

His kiss 391

Chapter 391

“I’m not mad at Gabriela.” With that, Wesley stood up, his voice calm. “It’s late. I’m heading back. Myah, you should get some rest, too.”

Myah walked him to the door, still pleading. “Wesley, Gabriela is really a good person. Please don’t be mad at her.”

“I understand,” Wesley said. “Just go back inside.”

Outside, Billy was waiting. Seeing Wesley emerge, he immediately asked, “Mr. Moss, are we heading back to the condo or the estate tonight?”

Wesley simply waved him away. “You go on ahead.”

“Huh?” Billy was surprised.

But seeing Wesley’s unreadable face, he didn’t utter another word and quickly drove off.

Wesley strolled along the side of the road.

The air was fresh and the scenery was beautiful. Many couples were walking hand in hand along the path.

Up ahead at the dock, an elderly man was playing the violin.

Wesley stood and listened for a long time, the music stirring up memories.

He recalled how Gabriela had secretly visited him after his surgery. She ran away in fright when she realized he had spotted her. In the process, she accidentally dropped the book that held Allan's notes and signature.

Later, she worked as his personal secretary, making sure his medication and warm clothes were ready for him whenever he went on a trip because she was constantly worried about his heart condition.

She even stepped up to take a few drinks on his behalf during social gatherings.

It hurt to realize that every memory he had of her was actually tied to Allan.

He felt a searing agony in his chest.

He wasn't sure what expression was on his face. Was it anger? Or hurt? Possibly neither.

As Myah had said, Gabriela had only approached him because she couldn't get over Allan.

Wesley's lips curled into a sarcastic smile. How could he possibly be angry with such a devoted woman?

He then pulled out his phone and sent a brief message to Gabriela: "Liar."

No sooner had he sent the text than he received a call from his grandfather, asking him to come to his house.

"It's too late," Wesley said flatly. "If it's urgent, we can talk tomorrow. Otherwise, simply say it on the phone."

"I heard you're pursuing a woman named Gabriela. Is that correct?" Roger's voice was aging and hoarse, and it was filled with menace.

Wesley's gaze sharpened instantly. "So what?"

Roger sneered. "As the future heir of the Moss Group, being involved with a nobody and letting her stay at your place is utterly improper."

"I'm not interested in taking over the Moss Group," Wesley shot back. "And you have no say in who I spend my time with."

"I can't control you," Roger said, his voice steady despite the defiance he was met with. "But I can make sure she is kicked out of Okburg."

Wesley's knuckles went white as he clenched his phone. "Don't you dare lay a finger on her."

"If I sent someone after her, do you think you could stop it?"

Among his generation, Wesley was indeed exceptionally capable.

Stewart and Adolf were his only rivals, and that was only because they had inherited their family businesses.

In terms of personal capability, they weren't even in the same league as Wesley.

Yet, for all its power, the Apex Group could only stand shoulder to shoulder with its peers. Compared to the century-old Moss Group, it still fell short.

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Wesley knew his grandfather was right. He wasn't yet strong enough to oppose the entire Moss family.

Ultimately, Wesley had no choice but to return to the Mosses' house.

Soon after, he learned why Roger had summoned him back overnight.

The Howard family was there for a marriage alliance.

The visitors were Rebecca and her cousin, Jasper Howard, the formidable head of the Howard family.

He had made a name for himself by securing the dock project in Solville at the age of twenty-one, shocking the business world.

Jasper politely shook Wesley's hand. "It's an honor to finally meet you, Mr. Moss."

Wesley exchanged a few pleasantries in return.

When Rebecca spotted Wesley, her eyes glowed.

With a bright smile, she walked up to him. "It's so good to see you again, Wesley."

The two had been schoolmates, but their relationship was nothing more than a casual acquaintance.

Wesley's response was distant. "Hello, Miss Howard."

Rebecca didn't seem to mind his aloofness. She gave him a gentle smile. "Why are you still so formal with me?"

Wesley's brow furrowed slightly. "I'm sorry, Miss Howard. We're just acquaintances."

Rebecca looked a little hurt, lowering her eyes awkwardly as she fell silent.

Roger scowled. "Wesley, come with me."

After a brief hesitation, Wesley followed Roger into the study.

The house was brightly lit late that night as Wesley and Roger talked for three hours straight.

No one knew what they discussed. When Wesley finally emerged, his expression was cold, his eyes devoid of warmth.

Roger, however, looked quite content, a faint smile on his face.

Pretending to be oblivious to Wesley's foul mood, Rebecca maintained her gentle, dignified demeanor as she approached him. "What were you and your grandpa talking about for so long?"

Wesley didn't even look at her.

Jasper watched Roger and noticed a subtle nod from the old man before he relaxed. He smiled at Rebecca. "It's getting late, Becca. We shouldn't disturb them any longer."

He and Rebecca then said their goodbyes to the Mosses.

Rebecca inquired excitedly as they were leaving, "How did it go? Do the Mosses agree to the marriage alliance?"

Jasper teased, "Can't wait to know the answer, huh?"

"Just tell me!" Rebecca playfully tugged at his arm.

At last, Jasper stopped teasing. "It's settled."

Rebecca's eyes sparkled. "When can Wesley and I get engaged?"

"You're so eager to marry him, huh?" Jasper said, a laugh in his voice. "We'll pick a date for the engagement ceremony."

The two joked their way back to their home.

Inside the living room, their parents were waiting for them.

Rebecca rushed over to her mother, Lauren Howard, eager to share the good news. "Mom, Wesley and his grandpa agreed—"

Lauren smiled warmly. "You're lovely and capable. With our family's clout, tell me, what guy in all of Okburg would be dumb enough to say no to you?"

Rebecca leaned against her mother's arm. "You're teasing me again, Mom."

Then she turned to Matthew Howard, her father, who had not spoken. There was excitement in her eyes. "Why don't you say anything, Dad? Do you not feel happy for me?"

Matthew chuckled softly. "I've heard Wesley is outstanding, and I'm thrilled for you to marry such an excellent man."

"Thank you, Dad," Rebecca said, her joy evident as she continued to act sweet.

In contrast, while Matthew appeared happy, his eyes seemed distant, as if lost in thought.

Lauren noticed his distraction, and her expression turned cold.

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While the Howard family was eager to broadcast their marriage alliance with the Moss family, Wesley remained stone-faced.

His expression had settled back into its usual mask of calm, and when Roger reminded him to nurture his relationship with Rebecca, Wesley agreed with mechanical compliance.

"I understand you're frustrated with me right now, but you'll grasp my reasoning eventually," Roger said with practiced sincerity. "Shared meals and outings — that's how genuine bonds take root."

Wesley's response came flat and final. "If that's everything, I'm leaving."

He walked out without another word.

Back in his apartment, Wesley retrieved his phone and checked the screen, but the message he'd sent earlier remained unanswered.

He placed the device on the table, his face betraying nothing.

Meanwhile, Gabriela had finally coaxed Truett into peaceful sleep.

She sat beside the slumbering baby, anxiety gnawing at her chest as she contemplated tomorrow's meeting. Would Wesley find it in himself to forgive her deception?

Truett's lips curved into a sleepy smile, tiny dimples appearing like perfect indentations.

Even in dreams, joy painted his features — what a blissful little angel.

Gabriela found herself smiling in response, tension melting from her shoulders as she traced her finger along Truett's soft cheek. "You're absolutely precious, sweetheart. I know your father will adore you too."

After a scalding shower, she picked up her phone to find Wesley had sent a message.

“Liar.”

The single word hit her like a physical blow.

Had Wesley discovered the truth about the child?

Panic fluttered in her chest, and she nearly typed a response demanding an explanation.

Instead, she forced herself to wait, deciding their face-to-face meeting would serve as the moment for complete honesty.

If he still wanted her in his life, she would weather any storm beside him.

If he rejected her...

Gabriela’s eyes drifted to the sleeping infant in his crib.

She would raise Truett alone and pour herself into her career.

With this resolution settled in her mind, sleep claimed her.

The following afternoon arrived heavy with nervous energy as Gabriela typed her message: “Mr. Moss, would you be available to meet at Golden Honey Café at 6:30 tonight?”

Hours crawled by without response.

Finally, she surrendered and dialed his number. Two rings later, Wesley’s voice cut through the line. “What do you need?”

His arctic tone made her stomach drop. “Mr. Moss, did you receive my message?”

“I saw it.” Wesley’s words carried the weight of indifference. “I’m unavailable tonight.”

“That’s perfectly fine,” Gabriela rushed to reply. “Perhaps tomorrow—”

“Tomorrow won’t work either,” Wesley cut her off with surgical precision. “Is what you want to say important? If not, tell me over the phone.”

“Mr. Moss, what I wanted to discuss...”

Her words faltered as a woman's voice drifted through the connection. "Wesley, why are you still talking? I'm absolutely famished."

"On my way," Wesley responded to the unseen woman.

Something cold settled in Gabriela's chest.

That voice carried dangerous familiarity — she'd heard it before.

The woman sounded so intimate with Wesley...

When Wesley returned his attention to the call, his tone had grown even more distant. "If there's nothing pressing, I'm ending this conversation."

"Nothing urgent," Gabriela heard herself say.

The line went dead immediately.

Gabriela stared at the silent phone, her mind spinning in empty circles.

She forced rational thoughts to surface — Wesley possessed exceptional qualities; naturally, attractive women would orbit around him.

This was normal. She could accept this reality.

Despite everything, Gabriela made her way to Golden Honey Café.

Wesley deserved to know about his child.

She crafted another message: “Mr. Moss, I’m waiting at the café. Please stop by when your schedule allows — I have something important to share. It requires only ten minutes of your time.”

Such monumental news demanded a proper conversation, not the cold efficiency of a phone call.

At The Gilded Fork, Wesley glanced at the two fresh messages, lost in thought.

Rebecca observed him from across the table. “Wesley, what has captured your attention?”

“Nothing worth mentioning,” Wesley replied, shutting off the screen with deliberate casualness.

“Wesley, Roger mentioned your heart condition troubles you. Try this — it is deep-sea fish, excellent for cardiovascular health,” she said, transferring the dish to Wesley’s plate.

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The fish lay garnished with fresh scallions and cilantro, and Wesley’s expression remained carved from stone. “I have a fish allergy.”

Rebecca’s face flushed with embarrassment. “I’ve known you all this time, yet I never realized you couldn’t eat fish.”

“No harm done. Please, enjoy your meal.”

Their conversation limped along in sporadic bursts, Rebecca carrying most of the dialogue while Wesley offered occasional, perfunctory responses.

The atmosphere hung heavy with suffocating tedium.

After dinner concluded, Wesley instructed Billy to escort Rebecca home.

Before sliding into the car, Rebecca turned with hopeful eyes. “Wesley, may I begin working at your company tomorrow?”

Wesley offered a nod.

Rebecca's face lit up with pure delight. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

Billy, meanwhile, seethed with quiet irritation.

Where had this Rebecca emerged from? Why was he suddenly demoted to personal chauffeur duty?

He served as a top-tier assistant, not some common driver.

As Billy navigated through traffic, Rebecca attempted to bridge the silence with conversation.

"You're Billy Clarke, aren't you? My cousin speaks of you constantly. He insists you're extraordinarily capable and well-regarded throughout the industry. If he weren't terrified of crossing Wesley, he'd steal you away as his own assistant."

Tonight, Billy embraced the role of stoic driver with unwavering commitment. Regardless of Rebecca's chatter, he maintained his composure, responding with mechanical politeness, "You're too kind."

Rebecca pressed further. "What foods does Wesley actually enjoy? I noticed he barely lifted his fork tonight — perhaps the restaurant's cuisine didn't suit his palate."

Wesley's refined tastes had been thoroughly shaped by Gabriela's cooking. Did Rebecca honestly believe some mediocre restaurant fare could possibly satisfy him now?

Billy delivered his response with practiced professionalism. "My apologies, but I'm merely an assistant. Mr. Moss's culinary preferences fall outside my area of expertise."

Rebecca launched several more inquiries, but Billy deflected each attempt with skillful evasion. Eventually, she abandoned her questioning and turned her attention to the passing cityscape beyond the window.

Around 9:30, Wesley finally made his way to Golden Honey Café.

Gabriela remained exactly where she'd promised to be.

She occupied the window-side couch, fidgeting with childlike restlessness — leaning forward, then back, her feet swinging in nervous rhythm.

Impatience radiated from her posture, yet she'd maintained her lonely vigil for hours.

Wesley pushed through the entrance with purposeful strides.

The café stood empty of other patrons, and Gabriela spotted him the instant he appeared. “Mr. Moss, you came!”

Her smile bloomed across her features, her eyes transforming into delighted crescents.

How could she radiate such joy after waiting for hours?

Wesley ignored her enthusiasm entirely, settling beside her with glacial detachment. “Speak quickly. My time is limited.”

Gabriela’s expression faltered, her voice dropping to an uncertain whisper. “What’s troubling you? Has something happened...”

Wesley yanked at his collar with visible agitation. “You have ten minutes. Not a second longer.”

His suit jacket hung open, the top two buttons of his crisp white shirt undone. His eyes burned with dark intensity — upon closer inspection, they appeared distinctly bloodshot.

This arctic, menacing demeanor sent waves of unease through Gabriela’s entire being.

She drew a steadying breath, forcing her lips into what she hoped resembled a reassuring smile. “Regarding my comment about Allan the other day — I never intended for it to sound so...”

“I’ve already received your apology.” Wesley severed her words with a blade of cold amusement, his gaze cutting through her like sharpened ice. “Repeating hollow platitudes serves no purpose.”

His overwhelming presence crushed her attempted smile into extinction.

“I need you to understand that my actions that day weren’t deliberate. I truly—”

Under Wesley’s polar stare, Gabriela summoned every ounce of courage and said, “I have feelings for you as well. I said those—”

“You feared for my heart condition, but not because of my well-being — I comprehend perfectly.” Wesley’s interruption dripped with acidic mockery. “Gabriela, you’re nothing if not a hopeless romantic. Should I commission a trophy in your honor?”

Gabriela sat frozen in complete bewilderment. “What are you even saying?”

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“Stop pretending you don’t understand me.” Wesley’s voice dripped with scorn as he let out a sharp, mocking snort. He leaned in close to Gabriela, their faces mere inches apart. “Your little tricks won’t work anymore, you liar.”

His breath somehow carried a chilling edge.

Gabriela's heart quickened with unease, urging her to pull back.

Wesley's hand shot to the back of her head, holding her firmly in place, studying her panicked expression as if watching a carefully crafted facade crumble.

"What a shame," he sighed. "Such a beautiful face, wasted on a liar."

Gabriela stared at him, dazed.

His gaze burned with disappointment and anger.

In that moment, it hit her — Wesley had misunderstood her.

She rushed to explain, her voice urgent. "What I said about Allan that day was out of frustration. I never doubted you, not once."

Even without documents or footage showing that Wesley had no involvement in Allan's car accident, she would never question his integrity.

She'd only wanted to cut ties completely, which was why her words had been so harsh.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Wesley said, a cold smile curling his lips. “Keep your deceitful words for someone else.” He released her slowly, his eyes glinting like frost. “I wish I’d never met you.”

The weight of his words sent a surge of panic through Gabriela.

She lunged forward, grasping his arm. “Please, let me explain. It’s not what you think—”

“Enough.” Wesley pried her fingers off one by one, his voice like steel. “How could you be so cruel? Still trying to fool me with your lies?”

He suddenly pulled her close by the waist, his hand burning through the fabric. Her heart fluttered as he let go abruptly.

“That night you fell into my arms, lying beneath me — who were you thinking of? That hairpin you left behind...” He reached into his pocket, pulled out the pin, and—

He tossed it at her. “A gift from Allan, wasn’t it? That’s why you were so desperate to retrieve it.”

Now she finally realized what she had lost in Room 1205 — a hairpin that was, in fact, a keepsake from Allan.

Gabriela knelt on the floor, retrieving it.

Wesley loomed over her, his voice relentless. “When you read ‘The Summer of Maybe’ to me, who was in your thoughts?”

With each word, his tone grew colder. He tossed the book at her feet.

It fell open to a marked page, revealing the line: “But every once in a while, you find someone who’s iridescent, and when you do, nothing will ever compare.”

The line had been underscored, and a name — Allan — was written beside it.

“You pushed me away time and again, yet you never truly left. You only cared about your own desires, ignoring mine.” Wesley’s expression was unyielding as he dropped the scarf she’d knitted onto the floor.

“Remember this: Allan saved me. I owe you nothing. Don’t ever come near me again,” he said.

With that, Wesley turned to leave.

“Wesley!” Gabriela’s voice broke as she called after him, her eyes red and brimming, clutching the scarf. “Won’t you even hear me out?”

He turned back slowly, his gaze flickering with a tangle of emotions too complex to unravel, before settling into a chilling coldness.

His eyes fell to her wrist. "Give it back."

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Gabriela's chest ached. She pressed her hand protectively over the bracelet, shaking her head as tears spilled. "I was wrong, I know. I'll never say those things again. Please, forgive me."

Wesley's expression remained impassive. "Hand it over."

His cold stare startled her, and she stumbled back a few steps.

Without a word, Wesley reached out, deftly untying the bracelet from her wrist.

He clenched it in his fist and walked away.

Gabriela sank onto the sofa, heartbroken.

In that moment, she was grateful for the café's soft cushions, a small refuge for her crumbling composure.

She sat motionless, unaware of the hours slipping away until a staff member softly told her the café was closing.

"Sorry, I'll go," Gabriela murmured, gathering the scarf and book as she left the café.

She was walking in a daze when suddenly — a car screeched to a stop right beside her. A hand reached out, yanking her inside with swift force.

Two burly men flanked her, gripping her shoulders tightly and warning her not to move as they confiscated her phone.

Was this a kidnapping?

Dread settled heavily in her chest. "Who are you? Where are you taking me?"

No one answered.

The car raced through the night, heading toward an isolated stretch of road.

Gabriela forced herself to stay calm, quietly assessing the situation.

There were three men, including the driver. She knew she couldn't overpower them.

But they hadn't restrained her. Perhaps, when the door opened, she could seize a chance to escape.

Before she could form a solid plan, the car halted abruptly.

The men opened the door, shoved her out, and sped off, leaving her sprawled on the ground.

Gabriela's knee struck a jagged rock, pain shooting through her leg, rendering her unable to stand.

As the car's taillights vanished, the last trace of light faded.

No streetlights illuminated the area, leaving only darkness.

Under the faint glow of the moon, Gabriela realized she was stranded in a desolate wilderness, surrounded by endless mountains.

They'd taken her phone and abandoned her in a place no car would pass, leaving her to fate.

What wretched luck.

She wondered whom she had crossed and why she was experiencing such a string of misfortunes.

Gabriela sat on the ground for a moment before forcing herself to stand, trying to recall which direction the car had come from.

The cold was merciless, the wind howling with an eerie wail.

Fear gripped her, but she pressed forward, each step a battle against the pain in her knee.

Since she had skipped dinner, exhaustion set in quickly.

Regret crept in — she should've eaten something while waiting for Wesley, or at least sipped that hot coffee.

Now, she lacked the energy for sorrow or regret; she might freeze to death out here.

The more she dwelled on it, the heavier her heart grew.

She couldn't stand the thought of her son Truett growing up without parents, just as she had.

To her relief, she'd left a sizable sum for Truett's care, entrusted to Farley.

Gabriela's thoughts spiraled. She walked for what felt like hours, yet the landscape remained unchanged — endless darkness, no escape.

Exhausted and unable to go on, she collapsed to the ground.

The temperature plummeted further, her fingers too stiff to move.

Was this it? Would she really freeze to death by the roadside?

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The biting cold seized Gabriela, each gust of wind feeling like a blade against her skin.

She could feel her consciousness fraying at the edges, her mind slipping in and out of focus as the freezing air gnawed deeper into her bones.

Her body shivered violently, her thoughts unraveling in the numbing dark.

She didn't see the black vehicle idling a short distance away.

Behind its tinted glass, a woman reclined in the back seat. Oversized sunglasses swallowed most of her face, but the sharp, malicious curl of her mouth was unmistakable.

"Ma'am," the driver murmured, his voice tight with worry. "If she died, wouldn't that cause problems for us?"

The woman's laugh was a low sneer. "What's there to fear? That wretch tried to steal my man. She deserves to freeze to death on a roadside like this."

The driver's hands tightened on the wheel, unease flickering in his eyes. "But..."

"But what?" she snapped, her tone turning razor-sharp.

When his hesitation lingered, she warned, "Let me make this clear. If you dare breathe a word of this to my cousin, you'll regret it."

The driver swallowed his words, unwilling to risk further angering her.

Minutes dragged on before she finally muttered, her tone clipped, “Head back.”

“Understood.” He obeyed, easing the car forward and steering past Gabriela’s shivering figure on the roadside.

From behind her dark lenses, the woman’s gaze lingered on the girl. Wesley might have been at her side, but his heart was elsewhere — and that thought ignited a sharp, icy fury inside her.

“That fucking bitch. I should’ve run her straight into the dirt,” she thought with malice.

Through her haze, Gabriela caught the faint rumble of an engine sweeping past. She forced her lips to move, to call out, but the sound that escaped was no stronger than a whisper lost to the night.

The taillights disappeared into the distance, leaving her alone once more. The cold gnawed into her bones, and dread crept through her — what if she truly froze to death out here?

At last, another vehicle braked sharply nearby, its headlights cutting across the snow. A figure hurried out, feet crunching against the ground, and rushed toward her.

“Gabriela? Why are you out here? Are you hurt?”

Gabriela caught the warmth in the concerned voice and finally let go of her tension. Her rigid nerves loosened, and she allowed her eyes to drift shut.

When she came to again, she was nestled in a soft, warm bed that smelled faintly of fresh linen.

Pushing herself upright, she glanced around, unable to spot any slippers.

Her bare feet touched the cool floor as she swung her legs down, the unfamiliar room making her even more determined to learn where she had ended up.

She wandered out of the room and followed the staircase down, pausing when a sharp clatter echoed from below.

Drawn by the noise, she stepped into the kitchen and found Brenden wrestling with pots and utensils.

With surprise flickering in her voice, Gabriela blurted, "Mr. Saunders?"

At the sound of her voice, Brenden turned. His expression lit up with relief. "You're awake!"

She gave a small nod, her voice soft. "Did you... save me?"

“Of course I did,” he answered, brushing his hands against his apron. “You were half-frozen and unconscious. I carried you to the car, cranked up the heat, and waited until you finally stirred.”

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His expression carried a hint of smugness as he went on, “Gabriela, looks like you owe me again.”

Her lips curved into a faint, grateful smile. “Thank you,” she said softly, her tone sincere. “And... I’m sorry about the other night.”

Just a few days earlier, she had hurled sharp words at him, yet here he was — no grudges, no hesitation, saving her once more.

Brenden brushed it off with a casual wave. “Don’t mention it.”

As he turned back to the kitchen, he picked up the pot of pasta he had just cooked. Grabbing it barehanded, he yelped when the heat bit into his skin.

The sight made Gabriela stifle a laugh.

She caught his wrist, tugging him toward the sink to run cool water over the burn, then deftly picked up the pot herself with gloves.

Brenden didn't even bother tending to his hand. Instead, he leaned close with a playful grin. "You're in luck — you just became the first person ever to taste something I've cooked in my life."

He wore a self-satisfied smirk, obviously fishing for compliments.

Gabriela humored him with a light smile. "Then I guess I'm about to taste something special. Thank you."

When she lifted the lid, a sharp burnt odor rushed out.

The pasta was a gloopy disaster, but the real nightmare was waiting underneath — a solid, charcoal-like sheet of what used to be sauce.

Brenden's grin froze on his face. Rubbing the back of his head, he muttered sheepishly, "I swear I stood right there the whole time. How did it still burn?"

Gabriela bit back a laugh, shaking her head at his logic.

She emptied the ruined pasta, rinsed the pot clean, and glanced at him with a teasing smile. "Any pasta left? I'll cook something for myself."

“Yeah, of course,” Brenden responded right away. “Why not rest a bit more? Don’t trouble yourself with cooking. I’ll order food delivery for you.”

Gabriela smiled. “Don’t worry about me. I’m okay, really.”

For the first time, she found Brenden entertaining. If he didn’t spend his time chasing after every pretty face, he might actually be a decent man.

Then she moved to the stove, pulling out ingredients to make pasta.

Brenden lingered nearby like a restless shadow, watching her every move. “I’m starving too,” he said with a hopeful grin. “Mind making enough for me as well?”

“Sure thing.”

Gabriela quickly whipped up two steaming plates of pasta. The fragrance filled the kitchen.

When she set Brenden’s plate down, her hand almost moved on instinct to pluck out the greens, but she caught herself — Brenden wasn’t Wesley, and he never fussed over such details.

While she hesitated, Brenden was already there, balancing both plates and carrying them to the table with a careless grin.

He dug in immediately, savoring the rich aroma as his gaze kept straying across the table.

Her skin looked luminous under the light, the pale fabric of her dress making her appear even more delicate, her eyes bright and unguarded, her long dark hair slipping down over her shoulders.

Even sitting quietly with her fork poised, she stirred something restless in him.

Trying to mask the way his pulse quickened, Brenden leaned back and said with an easy smile, “You know, this really is the first time I’ve cooked anything, Gabriela. Don’t laugh at me for it.”

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He was accustomed to women vying for his attention, but now, as he tried to turn his life around by chasing a woman with sincere feelings, he found it far more difficult than he’d ever imagined.

“Don’t worry — everyone’s first time cooking turns out a little messy. What matters is that you gave it a shot!” Gabriela reassured him.

The two of them lingered over the meal, chatting casually as they ate.

When their plates were empty, Brenden finally circled back to the question that had been on his mind. “So tell me — how did you end up collapsing out there? Lucky for you, I was racing with some friends nearby. Otherwise, I might not have been around to save you.”

“I was kidnapped and dumped there,” Gabriela explained, a shiver running through her as she recalled the two towering kidnapers. “I still don’t know who they were.”

Brenden leaned closer, his tone laced with curiosity. “And your phone? Why didn’t you call the police?”

“They took it too,” Gabriela answered, the memory sparking another thought.

The argument with Wesley before she was dragged away came rushing back, and she blurted out, “When you found me, did you happen to see a book and a scarf?”

“Oh, yeah. I made sure to get them both for you,” Brenden assured her with an easy smile. “They’re still in the car — I’ll bring them in later.”

“Thank you,” Gabriela murmured softly.

Her gaze drifted to the clock; it was already six. By now, Farley was surely awake. “Can I borrow your phone to make a call?”

Without hesitation, Brenden pressed his phone into her hand.

Gabriela stepped out onto the balcony, the morning air cool against her skin, and dialed. Farley's voice came through immediately, scolding her for disappearing the entire night.

Gabriela offered Farley an excuse to ease his worries before shifting the topic to Truett.

Farley immediately reassured her. "Truett cried a little last night, but once he had some formula, he fell asleep. Don't stress yourself."

Relief loosened the knot in her chest. "I'll stop by the company later and be back at the villa by noon."

Once the call ended, she handed the phone back to Brenden with a soft, "Thank you."

He waved it off casually. "Not a problem."

The sky still lingered in darkness, the neighborhood hushed. Brenden studied her delicate features and felt his heartbeat stumble.

He swallowed hard and shifted his gaze away in embarrassment. "I'll grab your book and scarf."

As he headed toward the parking area, he caught sight of Fiona.

Concerned that Gabriela might misinterpret his relationship with Fiona, Brenden's jaw tightened, irritation flashing in his eyes. "Why do you keep showing up uninvited?"

Fiona didn't flinch. She tilted her chin with confidence. "You handed me the door code — that's basically an open invitation, don't you think? Anyway, is Gabriela here? I heard she was in an accident. Word is that she got hit by a car — was she disfigured?"

Fiona hadn't come out of concern. The moment she caught wind of Gabriela's accident, she had rushed over before dawn, hoping to see her face disfigured.

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Brenden's brow creased into deep lines. "Instead of asking if Gabriela was okay, you jumped straight to whether she was disfigured. Fiona, you were hoping for it, weren't you? You are really cruel."

Fiona let out an irritated scoff. "Why do you shield Gabriela so fiercely? If she matters that much to you, then pursue her properly. You rescued her again — now seize this opportunity!"

Fiona was deeply frustrated that foolish Brenden had still failed to win Gabriela's heart, even with her help. Perhaps this time, his heroic act would finally unlock the door to her affections.

"I want to try, but she's..." Brenden began, but his phone's sharp ring cut through his words. He glanced at the caller ID and gestured for Fiona to remain silent.

Whatever voice spoke from the other end drained all color from Brenden's face. "What? Dead? Already transported to the morgue? Yes, we are friends. I'll drive there immediately..."

Fiona leaned forward, straining to hear, and her heart plummeted into her stomach.

Dead? Gabriela had actually died?

Did this mean she no longer had to compete with her for Wesley?

Before Fiona could laugh out loud, Brenden ended the call abruptly and said, "I have to rush to the hospital right now. You go inside."

Fiona pressed forward urgently. "Dead? Truly?"

She had only hoped for Gabriela to be disfigured. This outcome went far beyond her expectations.

Brenden gave a grim nod.

"I'll go with you," Fiona declared immediately.

Brenden shook his head. "You'd better not go. The doctor warned that the body is completely covered in blood — it's a horrific sight — and they've already moved it to the morgue."

As he spoke, he thrust a book and a scarf into Fiona's arms. "These belong to Gabriela. Help me take them inside and let her know I need to go to the hospital now."

With that, he jumped into his car and sped off.

Fiona stood there, bewildered, holding the book and scarf tightly against her chest.

She was surprised that Brenden would keep Gabriela's belongings, even though that woman was gone. And what did he mean by "let her know"? Didn't Brenden live alone?

Fiona hesitated, reluctant to step through the door.

A sudden crack of thunder split the sky above. She shuddered at the sound. It looked like a torrential rain was about to begin. Returning home in such severe weather would be far too risky.

Fiona quickened her steps, deciding to go inside.

She entered the spacious living room, exchanged her shoes for slippers at the entrance, and sat on the plush sofa.

Suddenly, she heard water running in the kitchen and the distinct clatter of dishes being handled. The sound made her freeze.

Brenden had only returned to the country several days ago, and as far as she knew, he hadn't hired any domestic help yet.

Could an intruder have broken in?

Fear clenched in Fiona's chest. Her nerves tightened like violin strings.

She grabbed her phone to call Brenden immediately.

Meanwhile, Brenden was driving through a sudden downpour, thinking about how often it had been raining lately.

He had spent over six months overseas, and the electrical system in his house, left unused for so long, had developed several minor issues. On the very day he returned, even though only a light drizzle was falling outside, the lights in his house had begun flickering in strange patterns. But after Gabriela's rejection, he hadn't had the energy to deal with repairs.

Now Gabriela was staying at his place. The sky was completely dark, and Brenden worried she might be frightened by the atmosphere. He quickly reached for his phone, then remembered she didn't have hers with her, so he called Fiona instead.

Fiona answered in a hushed, urgent voice. "Is there a burglar somewhere in your house?"