett had drifted into sleep after a full feeding. His tiny fists still twitched as if grasping food, and his rosy lips puckered now and then with soft, greedy smacking sounds.

He was the very picture of sweetness.

Gabriela gently laid Truett in the crib and pressed two soft kisses to his cheeks. The baby smelled of warm milk; Gabriela herself carried that same gentle fragrance. She slipped away to shower and change, then packed two simple outfits before heading downstairs.

Facing Wesley, she said evenly, "Mr. Moss, shall we go?"

Her freshly washed skin held a clean, subtle scent, something quiet and unexpectedly captivating.

A stir moved through Wesley's chest. "Gabriela, does Tessa visit you often?"

Caught off guard, Gabriela blinked at him. "Why do you ask?"

Her puzzled tone only sharpened the suspicion in his eyes.

Before the silence could stretch tighter, Farley suddenly hunched forward, one hand gripping his knee with a pained groan. "Miss Haynes, the chill is setting in, and my knees are giving me trouble. I should go upstairs and rest."

He then handed the small bowl from the coffee table to Ken. "Please make sure this is returned to Tessa tomorrow, will you?"

At that, understanding flashed in Gabriela's eyes.

She quickly added, "I stayed with Tessa in North Village through her pregnancy. We've been close ever since. I was there when the baby was born, and I've loved the little one like my own ever since."

Wesley's gaze lingered on her, steady and searching.

Her fragrance lingered in the air, unsettling him. He suddenly lost the will to press further and murmured instead, "Let's go."

But instead of heading to Moss Manor, he drove Gabriela to an apartment that belonged to him.

The place was tucked away in a quiet neighborhood.

Gabriela exhaled in relief. At least she wouldn't have to face Loretta or Miriam tonight.

The guest room had already been prepared. Bone-tired from the day's strain, she lay down and quickly surrendered to sleep, even in the strangeness of a new bed.

Half-asleep, she stirred at the vibration of her phone. A message lit up the screen. "I can't sleep. Open the door."

Still hazy, Gabriela padded over and turned the knob.

Wesley stood there, tall and broad-shouldered, strikingly composed in a dark robe.

Before she could fully process, he stepped past her into the room.

Gabriela was stunned. “Mr. Moss, it’s so late, you—”

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But Wesley didn’t let her finish. He settled on the edge of her bed, lowering his voice to a near whisper. “I don’t know what it is, but I can’t get any sleep.”

He really had been wrestling with sleepless nights.

His next words came rough, almost vulnerable. “Do you mind if I hold you? Please.”

The raw gentleness in his tone, and the quiet plea from such a handsome man, was disarming.

Gabriela’s heart softened. “Alright.”

It was no big deal, she told herself. They had shared a bed before.

She slid beneath the covers again, letting him draw her into his arms. Warmth surrounded her, steady and grounding.

Sleep tugged her back; she was simply too exhausted.

The warmth of her body pressed against Wesley. Her scent drifted over him again. Yet this time, so near, he caught something else beneath it: a faint sweetness, like milk.

The realization startled him.

A woman in her twenties carrying such a fragrance was unusual, yet the delicate sweetness stirred something deep within him.

He inhaled slowly, his embrace tightening almost instinctively, as if he could anchor her closer. Desire whispered through the restraint in his muscles.

But when Gabriela shifted slightly, uneasy in her sleep, Wesley forced himself to ease his hold, his chest tightening with the effort.

The night stretched on, his insomnia gnawing restlessly until dawn.

Gabriela, however, slept peacefully, waking the next morning with a glow of freshness.

Wesley couldn't look away. His gaze lingered, his Adam's apple shifting as he finally spoke, his voice rougher than usual. "Get dressed. I'll drive you to work."

Gabriela opened her mouth to refuse but thought better of it. Resistance would only prove futile.

Silently, she changed her clothes and followed his lead.

Driving her to Lakeshore Building, Wesley's lips curved into the faintest smile. "See you tonight, Ms. Haynes."

"See you tonight, Mr. Moss."

Wesley's car disappeared down the street, leaving Gabriela standing at the entrance of the building. She was just about to head back inside when a familiar voice called out to her, clear and warm, "Gabriela."

She turned and her eyes widened in surprise. "Mr. Williams?"

It had been more than half a year since she last saw Stewart. "It's been a while!" she exclaimed, unable to hide her astonishment. "What brings you here at this hour?"

"I need your help with something," Stewart said casually, his smile easy, as though they'd parted only yesterday. "Are you busy today?"

"Not really. What can I help you with?"

“Why don’t you drop by my office? I’ll explain everything in detail.”

Gabriela hesitated at once.

Wesley’s warning echoed in her mind. He had been very clear about keeping her distance from Stewart.

Her pause didn’t escape Stewart’s notice. He chuckled lightly, eyes narrowing with amusement.
“Gabriela, why that look? Do I seem so intimidating?”

Flustered, Gabriela quickly shook her head.

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If anything, Stewart gave off the opposite impression. He was approachable, relaxed, even comforting in a way that felt unexpectedly familiar.

“Don’t worry,” Stewart said with an easy smile as he opened the car door for her. “We’re friends. I’d never harm you.”

Once she was seated, he added smoothly, “What I need your help with isn’t difficult. Besides, my project to develop a city plaza by the pier has already begun. There’ll be plenty of chances for us to work together.”

Gabriela’s eyes flickered with interest. A project of that magnitude meant countless events to organize, creating numerous opportunities for Haynes Group.

Compared to the GD Fashion Week project, this project carried far greater weight.

Before long, they arrived at the Williams Group headquarters.

A sleek thirty-two-story tower of glass and steel, its stature even surpassing that of Apex Group. As she walked beside Stewart through the expansive lobby, employees greeted him with polished smiles before sneaking curious glances at her.

Gabriela, ever composed, returned their looks with a serene smile of her own. That quiet confidence, unruffled by attention, only deepened Stewart’s admiration for her.

The moment Gabriela stepped into the CEO’s office, her eyes were drawn to the model displayed beside the desk.

Her breath caught in her throat.

That deep-sea city model... Why did it look exactly like the one she had painstakingly crafted years ago?

Noticing her expression, Stewart chuckled softly. "Surprised to see your work from six years ago?"

Gabriela blinked in disbelief. "Wait, did I make this model?"

"Yes." Stewart's reply was matter-of-fact, his attention fixed not on her face but on the intricate structure before them.

The model depicted an underwater city, its sweeping architecture both futuristic and dreamlike. Yet one of its most striking towers stood incomplete.

"About six months ago," Stewart explained, "someone damaged it during a competition. Since then, it's been kept like this." He turned to her, his tone easy but expectant. "Would you help me restore it?"

Gabriela's chest tightened. The piece did resemble one of her old projects, yet so many years had passed that the exact techniques, the delicate steps she'd once used, were hazy in her memory.

She hesitated, shaking her head slightly. "Mr. Williams, I'm not sure I can fix it."

The damaged section was the most intricate part of the entire design. Restoring it would require specialized materials and delicate techniques. Even after studying the model for ten minutes, Gabriela could barely make sense of it.

“Why not?” Stewart’s gaze fixed on her, steady and unyielding. “Shouldn’t this be a piece of cake for you?”

Gabriela lowered her eyes, her tone laced with apology. “I don’t remember the production process.”

For a moment, silence stretched between them. Then Stewart’s lips curved into a knowing smile. He sneered, “That’s just your excuse. Now I see you’ve found a new love and decided to completely erase the old flame.”

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Confronted by Stewart’s blatant scorn, Gabriela was utterly perplexed. What did he mean by “new love” and “old flame”? His words made no sense to her.

Stewart continued, his voice dripping with mockery, “Latching on to Wesley must have been quite the feat. It is no surprise you would move on. People always aim higher, don’t they?”

Gabriela opened her mouth to clarify, but Stewart cut her off sharply. “Just leave—we’re not friends anymore.” Convinced Stewart was out of his mind, Gabriela decided that explaining was pointless and turned to walk away.

Back at her company, she sank into her office chair, lost in a fog of confusion. How had the model she crafted ended up in Stewart’s hands? And why did he turn hostile when she said she couldn’t repair it?

Gabriela remembered the first time she had met Stewart's assistant, Erik, at the Deluxe Hotel. He had insisted that they knew each other and mentioned that the accessibility software for the visually impaired would launch soon, crediting her with kickstarting it.

Then there was Myah, who was upset when Gabriela couldn't remember her. Additionally, Stewart claimed they had a prior acquaintance. Even more puzzling, he possessed the exact model she had created years ago.

Gabriela prided herself on her sharp memory, yet these people were strangers to her. She was at a loss.

All day, exhaustion weighed on her. Even during dinner with Wesley, her mind kept spiraling back to these mysteries.

Noticing her distraction, Wesley asked, "Are you feeling okay?"

Snapping back, Gabriela nodded her head and focused on her plate, picking at the food.

During the meal, she stepped away to the restroom. Returning, she found Stewart lurking in the hallway, clearly waiting for her.

Gabriela tried to walk past, but Stewart blocked her way.

Dressed in a crisp white shirt, his tall, lean frame gave him the air of a refined gentleman, but his mocking smirk ruined the illusion.

“You’ve got no time to fix the model, but plenty for dining with Wesley,” Stewart taunted.

Gabriela ignored him, brushing past. Arguing with someone so irrational was futile.

Stewart’s voice followed her, laced with bitterness. “Did you really think I funded that software just because of the model you created for me? I invested because you were kind to Allan Espinoza and went out of your way for his sister’s sake. I thought you were a good-hearted girl. It has only been a few years—how did you change so much?”

In his eyes, even if Gabriela wanted to move on, completely abandoning Myah was unforgivable.

His words grew increasingly absurd, and Gabriela quickened her steps to escape.

That night, once she was back home, she fed her son Truett, had a bath, and then joined Wesley at his condo.

The courtyard bloomed with white roses, their heavy fragrance enveloping her. The scent triggered an eerie sense of familiarity.

For nights on end, sleep eluded her. Her mind conjured endless fields of white roses, with a man in a pristine white shirt standing among them, his silhouette nearly blending into the petals.

She strained to see him, and when he turned, it was Wesley's face.

Gabriela woke with a start. The dream was too strange.

Unable to sleep, she clutched her pillow and knocked on Wesley's bedroom door.

Wesley opened the door and frowned. "What's wrong?"

"I can't sleep," Gabriela said, a little embarrassed. "Can I stay in your room? I'll sleep on the floor."

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"Come in," Wesley said, sitting on the bed and patting the space beside him. "Sit here."

Gabriela settled next to him.

"You've been off today," Wesley said, studying her closely. "Are you sick? Should I call a doctor?"

“No need,” Gabriela replied. “I just can’t sleep. Being alone at night feels unsettling.”

Stewart’s bizarre comments had left Gabriela on edge, fostering an anxiety she couldn’t shake. For some reason, her nerves began to settle only when she was near Wesley, but she couldn’t bring herself to confess this to him.

His gaze softened. “Stay here with me, then.”

In Wesley’s arms, Gabriela felt adrift. She hesitated to open her heart fully, yet they had shared nearly every intimacy short of the final step. Listening to the steady beat of his heart, her racing thoughts began to quiet. Soon, exhaustion pulled her into a deep sleep.

The next morning, Wesley was in high spirits. Adjusting his sleeves before a full-length mirror, he said, “I’m off on a business trip today. I’ll be back in about a week.”

Gabriela blinked, surprised. “That long?”

“Missing me already?” Wesley teased, a playful glint in his eyes. “Don’t worry—I’ll be back soon.”

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead, then added her fingerprint to his condo’s security system. “If you can’t sleep, come here at night,” he said, his voice low and warm.

Gabriela blushed, his closeness stirring her. “Got it,” she murmured.

Seeing her accept his affection without pulling away, Wesley felt a quiet thrill. “Gabriela...”

She cut in, “You should go on your trip. We’ll talk when you’re back.”

Her words opened the door to possibility, a marked shift from her earlier flat-out rejections.

Wesley pulled her close. “Hold to that promise. Wait for me to come back.”

This time, Gabriela didn’t pull back.

“I will,” she answered softly.

She resolved to reveal the truth about her child when he returned.

If he embraced it, she would summon every ounce of her courage to overcome any hurdle to marry him. But if he recoiled, if he showed even a hint of disgust—she would slip away silently.

While Wesley was away in Athea on business, Gabriela's insomnia worsened. Normally, sorrow passed quickly for her, but Stewart's cryptic words had stolen her rest entirely. A simmering anger fueled her determination to unravel the mystery of six years ago.

She climbed to the attic storage room, a space untouched for years and crammed with old belongings. Marie had likely never bothered with them, leaving everything to gather dust for over a decade. All traces of Gabriela's childhood remained—shoes, dresses, hats, rag dolls, and even old hair clips. Methodically, she began sorting them into tidy stacks.

In a corner, she discovered a pile of dusty books. Wiping away the grime, memories flooded back of her mother holding her close, reading bedtime stories. As she sifted through the pages, lost in nostalgia, a folded sheet slipped from the stack.

She unfolded it across a table, revealing a sprawling design for an undersea city model. Its lines were sharp and meticulous, reflecting a calm and steady hand. Detailed notes beside it outlined the construction steps. Two distinct handwritings caught her eye—one was unmistakably her own. The other was bold and forceful, carved deeply into the paper.

Gabriela froze, utterly stunned. She had no memory of this blueprint whatsoever.

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Gabriela spread the blueprint across the floor, her fingertips gliding over each intricate line as she studied it in silence.

The notes revealed that the deep-sea city model had been built by two people working together.

One section stood out from the rest — the most complex portion of the entire design. The structure there felt different. The precision, the geometry, the mirrored architecture rising from and reflecting into the waterline. It was brilliant, but not hers.

Gabriela suspected that part had been designed by the other collaborator.

His name hovered at the edge of her memory, just beyond reach.

She searched her mind restlessly until Stewart's words echoed back to her. Allan Espinoza, he had said.

Espinoza. The same surname as Myah.

Could Allan be Myah's brother?

A sharp, blinding pain shot through Gabriela's skull.

Just thinking his name made her head throb violently. Why?

Breathing through the pain, she folded the blueprint with careful precision and made up her mind. She would confront Stewart the next day.

When she arrived, Stewart's expression had already darkened. The first words out of his mouth carried a quiet sneer. "Well, well. Shouldn't you be with Mr. Moss? This is unexpected — you barely visit me anymore."

Gabriela ignored the jab entirely.

Instead, she set the blueprint down in front of him. "I found this. I can repair the damaged section."

His expression shifted immediately. The mockery drained from his face, replaced by something still and watchful. "Fine. One more chance."

He led her to collect the necessary materials, then stood aside while she set to work.

The damage was concentrated in the most technically demanding portion of the model. It was more than structural. Every piece of that inverted clock tower had to align in flawless symmetry with its distorted reflection across the glossy, waterlike surface. The illusion depended on perfect mathematics.

Gabriela bent over the model, reworking the fractured pieces, recalculating angles and depth, adjusting micro-supports that would never be visible to the naked eye.

Within minutes, she had gone silent.

Then the rest of the world fell away.

Sweat gathered along her brow, but she didn't notice. Her breathing slowed. Her hands moved without hesitation, guided not by thought but by memory buried so deep it had never felt like memory at all.

Piece by piece, she began to bring it back to life.

Stewart, captivated by her craftsmanship, watched her work with sincere fascination.

Her skin had a porcelain clarity. When she focused, her eyes sharpened, and that quiet intensity transformed her entire face.

Without thinking, he reached for a tissue and leaned in to gently wipe the sweat from her brow.

Gabriela looked up, their eyes meeting. For a brief moment, the air between them pulsed.

Stewart's heartbeat stumbled. His throat went tight, and he recoiled almost immediately.

Gabriela accepted the tissue and finished wiping her own forehead. "Thank you, Mr. Williams."

Stewart cleared his throat. "It's already past one. Should I order something? Do you have any preferences?"

"Anything is fine," she said softly.

Wesley's strict food habits flashed through her mind, and a faint smile curved at the corner of her lips.

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That tiny shift in her expression knocked the breath out of Stewart.

Too warm. Too close.

He tugged at his collar. "Feels stuffy in here. I'm going to get some air."

He stepped onto the balcony and lit a cigarette, fingers not entirely steady.

What was that just now?

His heart had actually reacted to her.

He told himself it was nothing. He'd kept his distance from women for too long. Any beautiful woman standing that close would have stirred something. That was all.

By the time he returned, the air had cleared — and so had his face.

Gabriela had already shaped the fractured section into a defined structure. The outline was back. The lost geometry was reappearing under her hands.

Impressed, Stewart nodded. "I told you. Fixing this would be a piece of cake for you."

Gabriela paused, fingers still resting on the base of the model. "Did you know the other architect personally?"

"We met several times," Stewart replied. His smile softened with memory. "Gentle soul. Still in college. The kind every young woman falls for."

"He..." Gabriela's grip tightened around the delicate clock hand she was holding. The sharp edge pressed into her palm hard enough to pierce skin, but she didn't seem to feel it.

Her voice fell to nearly a whisper. "His name is Allan Espinoza, right? What happened to him?"

Stewart's expression shifted into confusion. "He's dead. Surely you remember that?"

Dead.

The word slammed into Gabriela, knocking the air from her lungs.

Her fist clenched on instinct, and the sharp clock hand in her palm drove in deeper. Blood welled along the edge.

A broken image hit her—someone in a white shirt, clean and bright, his smile warm and gentle.

Then pain detonated behind her eyes.

Gabriela gasped and bent forward, both hands flying to her head as if she could hold her skull together. A low, strangled cry tore out of her.

Alarm cut through Stewart's composure. "Gabriela, what's wrong?"

Her vision fractured. The room tilted. The pressure in her head spiked to a blinding scream, and then the sound actually left her throat.

She collapsed.

Stewart lunged forward, catching her before she hit the floor. His voice snapped through the office, sharp and urgent. “Call an ambulance!”

His secretary froze, stunned — she had never seen Stewart lose control. Hands shaking, she grabbed her phone and dialed emergency services.

In the hospital, after a round of examinations, the doctor finally spoke. “It was a severe emotional shock. She’ll regain consciousness soon. There’s nothing physically abnormal.”

Stewart thanked him, then dragged a chair to her bedside and sat.

Gabriela, even unconscious, didn’t look peaceful.

Her brows pulled tight. Her lips trembled. Tears slid silently from the corners of her eyes, one after another.

Stewart watched, unsettled.

At thirty-three, he had long dismissed love as nothing more than a sales pitch. He kept women when convenient, let them go when bored, and regarded marriage as a scheme designed to trap men foolish enough to believe in it.

But watching her like this, something inside him twisted.

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His hand lifted on its own. He wiped the tears from her face with his thumb.

Her skin felt warm. The tears felt cold. The contrast sent a pulse through him he didn't understand.

The feeling intensified, tight and unfamiliar, low in his chest.

He leaned in, studying her face as if searching for an answer. What kind of pull did she have? What kind of woman could turn a man like Wesley into a fool?

Gabriela's eyes snapped open.

She stared at him without recognizing the room around her. Then, all at once, she grabbed his sleeve with a desperate grip. "Where's Allan? Tell me where he is."

Stewart went still.

Something in her voice wasn't right. She wasn't speaking like the woman he'd just watched collapse. She was speaking like a woman ripped out of another year.

"You know the answer," he said quietly. "The car accident took him."

Her fingers tightened around his sleeve, wrinkling the expensive fabric in her fist. Seconds passed. Her gaze was unfocused. Then, in a flat, distant voice, she said, "Right. Allan's gone. And I... I wiped him from my memory completely."

The words fractured on her tongue.

Her free hand flew to her chest, curling over her heart as if holding something in place that wanted to tear open. Then her eyes fluttered, and she slumped, slipping under again.

Understanding hit Stewart like a blow.

He had thought Gabriela had simply moved on with someone more powerful. That she had traded sentiment for survival. But that wasn't true at all.

She hadn't left Allan behind.

Her mind had erased him.

After calling the doctor back in, Stewart explained everything he had just witnessed.

The doctor listened, then nodded with clinical calm. "Selective amnesia. When grief reaches a level the mind can't tolerate, it sometimes discards the memory as a way to protect itself. Forgetting, in this case, is a defense."

Stewart stared at him.

Could grief do that?

Could a person care so much that their mind chose to rewrite itself just so they could keep breathing?

It rattled him.

The episode passed quickly. Within minutes, Gabriela's lashes flickered and she woke again.

This time, she was composed. Too composed.

Her face had settled into something calm and controlled, almost polite. But that brittle calm felt worse than any screaming.

Stewart leaned in, and for once there was nothing mocking in his voice. “How are you holding up?”

“Fine, really.” She even smiled. “I was young then. Couldn’t handle reality. Sorry for the drama, Mr. Williams.”

Stewart felt something sharp twist in his chest. He remembered every cutting thing he’d said to her. Every assumption. Every accusation.

“Stop it,” he said quietly. “Don’t laugh it off. I know you’re hurting. If you need anything — anything at all — tell me.”

Gabriela held his gaze. This time, she didn’t deflect.

“Actually,” she said softly. “There is something.”

He straightened. “Name it.”

“I need to see Myah. Do you know where she’s living now?”

"I'll find her," he said at once.

Locating Myah proved surprisingly simple. Stewart had the information within hours.

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After Myah's brother passed away, Wesley had stepped in to look after her.

Since she refused to move into the Moss Manor, he bought her a villa instead. When Gabriela knocked on the door, she was greeted by the sight of a yard brimming with white roses.

The garden was pristine, every rose in full bloom, a living sea of ivory.

It was Delia who opened the door. At the sight of Gabriela, her face lit with delight. "Miss Haynes! What a surprise. Have you come to see Miss Espinoza?"

Gabriela returned her smile. "I had a little free time today, so I thought I'd drop by."

Though Delia found the visit unexpected, she quickly welcomed her in. But the moment Stewart followed behind, Delia instinctively tried to block his way.

Stewart, all easy charm, introduced himself with a grin. “I’m a friend of Myah’s.”

Momentarily disarmed by his smile, Delia unconsciously stepped aside.

Inside the spacious yard, Myah was crouched among the roses, carefully trimming away stray branches.

Gabriela stopped in her tracks, her gaze softening as memories washed over her—Myah as a little girl, tugging at her sleeve, eager for her to help plant flowers.

Her eyes glistened with tears.

Sensing someone nearby, Myah turned sharply. “Delia, who’s here?”

Gabriela hurried forward, her voice gentle. “Myah.”

Recognizing the voice, Myah asked in surprise, “Miss Haynes? Really? How do you have time to visit? Did Wesley come with you?”

“I came on my own. He doesn’t know.” Gabriela’s voice lowered as she drew closer. “Myah, I’m sorry I didn’t visit you before now.”

Myah's body wavered, the scissors slipping from her hand.

Her voice trembled. "Gabriela? Is that really you?"

Choked with emotion, Gabriela nodded. "It's me."

For a heartbeat, Myah stood rooted in place, then stumbled toward her. "Gabriela! Where did you go? I wanted to search for you, but since I can't see, I didn't even know where to begin!"

"I'm so sorry," Gabriela whispered, her tears brimming. "I didn't know you were here."

Myah clutched Gabriela's hand with desperate strength, nails digging into her skin. Her excitement was almost frantic. "It doesn't matter. You're here now. Just—don't leave again."

Gabriela held her hand tighter. "I won't. I promise. I'll take care of you."

"You must mean it." Myah wept as she threw herself into Gabriela's arms. "My brother is gone. You can't leave me again."

"I'm so sorry," Gabriela murmured, holding Myah close as tears streamed down her cheeks.

A short distance away, Stewart had been lazily admiring the roses, but when he noticed Gabriela's tears, he froze.

Never in his life had he seen a woman cry like that—like she was pouring her very soul out through her tears.

But the sight unsettled him for another reason: every time he'd seen Gabriela before, she was the picture of cheer, carefree as sunshine.

He had thought she carried no burdens at all.

Walking closer, Stewart quietly offered them a packet of tissues. "Don't cry."

"Thank you."

Looking into her teary eyes, Stewart was struck by a strange impulse—he wanted to see her smile again, to catch even a glimpse of the warmth she once carried, and not this lingering sadness.

He cleared his throat awkwardly and said, "It's been years. Try not to let it weigh so heavily on you."

Gabriela gradually steadied herself, her voice softer as she murmured her gratitude. "Thank you for bringing me to Myah, Mr. Williams."

Stewart said nothing more.

Gabriela lingered at Myah's place for a while. Soon, the sky deepened into full darkness.

Myah clung to her sleeve, reluctant to part. "Gabriela, why don't you stay the night?"

"I can't." Gabriela smiled faintly, her hand brushing gently over Myah's hair. "There are things I need to take care of at home."

Unwilling yet helpless, Myah walked her to the door. Just as Gabriela reached for the handle, her phone buzzed sharply in her pocket.

It was Wesley.

"Gabriela, where are you?"

Gabriela's eyes flicked toward Myah, then her mind wandered briefly to Allan. For reasons she couldn't quite name, a lie slipped from her lips. "I'm at home."

"I've just returned," Wesley said. "I'm outside your place. Come see me." His voice carried a hint of weariness, probably just back from a flight.

Gabriela felt a sudden pang of anxiety and quickly said, "I have turned in for the night. You should go home and rest. I'll come see you tomorrow."

Wesley's brow creased. "What's wrong with your voice? Are you sick?"

"No, just a little tired." Gabriela forced a calm tone. "I'll be fine after some rest."

Wesley didn't push further. "Take care and rest well."

After hanging up, he went home, showered, and then checked his phone again. Watching the small red dot move across the screen, he tapped his fingers against the table in a steady rhythm.

Gabriela was out of the house.

Why had she lied to him?

Meanwhile, Stewart was driving Gabriela back to her place. With a teasing smile, he said, "After all the effort I put in today, aren't you at least going to invite me up for a cup of coffee?"

Feeling awkward, Gabriela replied, "It's too late tonight. How about I treat you to dinner another day?"

Stewart, ever the gentleman, didn't press. "Alright then."

Once she stepped inside her home, exhaustion hit her like a wave, leaving her body heavy and her spirit drained.

"Gabriela, why are you home late today?"

Farley, who had finally gotten used to calling her by her name, handed Truett over. The little boy eagerly reached out toward her.

As she cradled him close, Gabriela explained softly, "I had a few things to deal with."

Truett nestled against her like a kitten, rooting around in search of food. She carried him into the room to nurse him.

As she looked at her son's cherubic face, warmth spread through her chest and her strength seemed to return.

No matter what, she reminded herself, she had to keep moving forward and live well.

The next evening, Gabriela went to Wesley's place, greeting him with her usual cheerful, "Mr. Moss."

He studied her intently, long enough to make her scalp prickle.

"Is there something on my face?" she asked with a nervous smile.

"Did you not sleep well last night?" Wesley asked suddenly. "Your eyes look a little puffy."

"Oh?" Gabriela quickly lowered her head. "Maybe I drank too much water before bed."

Wesley didn't respond. Instead, he tapped the table with his finger. "Come here."

She hesitated, but then walked over.

Wesley reached out, pulling her close and searching her eyes. "You said we'd talk after I got back. Is now a good time?"

Gabriela slipped free of his grasp, her unease written all over her face. "I'm hungry. Let's eat first."

A heaviness settled in Wesley's chest.

Before he had left the country, Gabriela's attitude had begun to soften. How had things changed so much in less than a week? What had taken place?

He said nothing more, simply picking up his suit jacket and draping it over his arm. "Let's go."

During the meal, Gabriela carefully picked out the ingredients he disliked from the dishes, maintaining a deliberate silence. Her demeanor was cool and professional, more like that of a capable assistant than anything else. Wesley masked his thoughts behind a calm expression.

After dinner, he suggested, almost casually, that she stay at the apartment for the night.

Gabriela shook her head. "Mr. Moss, I'd rather stay at home for a few days."

His grip on the fork tightened ever so slightly. "Why?"

She met his gaze for a moment before lowering her eyes and shaking her head. Her memories of Allan had returned, leaving her uncertain of how to face Wesley.

"I'm okay, really. I just need some time at my own place. If there's nothing else you need, I'd like to go back now."

"I'll drive you." Wesley's voice was calm, but his chest felt heavy.

He took her home, sitting in the car until she stepped inside, then finally turned the wheel to leave.

Not long after, he called Billy. "I want to know who Gabriela has met and everything that's happened these past few days."