

His kiss 461

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Stewart had the sudden urge to slip away, but Loretta's next words stopped him in his tracks, leaving him confused.

She offered a kindly smile. "Tell me, Stewart, are you seeing anyone right now?"

The unexpected question left him momentarily stunned, though his answer came out automatically. "No."

Her expression brightened with deeper warmth, brimming with fondness. "Would you mind sharing your phone number with me?"

When he hesitated, Loretta leaned in slightly, her voice gentle yet firm. "You drove me to the hospital so late at night. I can't let that go without thanking you properly. Let me treat you to a meal sometime."

Stewart tried to brush it off with polite formality. "Really, it was nothing, Loretta. No need to trouble yourself."

"You can call me Loretta," she said, her eyes twinkling.

She asked a nearby nurse for a pen and paper, then held it out to him with expectant patience. "Please, write your number here."

Faced with her unwavering insistence, Stewart finally surrendered and wrote his phone number down, handing it back with reluctant grace.

Stewart then offered to drive Loretta home, and following her directions, the car came to a stop outside Rosemont Gardens.

“Loretta... you live here?” he asked, unable to hide his curiosity.

She inclined her head lightly, her tone playful. “Why do you sound so surprised?”

A soft laugh slipped past his lips. “Oh, nothing serious. It’s just that I happen to know someone who lives here too.”

Loretta shook her head with a gentle smile. “I’m not a permanent resident. I’m only staying here for now.”

The thought of this elderly woman wandering the streets alone at night—without a single family member by her side when she had visited the hospital for her sprained ankle—tugged at Stewart’s heart.

He spoke with quiet sincerity. “If you ever run into trouble, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

Loretta thanked him warmly once again.

Back at the villa, Loretta recounted the evening to Miriam. A hint of admiration lingered in her voice.

“That young man truly has a kind heart. And from the way he dresses, I’d say he’s doing quite well for himself—every bit as well-off as Wesley.”

Miriam tilted her head, curiosity flickering in her eyes. “Are you really thinking of pairing him with Gabriela?”

Loretta gave a small shake of her head. “Not so fast. We should learn more about him first.”

By the following morning, Loretta had already made discreet inquiries through Stacey and obtained the address of Stewart’s company. After a brief discussion, she and Miriam agreed to pay him a visit.

When they arrived at the Williams Group headquarters, they craned their necks to take in the towering glass building, their expressions a mix of awe and admiration.

Loretta murmured with surprise, “This place even outshines Wesley’s offices.”

Miriam gave an approving nod. “It really is remarkable.”

Together, they approached the front desk and politely asked if Stewart was available.

The receptionist, momentarily taken aback to hear the CEO's name spoken so casually by two plainly dressed older women, hesitated. Still, unwilling to risk offending them, she quickly placed a call to Erik.

By chance, Stewart had no pressing engagements that morning. When Erik relayed the message, Stewart's lips curved into an amused smile.

"She actually managed to track me down here?" he mused, a trace of amusement flickering in his eyes.

He descended quickly, his steps brisk against the polished floor.

Loretta greeted him warmly, pressing a small box of pastries into his hands while thanking him over and over.

He accepted the gift with a shy smile. "It really wasn't anything big. No need to go to such trouble, Loretta."

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Her eyes wandered over the spacious lobby. "Tell me, Stewart, do you actually own this entire building?"

The blunt question caught him off guard, and he let out a quiet laugh. "I do, yes."

Loretta's expression softened into an approving nod. "Oh, will you have a little free time in the next few days? I'd love to invite you over for a meal."

Stewart waved his hands quickly. "Really, there's no need. It was just a small thing, nothing worth troubling yourself over, Loretta."

Loretta shook her head firmly, her smile warm but insistent. "Nonsense. It's necessary. Or are you telling me you're too busy to visit an old woman?"

Caught between courtesy and her persistence, Stewart could only give in. With a faint smile, he said, "I'd love to. Thank you for the invitation."

Her eyes lit up with satisfaction. "Good. I'll give you a call then, and you must come."

"I'll definitely be there," Stewart promised with a nod.

Once Loretta and Miriam departed, Erik leaned closer, curiosity written all over his face. "Mr. Williams, how do you know that elderly lady? She looks awfully familiar, like I've seen her before."

Stewart chuckled lightly, brushing it off. “You might be confusing her with someone else.”

Erik nodded and dropped the matter.

Several days passed before Stewart’s phone buzzed with a call from Loretta—inviting him over for dinner.

Stewart had just wrapped up a grueling meeting, the exhaustion etched into his face, and longed only for a quiet evening of rest. Still, he couldn’t bring himself to refuse Loretta’s earnest invitation. Reluctantly, he asked Erik to drive him over.

Once she ended her call with Stewart, Loretta immediately called Wesley, instructing him to bring Rebecca along. “You’re about to get engaged, and I still haven’t even met her. Bring Rebecca over so I can finally have a look at her.”

Wesley’s brow furrowed, irritation in his voice. “Grandma, I’m too busy to spare a moment right now.”

“Busier than me?” Loretta shot back without missing a beat. “I have plenty of gardening to handle. You’re bringing her over today, and the two of you will help me with it.”

Wesley had always treated Loretta with respect, and defying her over something so minor felt unthinkable.

Letting out a weary sigh, he finally conceded, “Alright, Grandma. I’ll bring her over right away.”

That day, Loretta had settled back into her countryside home.

The scallions she’d planted stood tall and ripe for pulling, while the vegetables and beans she had sown the month before had flourished into plump, green rows—perfect to be harvested and served to her guests.

When Wesley and Rebecca arrived, Loretta wasted no time ushering them straight into the fields.

Rebecca, who had been pampered her whole life, stood frozen at the edge of the vegetable patch in her designer heels. She couldn’t bring herself to step onto the damp soil, certain her shoes would sink into the mud and never come back out.

Meanwhile, Wesley had already slipped off his jacket with an easy motion, rolled up his crisp sleeves, and crouched down to pull scallions. Loretta hovered nearby, pointing out every flaw in his technique while demonstrating the right way to handle it. Unbothered, Wesley followed her instructions with quiet patience.

Rebecca could hardly believe her eyes. Wesley—so polished, so meticulous in every aspect of life—was actually doing farm work? And doing it without complaint, all because his grandmother asked?

Her thoughts whirled in a frenzy. If she could secure Loretta’s good graces, Wesley would surely see her in a new light.

Still, frustration simmered beneath her smile. Had Wesley warned her about the farm work, she would have worn flats instead of teetering uselessly in heels.

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Loretta took in Rebecca's sleek city look and delicate features, and despite a flicker of discontent, she couldn't help warming to her. Together, Rebecca and Wesley gave off the glow of a couple blessed by heaven. Since Wesley favored her, Loretta chose not to press too hard.

"Rebecca," she called out kindly. "Working in the dirt with those heels will be tough. Why don't you head inside and help wash the vegetables instead?"

Rebecca offered a quick, apologetic smile. "I'm so sorry, Loretta. Wesley didn't mention we'd be working in the fields today."

Hearing her gentle voice and seeing the poise in her manners, Loretta's frustration faded. She waved her hand lightly. "It's fine, dear. Go on in."

Rebecca, eager to win favor, headed to the yard faucet with a basket of freshly picked vegetables, every movement soft and elegant.

Loretta bustled into the kitchen, and Rebecca threw herself into helping with the vegetables. Her enthusiasm far outpaced her skill, leaving the counters a jumble of clutter, but the sincerity in her efforts was so obvious that Loretta chose not to scold her. The sudden chime of the doorbell cut through the clatter, and Loretta called for her to answer it.

Rebecca hurried over and pulled the door open. Waiting on the doorstep were none other than Fiona and Brenden. The sight of Fiona instantly dragged her mind back to that mortifying night at Golden Days, but she forced her lips into a polite smile.

“What brings you both here?” she asked smoothly.

Fiona’s brows pinched together as she countered, “Loretta invited us for dinner. Why are you here?”

“I came with Wesley,” Rebecca replied lightly. “He’s outside helping in the field, and I’ve been in the kitchen lending Loretta a hand.” Slipping easily into the role of hostess, she gestured toward the living room with a graceful air. “Come in, you two. Have a seat—dinner will be ready soon.”

Fiona shot her a withering glance, rolling her eyes before striding past. She raised her voice as she entered the kitchen. “Loretta, I’m here!”

Her gaze swept over the basket of vegetables, and she deliberately let out a dramatic sigh. “Who picked these beans, Loretta? They’re all different lengths.”

Loretta explained, “Rebecca’s never done this before. It’s only natural she didn’t get it quite right. I’ll take care of those beans later.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Fiona cut in smoothly. “I’ll handle the beans.” She shot Rebecca a sly, challenging smile before sitting down and briskly sorting through the pile.

As her fingers snapped and tugged at the pods, she remarked sweetly, “Miss Howard, Loretta already has her hands full. If you can’t even manage bean-picking, just admit it. Doing it halfway only makes extra work for everyone.”

Rebecca’s face tightened, her pride stung. Fiona wasn’t just being helpful—she was taking the opportunity to openly ridicule her in front of Loretta! Every past slight and this fresh humiliation flared up in her mind. She vowed with a simmering glare that she would find a quiet moment later to confront Fiona and finally put her in her damn place.

As she sulked and quietly plotted her revenge, the doorbell rang once more.

Sensing her chance to reclaim her dignity, she straightened with practiced grace and slipped back into the role of hostess. “Loretta, more guests are here? Allow me to welcome them,” she said smoothly, already moving toward the door.

Loretta gave a simple nod of approval.

Rebecca shot Fiona a smug smile, savoring the small victory, before swinging the door open.

Waiting on the other side was Gabriela.

Rebecca's expression tightened the instant she saw Gabriela.

She demanded, "What brings you here?"

Gabriela quickly understood why Rebecca was there and answered with calm restraint, "Mrs. Larson invited me to come."

Wesley appeared from around the corner just then.

His sleeves were still rolled up past his elbows, and a faint sheen of sweat glimmered across his brow from labor. Surprise flickered in his eyes when he noticed Gabriela standing there.

Rebecca immediately pulled out a tissue and began gently dabbing his forehead, her voice dropping to silk. "Wesley, you must be exhausted."

Disgust twisted in Wesley's stomach, but with Gabriela watching, he forced himself to nod and didn't pull away from Rebecca's touch.

Rebecca poured warm water into a glass and held it to him with obvious care. "Your heart condition requires rest, not strain. Please, drink this."

Wesley reached out and accepted it.

After he finished drinking, Rebecca smoothly lifted his jacket from a nearby chair. "Put this on. You've worked up quite a sweat."

Their movements fit together with practiced ease, intimate and natural.

A sharp ache stabbed through Gabriela's chest, and her eyes burned.

That open, deliberate show of closeness felt merciless.

She managed, barely above a whisper, "I should help Mrs. Larson."

She turned and walked toward the kitchen.

The air inside was already filled with the warmth of steam and the rich, layered scent of cooking.

Loretta's entire expression softened the instant she saw Gabriela step in.

"Oh, my dear girl, you've arrived. There's no need for you to work today. Go make yourself comfortable outside."

She had arranged for an eligible young man to be present, and all Gabriela needed to do was show up looking lovely. Surely, he would fall for her at first sight.

Gabriela offered a soft smile. "Mrs. Larson, preparing a feast for so many guests by yourself must be exhausting. Please let me help."

Loretta waved her off. "Absolutely not necessary. Fiona has already volunteered."

Fiona paused mid-rinse, green beans in hand, and shot Gabriela a smug little smile. "This kitchen barely fits two people as it is. Add a third and Loretta won't even be able to move."

Gabriela let it go and stepped out of the busy kitchen.

She drifted toward the garden plot.

With nothing to do, she sat along the edge of the beds, her thoughts circling in on themselves.

If she had known Wesley and Rebecca would be here, she would have made an excuse and stayed home.

Spending the afternoon with Truett would have been real comfort, instead of this.

As regret continued to build in her chest, Rebecca's voice cut in behind her, sharp and accusing. "Gabriela, what exactly are you trying to do? Do you actually believe that charming Wesley's grandmother will help you win him back?"

Gabriela refused to turn around. She stared straight ahead.

Rebecca shifted into a tone soaked in false sympathy. "You're just a girl without any real backing or influence. You should be grateful you're barely managing to keep that tiny company of yours afloat. Stop chasing Wesley. He will never be yours."

"Miss Howard, you sound genuinely pathetic." Gabriela finally stood and faced her. "You're so unsure of yourself that you have to warn someone you claim is beneath you. That's ridiculous."

Rebecca's expression twisted, and she stepped in close, anger flaring. "Maybe warnings aren't enough."

She shoved Gabriela hard. Gabriela hit the ground, dirt smearing across her clothes, while Rebecca continued in the same gentle voice she used in front of everyone else. "Look at you now, covered in mud. Go ahead and say I pushed you. Do you honestly think anyone will believe you?"

Gabriela resisted the urge to roll her eyes.

Could Rebecca truly be a distinguished graduate from an elite institution? Her behavior and logic belonged in a schoolyard.

Just as Gabriela moved to stand, Brenden appeared, reaching out to help her up. His voice held a note of alarm. "Are you hurt?"

Gabriela shook her head and brushed dirt from her palms with calm indifference.

Rebecca's attempts at intimidation had all the force of a paper tiger.

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"I saw everything," Brenden said, turning a hard gaze on Rebecca. "You've gone too far. Wesley is going to hear about this."

"Go ahead and tell him." Rebecca had already slipped her elegant veneer back into place, composure settling over her features like polished glass. "If Wesley asks me to apologize, I will, of course."

This woman carried multiple faces and wore each one at will.

Brenden instinctively recoiled, then guided Gabriela back toward the house, clearly intending to expose what had just happened.

Gabriela couldn't stop him.

Fiona leaned forward in anticipation, eager to watch Rebecca's image crumble.

But Rebecca moved first. "Gabriela, please accept my sincere apology," she said, voice soft and beautifully measured. "The entire thing was an accident. The mud made it hard to stand in heels, and I slipped. I never meant to bump into you."

Her expression was earnest. Her tone was remorse itself. It was almost flawless.

Wesley glanced briefly at Gabriela, then turned to Rebecca. "Be more careful from now on."

"I'm truly sorry, Gabriela," Rebecca said again, contrition pouring from her like honey.

Gabriela had expected exactly this.

That was why she hadn't grabbed Rebecca by the hair and dragged her into a fight.

Wesley had already made his choice, and no amount of fighting would change it.

She had responsibilities now—a child who depended on her, a company barely steady on its feet. The luxury of reckless defiance was gone. Those days of throwing herself into chaos without consequence had ended.

Brenden stared in disbelief before bursting out, “Rebecca, you’re nothing but a calculating liar!”

He could hardly comprehend that he had once praised her elegance and intelligence to anyone who would listen. Those words now tasted like poison.

Rage flared under Rebecca’s polished calm, but her face remained composed as she repeated her empty apologies.

Brenden was shaking with fury, his voice on the verge of breaking into a shout.

Wesley’s voice cut through the air like a blade. “Brenden.”

Brenden stiffened at his cousin’s tone. He could see the warning in Wesley’s expression and tried to push forward anyway. “Wesley, Rebecca actually—”

“Enough,” Wesley snapped. His voice had turned to ice. “This matter ends now.”

Brenden recoiled beneath the force of it, muttering bitterly under his breath, “Even Fiona would be a better choice than Rebecca.”

Warmth moved through Gabriela's chest at his fierce loyalty. She touched his sleeve gently and murmured, "Let it go. Tying himself to someone like Rebecca is punishment enough. Don't let her poison you too."

Brenden squeezed her hand with quiet protectiveness. "Don't worry. I'll find a way to make her pay for this."

Their exchange caught Wesley's eye. His next words were precise and cutting. "Gabriela, are you satisfied? If not, I can apologize on Rebecca's behalf."

That hurt more than anything Rebecca had done.

Gabriela finally lifted her gaze to his, steady and controlled. "I'm satisfied. I don't need an apology from you."

Sadness pressed through her, slow and suffocating.

What fantasy had ever led her to expect anything from Wesley at all?

Home was waiting. Her child was there. That was where she belonged.

As Gabriela turned toward the door, Wesley's voice followed her like a cold wind. "Why this dramatic exit then?"

Fury ripped through what little patience she had left.

She shoved her sleeves up past her elbows, ready to fight. "Mr. Moss, I'm covered in dirt. Am I not allowed to go home and change my clothes?"

Loretta, sensing the tension spike, quickly stepped between them with practiced calm. "Since Rebecca acted without malicious intent, we should put this unpleasant moment behind us. Everyone, please take your seats. Dinner is ready."

Gabriela held her ground, her gaze fixed on Wesley like crystal under pressure, silently demanding an answer.

The air in the living room grew heavy.

Meanwhile, in the car, Stewart had nodded off, lulled by the motion of the drive.

Erik glanced at the GPS and said quietly, "Mr. Williams, we've arrived."

Stewart stepped out of the car and stretched, taking in his surroundings. He ran a hand through his slightly tousled hair, straightened his posture, and pressed the doorbell with easy confidence.

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The sharp chime of the doorbell cut through the heavy air in the room.

Loretta exhaled in relief, her face brightening.

It had to be Stewart.

She turned to Gabriela with a warm smile. "Dear, would you mind getting the door?"

Gabriela nodded and walked out, not giving Wesley so much as a glance.

Outside, Stewart, looking tired, leaned against the wall while chatting with Erik, who stood behind him holding several gift bags.

"Loretta's place is pretty far out. Her living conditions might not be ideal. Make sure you pick up some essentials for her later. And since she's getting older, her back might be bothering her. Get her a couple of massage devices too," Stewart said.

Erik nodded quickly in agreement.

As they continued talking, the door swung open.

Stewart glanced up casually, then froze, nearly losing his balance as his hand slipped from the wall.
“Gabriela, what are you doing here?”

Gabriela’s eyes widened in surprise. “Mr. Williams? Why are you here?”

Despite the mud streaking her clothes and smudging her face, Gabriela didn’t look disheveled. The dirt only made the brightness of her eyes stand out more.

At that moment, Loretta stepped outside. “Stewart, you made it!”

Beaming, she began introductions, piling praise on Gabriela. “Gabriela is an amazing cook, charming, and she runs her own company. Stewart, isn’t she wonderful?”

Gabriela’s cheeks warmed, immediately understanding Loretta’s clear intentions.

Stewart nodded without hesitation. In his eyes, Gabriela was flawless.

After the introductions, Loretta ushered them both inside for dinner.

Stewart was still reeling.

How had he ended up walking into Gabriela like this, of all places?

Watching quietly from behind, Erik leaned in and whispered, "Boss, I think she's the woman you mentioned before. The one you've always liked."

"Loretta is trying to set you up with Gabriela."

Stewart snapped to attention, suddenly self-conscious.

He straightened his posture, silently regretting not putting more effort into his appearance. Had he seemed groggy and careless just moments earlier? If Gabriela was here as a potential match, would she think he was lacking?

Loretta really should have warned him to dress properly if she planned to introduce him to Gabriela.

With those thoughts churning, Stewart slowed his pace, discreetly smoothing his collar and asking Erik in a low voice to check if he looked presentable.

Erik was amused.

He had never imagined that Stewart, who was always cool and composed, could become so flustered. Gabriela's pull was clearly no small thing.

Back in the living room, Gabriela's frustration with Wesley had already faded.

Her resilience allowed her to shed heavy emotion quickly. Fiona, who quietly admired that about her, had noticed how little seemed to unsettle Gabriela for long.

When Stewart entered the room, every gaze turned toward him with interest.

Loretta, practically glowing with excitement, introduced him warmly and recounted how he had kindly driven her to the hospital the other night.

Wesley remained impassive as he extended a hand. "Thank you."

Stewart blinked in surprise.

Who would have guessed Loretta was Wesley's grandmother?

He quickly took Wesley's hand and offered a polite smile. "It was nothing."

With everyone introduced, dinner began.

Stewart's gaze drifted to Gabriela again and again, and with each glance, Wesley's expression grew darker.

Fiona, quick to pick up on the tension, found the entire thing entertaining. She leaned toward Brenden and, whenever Stewart's eyes lingered too long on Gabriela, nudged him just to rile him up.

The table was full of secret agendas, but Loretta remained cheerfully unaware, simply pleased to have everyone gathered together.

Seeing three pairs of charming, youthful faces around her table warmed Loretta's heart, making dinner more enjoyable than usual.

After the meal, Gabriela offered to help with the dishes, but Loretta waved her off. "It's still light out. Why don't you and Stewart take a stroll? There's a beautiful garden a short walk from the vegetable patch. You young people might find it quite romantic."

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Gabriela, now fully aware of Loretta's intentions, sighed. "I'm pretty worn out today."

She wasn't in the mood for romance.

"You're more tired than I am?" Loretta teased, hands on her hips. "I'm an old woman who has been yanking scallions, cooking, and worrying over you kids all day!"

Gabriela let out a quiet laugh and lifted her hands in surrender. "Alright, you win. I'll go."

She and Stewart stepped outside together.

They soon found the garden Loretta had mentioned, where roses sprawled in deep reds and rich pinks, a sea of color glowing in the evening light.

It was stunning.

For a moment, Stewart felt as if he'd wandered into a dream. He could hardly believe he was on what felt dangerously close to a date with Gabriela, and in a place that looked like it had been made for romance.

Gabriela paused by the roses. "Mr. Williams, I had no idea Loretta invited you."

"Don't reject me so quickly," Stewart said, pretending to be offended. "Am I that unappealing?"

"It's not you," Gabriela said simply. "It's me. I'm not planning to marry for at least a decade."

Her words landed as a gentle refusal.

"Is it because of Wesley?" Stewart asked quietly.

Gabriela didn't answer.

Since Truett's birth, all her thoughts had been fixed on working, saving, building a future. Love was not a priority.

Stewart took her silence as agreement and let out a slow sigh. "Wesley already has a girlfriend."

"It has nothing to do with him," Gabriela said, stepping back. "Please don't get the wrong idea, Mr. Williams."

Stewart watched her retreat, then closed the space between them and lightly tapped her forehead. "You think I like you? Please. If I had known Loretta was playing matchmaker, I wouldn't have shown up."

Relief washed over Gabriela. Her shoulders loosened, her guard fell, and for the first time that evening, her breathing steadied.

Seeing her relax, Stewart felt a dull, unexpected pinch in his chest.

“What, you think you’re everyone’s dream girl? Not everyone is falling all over you. Stop being so full of yourself.” He turned his attention to the roses around them. “You’ve gone and ruined the mood of this gorgeous view with a few words.”

Gabriela flushed and muttered, “Sorry.”

Stewart grinned. “Walk with me through the flowers, and I’ll let it slide.”

Gabriela nodded and fell into step beside him. They walked slowly, surrounded by the deep red roses and the soft, cooling air.

From a distance, Loretta watched them with quiet satisfaction.

But when she turned, she found Wesley beside her, his expression thunderous.

“Don’t Gabriela and Stewart look perfect together?” Loretta said with a light laugh. “What do you think, Wesley? Will my matchmaking work?”

Wesley's face only darkened, an ache tightening in his chest. "Grandma, you're meddling too much. Gabriela's not my employee anymore. Leave her alone."

"Just because she's not working for you, you stop caring?" Loretta snapped back, clearly displeased. "She cooked for you, worried about you, took care of you. Now that she's resigned, you act like she doesn't exist? You really are cold."

Wesley's jaw flexed, his fists curling at his sides as his eyes locked onto Gabriela and Stewart.

What was so interesting about a garden? Why was she standing that close to him?

It took everything in him not to cross the yard and pull them apart.

When he didn't answer, Loretta huffed. "I'm determined to make this match happen tonight. If it bothers you, then walk away."

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Loretta waved Stewart over with a warm smile. "Stewart, come here. I've got something to ask you."

Stewart gave a quick nod, then turned to Gabriela. "Mind if I borrow something from you?"

Gabriela blinked, puzzled. "Borrow what?"

"This." With an easy motion, Stewart reached out and plucked the gold tie from her ponytail.

In an instant, Gabriela's glossy hair spilled down like a waterfall, catching the glow of the setting sun. For a moment, she seemed almost radiant, the kind of beauty that made the whole world pause.

Stewart's throat tightened, and he swallowed hard.

Suddenly, all the other women he had ever met felt like pale imitations, shadows compared to her.

Gabriela frowned, snapping back to herself, and reached for her hair tie. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Look at Loretta's smile," Stewart replied smoothly. "She clearly hopes we'll end up together. Even if I don't like you, it's worth playing along to keep her happy."

Something about his tone rang false, but before Gabriela could put her finger on it, Stewart had already turned on his heel, walking toward Loretta with the hair tie in hand.

Loretta's face lit up as he approached. "You've spent half the day with Gabriela. Tell me, what do you think of her?"

Stewart's gaze slid to Wesley, who stood nearby with eyes as cold as ice.

Their stares clashed, sparks flying in the silence between them.

Truth be told, Stewart had bristled at Wesley for a long while.

Both men were of the same generation, yet their paths couldn't have been more different. Stewart had stepped straight into his father's empire, wearing inherited prestige like a crown. Wesley, on the other hand, had carved his success from nothing but grit and determination, and his reputation had always burned brighter.

Stewart had known Gabriela first, yet her heart and gaze belonged to Wesley now.

He couldn't quite fathom where he had lost the race.

At Loretta's question, Stewart donned a bashful smile and toyed with the hair tie between his fingers. "Gabriela's sweet and delightful," he said with just the right amount of hesitation. "I really do like her."

Wesley's gaze dropped to Stewart's fingers, and his knuckles tightened until his fists slowly clenched.

Loretta, oblivious to the storm brewing, beamed. “Gabriela is a fine girl. You’ve got good taste. Let me tell you, she’s easy to please—just a little—”

“Grandma.” Wesley’s voice cut through like a blade of ice. “It’s freezing out here. You should go inside. I need a word with Stewart.”

After telling Stewart to get along with Gabriela, Loretta left Wesley and Stewart alone and went back inside.

“Stay away from Gabriela,” Wesley said flatly, his tone sharp as winter frost. “Hand me the hair tie.”

Stewart smirked, deliberately dangling the golden tie before tucking it away. “Why should I? Gabriela gave it to me herself.”

Wesley tilted his chin, shooting him a sidelong glance dripping with disdain. “And you really think that means she likes you?”

That look made Stewart’s blood boil. He loathed Wesley’s air of superiority.

“How do you know she doesn’t?” Stewart snapped, slipping the hair tie onto his wrist like a trophy. “Do you even realize what this means? When a woman gives a man something so personal, it’s usually her way of saying she’s ready to take things further.”

Wesley drew in a long breath, his voice simmering with anger. "She doesn't like you."

He knew Gabriela's heart too well. Just earlier, she had nearly broken down because of him. How could she suddenly be falling for someone else?

Stewart narrowed his eyes, biting back his fury, and sneered, "You've already got a girlfriend, yet you're still trying to keep Gabriela under your thumb. You act like you're above everyone, like the world ought to bend to your will."

Wesley didn't dignify the jab with a response. He turned and strode toward Gabriela instead. "Stewart isn't right for you. Keep your distance from him."

Gabriela scoffed at him. "Why? Is he seeing someone?"

She believed her personal life was none of his concern, especially now that he was on the verge of getting engaged to another woman.

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Her cold resistance pierced Wesley like a knife.

"Stewart isn't the man you think he is," Wesley said, his voice tight with urgency. "He won't marry you, Gabriela."

That struck a nerve. Gabriela's temper flared. "I'm only dating him—it's not like I'm racing to the altar! Who do you think you are to me? Since when do you get to dictate my love life?"

Wesley's lips lost their color, irritation etched deep across his face. "So you like him? You really mean to date him?"

The edge in his questioning only stoked her defiance. "That's none of your business," she snapped, her voice cold as steel.

Wesley's eyes locked onto hers, burning with disbelief. "You've grown bold, haven't you? Now you don't even listen to me?"

"Why should I?" Gabriela shot back, chin lifting stubbornly. "You're certainly not my husband, so why on earth should you control me?"

At the word husband, Wesley's gaze sharpened, dark and intense, locking fully onto her.

Gabriela froze, realizing what she had said, and quickly covered her mouth.

Stewart, who had been standing to the side watching the storm brew, seized the chance to play peacemaker. He stepped forward and handed the golden hair tie back to Gabriela. "Sorry, Gabriela. I only wanted to make Loretta happy. Don't fight over me. Maybe I should explain everything to her myself."

Gabriela stiffened, pride prickling. “No need,” she said stubbornly. “We’ve done nothing wrong.”

Wesley’s face darkened, fury simmering just beneath the surface.

Stewart hid a smug smile but wisely kept quiet.

The air between the three of them hung heavy with tension—until a piercing scream tore through the night, shattering the standoff.

A man’s voice followed the woman’s, high-pitched and panicked. The three exchanged startled glances and rushed toward the commotion.

The source was Fiona and Brenden.

After dinner, she had pulled Brenden into the small grove in the backyard, scheming about how to drive a wedge between Wesley and Rebecca. But their plotting was abruptly interrupted when a cockroach crawled across her shoulder.

“Ahhh! A cockroach!” Fiona screamed, ripping off her jacket and whipping it around like a flag.

Unfortunately, the cockroach leapt onto Brenden.

He froze, his face draining of color. For a man who feared cockroaches, the fact that he hadn't bolted outright was already an act of courage.

But when he spotted the creature clinging to his pant leg, panic took over. In desperation, he yanked off his belt and began tugging his trousers down.

It was at that precise moment that Loretta's shocked voice rang out. "What are you two doing?!"

Their shrieking had been so loud it had summoned not only Gabriela, Wesley, and Stewart, but nearly the entire household.

Then everyone saw Fiona with her jacket off, clothes in disarray, and Brenden with his pants halfway down.

Even though Loretta knew the two were a couple, such behavior in the open was far beyond what she could tolerate.

Clapping a hand over her eyes, she scolded sharply, "For heaven's sake, put your clothes back on!"

Fiona was mortified. The moment her gaze landed on Wesley's stone-cold expression, she panicked, yanked her jacket over her head, and bolted in tears.

Rebecca, struggling to maintain her demure facade, pressed her lips together—because if not for appearances, she would have doubled over laughing.

Brenden, meanwhile, fumbled to yank his trousers back into place, his ears bright red with embarrassment. He stammered, “Loretta, Gabriela, don’t get the wrong idea! A huge cockroach crawled onto Fiona, and then it leapt onto my pants—”

But that raised an obvious question: in the dead of winter, where would a cockroach even come from?

Loretta decided that was just an excuse to save face. Her voice rang out, stern and uncompromising. “Enough. Tomorrow, you need to go to the Dewitt family to discuss your marriage!”

Brenden froze, thunderstruck.

Just moments ago, he and Fiona had been whispering about how to split Wesley and Rebecca apart. How had things spiraled into this?

Come on, his heart wasn’t ready.

His heart still belonged to Gabriela. The last thing he wanted was to be shackled for life to fiery, sharp-tongued Fiona.

Chapter 470

Brenden's face darkened with reluctance, which only sharpened Loretta's glare.

"What's with that expression? Are you challenging me now?"

Brenden released a heavy sigh, exhaustion bleeding through his voice. "You've misunderstood everything. Fiona and I are nothing more than friends."

The truth gnawed at him — both he and Fiona harbored feelings for other people, making any romantic possibility between them impossible.

Wesley's mood had already soured beyond repair, and he dismissed Brenden's explanation entirely.

Rebecca, however, tilted her head with feigned innocence. "If friendship is all it is, why would you wander off to such a place together after dinner?"

Her question struck like a match to kindling, and Brenden found himself speechless.

He couldn't possibly reveal their true mission — sabotaging Wesley and Rebecca's relationship.

Loretta seized upon his silence, her voice cutting through the air. “Your past girlfriends were all disasters, and your mother and I refused to waste our energy interfering. But Fiona possesses genuine goodness, and I won’t allow you to break her heart.”

Heat flooded Brenden’s cheeks as he spoke in barely more than a whisper. “Please, Loretta, don’t breathe a word of this to my mom yet. We can handle this ourselves.”

Loretta had always harbored a soft spot for Brenden, and his earnest plea melted her stern facade slightly. She reminded him to proceed carefully. “Fiona deserves better than carelessness. If you dare dismiss this situation, you’ll answer to me personally.”

Brenden nodded with desperate enthusiasm.

Gabriela absorbed the news of Brenden and Fiona’s potential romance with mild surprise.

Though Brenden had rescued her once, the friction between her and Fiona remained thick as winter fog, leaving Gabriela completely indifferent to their romantic entanglements.

As twilight painted the sky in deep purples, she turned to Loretta with polite finality. “I should head home now.”

Stewart had been anticipating this exact moment, his voice brightening immediately. “Gabriela, I brought my car. Allow me to drive you home.”

Wesley's face darkened, his mouth opening to object, but Gabriela shook her head. "That won't be necessary. I prefer going alone."

Stewart held back his eagerness, understanding that pressing too hard would only drive her further away.

Loretta studied Gabriela's frozen demeanor and wondered how any progress could ever bloom between them. She spoke up. "Gabriela, I'll accompany you home."

Since Loretta still resided in Gabriela's villa, her offer carried perfect logic.

Gabriela offered a small nod. "Very well."

Loretta then pivoted toward Stewart with calculated precision. "In that case, please provide us with transportation."

Gabriela's mouth fell open, words abandoning her completely. With Loretta making the request directly, refusal became impossible.

Stewart's face lit up like sunrise. "It would be my absolute pleasure."

He felt blessed by fortune itself, grateful beyond measure that he had insisted on escorting Loretta to the hospital that night. Without that one gesture, she would never have formed a good impression of him, much less set him up with Gabriela now.

They filtered toward the exit.

Erik, still glowing from the exceptional homemade feast, showed his appreciation to Loretta by gallantly offering her the front passenger seat. The back seat arrangement fell naturally to Stewart and Gabriela.

Stewart caught Erik's eye and flashed a discreet thumbs-up, already planning to reward him with first pick from his prized car collection.

Wesley remained seated in his vehicle, his gaze turning glacial as he watched Gabriela and Loretta settle into Stewart's car. His knuckles turned white against the steering wheel.

Jealousy consumed him like acid, though he maintained his composed mask while his heart twisted in silent agony.

Rebecca, observing from the passenger seat, spoke with gentle concern. "Wesley, your color has drained completely. Are you feeling ill? Should I take over driving?"

"Absolutely not." Wesley's glance lasted mere seconds before he started the engine.

His chest felt compressed, as though invisible bands were tightening around his ribs, stealing his breath. At first, he dismissed the sensation, but as the minutes crawled by, the pain intensified with alarming persistence.

Rebecca's voice suddenly pierced through his haze, laced with worry. "Wesley, you're drenched in sweat! We need to pull over immediately!"

Wesley jolted back to awareness and slammed the brakes, sending them both lurching forward from the violent stop.

Rebecca gasped in shock, and when she regained her balance, she discovered Wesley collapsed against the steering wheel, unconscious.