

His kiss 471

Chapter 471

“Wesley, what’s happening to you?!”

Panic seized her as she frantically dialed 911, then immediately called Jasper. Throughout the years, Rebecca had consistently turned to Jasper whenever crisis struck.

Meanwhile, Fiona returned home and barricaded herself inside her bedroom. Humiliation burned through her veins as she relived every mortifying detail, especially Rebecca’s expression of pure disdain and mockery. Fury drove Fiona to claw at the wall until her nails cracked and bled.

Unable to contain her rage any longer, she stormed to Brenden’s house and unleashed her wrath. “Are you even worthy of being called a man? Shrieking over a cockroach? And stripping off your pants? The very thought makes me sick!”

“And you have the audacity to blame me?” Brenden shot back, his mood as dark as storm clouds. “You’re the one who flung that cockroach directly at me.”

Fiona’s disbelief exploded into action as she seized a pillow from the sofa and hurled it at him with murderous force. “Get out of my sight!”

Brenden snatched the pillow from the air with both hands. “Fine, I’m done with this!”

He crushed the pillow against his chest, wrenched the door open, and stormed out with thunderous steps.

Fiona pummeled the sofa cushions in pure frustration.

How could someone as impossible as Brenden even exist in this world? With his ridiculous behavior, Gabriela would never develop feelings for him.

“Brenden, you complete fool! So pathetic and cowardly, no wonder you can’t capture Gabriela’s heart...”

Her tirade died mid-sentence when a pair of long legs entered her peripheral vision.

She straightened instinctively and looked up to find Brenden standing there, clutching the pillow and wearing an expression of stone.

“Why did you come back?”

Brenden’s voice rang with righteous conviction. “This happens to be my house. If anyone should leave, it’s you.”

Despite his anger burning white-hot, he couldn’t bring himself to utter the words “Get out” to someone so breathtakingly beautiful.

He collapsed onto his sofa, his elbow striking the remote control and awakening the massive screen. The horror movie resumed exactly where it had paused.

The ghost's pale fingers emerged from the television screen, accompanied by spine-chilling music that made Fiona's eyes dilate with terror. She launched herself at Brenden without thinking.

Brenden had deployed this calculated move on countless women before, so muscle memory kicked in as he wrapped his arms around her and whispered soothingly, "Don't be frightened. It's nothing but special effects."

Several heartbeats passed before Fiona's senses returned, and she noticed Brenden's expression had softened into something almost tender. Rage ignited in her chest like wildfire.

She thrust him away with violent force and delivered a savage kick at him. "You manipulative snake! Do you mistake me for one of your conquests? If you ever try this pathetic trick on me again, I'll destroy you..."

Before Fiona could roll up her sleeves to deliver proper retribution, Brenden's agonized howl split the air.

Her kick had sent him careening into the coffee table's sharp edge, toppling the freshly boiled water that had been sitting there.

The scalding liquid cascaded across his shoulder in a merciless waterfall.

Fiona jerked back at Brenden's blood-curdling scream. "What's wrong with you?"

Brenden's voice cracked with pain. "My arm feels like it's being roasted alive!"

Shock rendered Fiona momentarily speechless.

She fumbled for her phone and dialed 911 with trembling fingers.

Soon, Brenden was rushed to the hospital. The doctor examined his injury with clinical precision before delivering his verdict. "Fortune smiled on you — the water had cooled slightly from boiling temperature." Otherwise, his arm would have suffered devastating damage.

The doctor prescribed medication and applied specialized ointment to the angry red burns before departing.

As she watched Brenden's face contort with each wave of pain, guilt stabbed through Fiona's chest like a blade. "I'm truly sorry."

Brenden responded with a dismissive snort, completely ignoring her.

He struggled from the hospital bed and limped toward the door in stony silence.

"Where are you headed? Let me help you," Fiona rushed forward to offer support, but her hand accidentally brushed his wounded arm.

Brenden's anguished cry echoed through the corridor as he fixed her with a look of pure terror and exasperation. "Stay away from me!"

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Fiona released her grip instantly.

She lifted her hands in apologetic surrender. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Brenden dismissed her apology, clutching his cup as he strode away to refill it with water.

Fiona trailed behind him. "Are you thirsty? Let me help you with that water."

"No need!" Brenden shot her an exasperated glare. "The best help you could give me is to stay far away."

With that declaration, he marched into the break room.

The freshly mopped floor gleamed treacherously. Brenden took a confident stride, but his slippers betrayed him on the slick surface, sending him sliding into an involuntary—and excruciating—split.

Pain exploded through Brenden's body, wiping his mind clean of coherent thought. A wretched cry tore from his throat. "Ah!"

Fiona stood frozen, stunned by his unexpected mishap. His agonized scream finally jolted her into action, and she rushed forward to assist him.

It took considerable effort for her to haul him upright.

Brenden had started with only an injured arm, but now his foot throbbed with fresh pain while his back remained unhealed from before.

Battered from head to toe, he pushed Fiona away with a broken sob and limped toward the exit.

Fiona hurried after him to offer assistance.

A familiar figure suddenly streaked past them.

Could that be Gabriela?

Brenden quickened his pace, attempting to pursue her, but his strained thigh muscle screamed in protest, preventing any real speed. Fiona called out urgently, "Brenden, where are you headed?"

Brenden gestured toward the direction where Gabriela had vanished. "Help me catch up with the person ahead of us!"

Gabriela burst into the VIP area.

By pure coincidence, Jasper arrived at the hospital simultaneously.

The two of them were approaching from opposite directions. Gabriela's breakneck pace sent her colliding into him. "My apologies!"

Without even looking at Jasper's face, Gabriela offered the hurried apology and moved to rush past him toward Room 603.

Jasper took in the panic on her face, adjusted his glasses, and asked with quiet concern, "Are you here for Wesley?"

Gabriela stopped and studied him. "Do you know who I am?"

"I'm Jasper Howard," he said, extending his hand. "Rebecca's cousin. We met at the Apex Group headquarters."

Gabriela gave a small nod. So he was from the Howard family.

She asked, "Mr. Howard, are you visiting Wesley as well?"

Earlier, Rebecca had called Gabriela with news that Wesley had collapsed behind the wheel. She had urged Gabriela to come immediately.

Since Jasper was Rebecca's cousin, his presence at the hospital made sense.

Jasper smiled with impeccable courtesy. "I am. We can go in together."

Gabriela found no reasonable ground to refuse.

Jasper led the way and knocked lightly on the door.

Inside, Wesley had already regained consciousness. Rebecca sat at his bedside and reached out to touch his forehead with practiced tenderness.

“Wesley, you’re finally awake. I was terrified earlier — I completely panicked — so I called Gabriela.”

Wesley paused and looked at her steadily. “What exactly are you trying to say?”

“Your heart condition worries me. Why didn’t you tell me?” Rebecca whispered. “I would have taken care of you with everything I have. And if you prefer Gabriela not know about it, I’ll keep that secret for the rest of my life.”

Her tone was soft, pure, harmless.

But the air shifted.

Wesley’s lips pressed into a thin line, his voice turning cold. “Are you trying to threaten me?”

“Never.” Rebecca shook her head. “Wesley, my feelings for you run so deep. Everything I do is for you. I would never hurt you.”

Wesley’s arctic stare cut straight through her act. “Rebecca, don’t try to manipulate me.”

Just then, a knock sounded at the door.

Rebecca's face lit up at once. "That must be Gabriela. I'll get it."

Outside stood Jasper and Gabriela.

Rebecca hurried over and clung to Jasper's hand, her expression flooded with relief. "Jasper, thank goodness you're here."

Jasper gently patted her head, the gesture almost brotherly. "You look shaken. How serious is Wesley's condition?"

Rebecca glanced back at Wesley, noting his steady, unreadable gaze before answering, "It's nothing critical. The doctor said it's just exhaustion. With rest, he'll recover fully."

Jasper nodded and offered Wesley a reassuring smile. "I'm glad you're alright."

Then Rebecca turned to Gabriela. "Gabriela, when Wesley collapsed earlier I was so frightened I didn't know what to do, so I called you. I hope I didn't trouble you by dragging you here so late."

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Gabriela gave a calm shake of her head. "It's fine."

Rebecca laced her fingers through Gabriela's with an air of intimate warmth. "By the way, I heard from Wesley that when you were his secretary, you often cooked for him. I'd really love to learn some of your techniques, if you wouldn't mind sharing."

Gabriela let out a quiet laugh. "My cooking is just simple home-style food. You definitely have access to chefs far more skilled than I am."

"No chef can compare to you," Rebecca said sweetly.

She sat beside Wesley's bed and looped her arms through his, resting lightly against his shoulder. "Wesley always tells me your cooking suits his taste better than any professional chef's. Since I'm going to marry him, I want to take care of him properly. I hope you'll teach me. You wouldn't refuse, would you?"

Wesley subtly shifted away from her touch, nausea stirring under his ribs.

But Rebecca knew about his heart condition — a truth he was determined to keep from Gabriela at all costs.

So he said nothing.

His face remained controlled, closed, giving nothing away, even as Rebecca performed for the room and he fought the urge to look toward Gabriela.

Gabriela finally understood the real reason Rebecca had called her in such a panic.

This wasn't concern. It was theater.

Rebecca had summoned her here only to flaunt her intimacy with Wesley.

Disgust rolled through Gabriela. She despised nothing more than someone parading their relationship in front of her.

Her smile sharpened. "Miss Howard, my schedule is packed lately. The company my mother left me may be small, but my time is extremely valuable."

Contempt flickered in Rebecca's eyes.

Greedy woman. Money is all you care about, isn't it?

Rebecca softened her tone into something sweet and helpless. "Gabriela, why don't you just name your price? Whatever you want, I'm willing to pay."

Gabriela answered coolly, "As I mentioned, my cooking isn't anything special. But my time is, which is why I must decline."

"One hundred thousand dollars," Rebecca cut in. "One hundred thousand per dish. Teach me one recipe and I'll transfer it immediately."

"I still have to refuse," Gabriela said evenly. "What if it takes you several months to learn a single dish?"

Rebecca's smile stayed polished, but irritation sparked in her eyes. "Then let's handle it monthly. One hundred thousand dollars per month. Is that acceptable to you?"

Gabriela gave a thoughtful nod. "That is workable. However, I'm unavailable during the day or at night. I can only spare you from five to seven in the afternoon."

For Rebecca, that money was nothing. But being maneuvered into those terms left a bitter sting in her pride.

Her lips tightened. "Gabriela, isn't that a bit unreasonable?"

"Take it or leave it," Gabriela replied without hesitation. "And I don't work weekends. Since Mr. Moss is fine, I'll be going."

She turned toward the door and added, without looking back, "Miss Howard, consider my terms."

Then she walked out.

Brenden was waiting in the hallway, and from the look on his face, it was obvious he'd heard everything.

Incensed by Rebecca's attempt to humiliate Gabriela through financial manipulation, he announced loudly, "Gabriela, teach Fiona culinary skills instead, and I'll compensate you one million dollars for your expertise."

Fiona stared at him in complete bewilderment. "How does this concern me in the slightest?" She had never so much as touched a cooking pot in her entire life and harbored no intention of learning such domestic skills!

"Didn't you express a desire to make amends with me?" Brenden challenged. "Learn from Gabriela, prepare my meals personally, and I'll forgive you."

Fiona recoiled at the suggestion. If those were his terms for reconciliation, she would gladly forgo his forgiveness entirely! However, she refused to squander this golden opportunity to antagonize Rebecca.

She adopted an air of disdainful superiority. "Miss Howard, Gabriela commands respect as a company CEO. You can't seriously expect her to consider such a paltry offer—a hundred thousand a month? Don't waste her time."

Rebecca was nearly driven mad by Fiona's words. Forcing down her anger, she offered, "I'll pay two million!"

Fiona shook her head with a look of disapproval. "Money doesn't make you better than anyone else, and it sure doesn't buy you everything."

Rebecca was fuming on the inside. With Wesley and Jasper watching from nearby, she had no choice but to maintain her refined image, leaving her to stew silently. It felt as though a raging fire was burning through her chest, while outwardly she carefully remained composed.

She forced her lips into a smile. "Miss Haynes, would you teach me for two million a month?"

"Deal!" Gabriela answered without hesitation.

Two million a month for only two hours a day, weekends off included? Only a fool would turn that down. Gabriela never missed an opportunity to make money.

"Should I start tomorrow?"

Rebecca had intended to humiliate Gabriela in front of Wesley by showing off her wealth, yet Gabriela showed no embarrassment at all. On the contrary, she looked delighted by such an offer.

Swallowing her frustration, Rebecca said, "Alright then. See you tomorrow."

Gabriela finally gave Wesley a serious look. His face was pale, his lips drained of color, and he looked completely worn out. The commanding aura of the powerful CEO had slipped away, leaving behind only a weary man who seemed fragile.

Gabriela felt a pang of sympathy but managed a small smile. "Mr. Moss, take good care of yourself."

After all, his health was no longer her concern.

Wesley's throat tightened as if he wanted to say more, but he could only manage, "Thank you."

Gabriela nodded once. "I'll be off then."

"Miss Haynes, let me walk you out." Rebecca stepped forward, escorting Gabriela into the hallway. "Thanks for visiting Wesley."

Gabriela gave her a polite nod, then turned to thank Brenden as well before striding away.

Seeing Wesley's indifferent expression, Brenden and Fiona quickly slipped back into Brenden's hospital room.

When the others had gone, Rebecca's smile faded. She frowned and walked toward Jasper.

He leaned against the wall outside the ward, watching Gabriela's departure with a spark of interest.

Rebecca's brow creased in displeasure. "Jasper, you're not starting to like her, are you?"

Gabriela was undeniably beautiful. Her graceful figure and youthful features were complemented by an inexplicable mature charm. The fact that even Wesley was captivated by her said it all — of course Jasper would be, too.

"No. She just intrigues me a little," Jasper replied.

"The biggest difference between her and the women you've met is her sheer greed for money." Rebecca's tone carried disdain as she continued, "Don't let yourself get carried away by novelty."

"I see." Jasper chuckled.

What had truly caught his eye was Gabriela's handbag. It looked familiar, reminiscent of Presley's signature style. But he quickly dismissed the thought.

How could an orphan with no background possibly own one of Presley's creations?

They then returned to the ward. After exchanging a few words with Wesley, Jasper took his leave.

Wesley looked at Rebecca. "You should go too."

Her eyes softened as she gazed at him. "Wesley, don't be so cold to me. We're about to get engaged. It hurts my feelings."

His voice was flat, void of warmth. "What do you want?"

"I want to invite Gabriela to our engagement party." Rebecca's smile grew increasingly gentle. "Do you think that's okay?"

The atmosphere shifted instantly, turning tense and cold.

"Rebecca, I'm telling you for the last time — I have no feelings for Gabriela. Stop trying to make trouble for her." Wesley's gaze cut into her like a dagger.

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Rebecca's eyelids trembled, then quickly lowered.

“You’ve got the wrong idea, really. There’s no hidden agenda here; I just want to invite her to our engagement party.”

Wesley closed his eyes, his handsome features calm and unreadable, clearly unwilling to continue the discussion.

“You’re tired, aren’t you? I won’t disturb you then.” Rebecca kept her expression soft, her breath steady and light. But her fingertips dug into her palms so hard they nearly broke the skin. Her heart burned with resentment toward Gabriela.

In the following days, Gabriela was busier than ever.

Tessa had successfully divorced, and public opinion was firmly on her side. Gabriela’s reputation had soared. GD Fashion Week’s representative issued a public apology and signed a twelve-year contract, granting the Haynes Group an additional thirty percent profit. This breakthrough prompted other companies — previously hesitant — to seek cooperation with the Haynes Group.

Gabriela now faced endless stacks of documents and contracts to review each day.

After work, she was obliged to teach Rebecca how to cook. Rebecca had originally planned to humiliate Gabriela, but the scheme had backfired — costing her two million for nothing.

After a week of lessons, during which Gabriela endured seven painful burns from splattering oil, Rebecca abruptly lost interest.

“Gabriela, I’m getting engaged in three days,” Rebecca announced smugly. “Cooking isn’t suitable for me right now. Imagine hot oil ruining my hand and spoiling the ring’s appearance.”

Gabriela paused, then replied evenly. “Fine. Just pay me for the week.”

“Please hear me out,” Rebecca continued smoothly. “Since your company handles wedding planning, I’d like you to oversee my engagement banquet. I’ll pay you double the market rate — and the two million, of course.”

Gabriela’s chest tightened.

She needed the money, but the thought of standing by while Wesley became engaged to another woman was unbearable.

“I can pay triple the amount,” Rebecca pressed, watching her closely. “But you must personally oversee the event.”

Temptation tugged at Gabriela, yet the pain of Wesley’s impending engagement made her hesitate. She attempted to decline.

Rebecca leaned in, her tone dropping to a near whisper. “I made GD Fashion Week cancel their partnership with you, and I can do it again.”

Gabriela's eyes widened. "So the fact that they are re-signing with Haynes Group was your doing?"

No wonder their representative had apologized so profusely — and offered such generous terms.

Rebecca rested a hand on Gabriela's shoulder, a silent smile curving her lips, though her eyes carried an unsettling glint.

Gabriela knew all too well how disastrous it would be if they terminated the partnership yet again. The fate of Haynes Group, her mother's life's work, had to take precedence; her own feelings would have to be pushed aside.

She drew in a steady breath and nodded. "Alright, I'll do it."

Rebecca's smile widened. "I'm so happy about that."

She then launched into a long explanation of the engagement banquet details she envisioned. After going over every point, Rebecca suddenly brightened.

"It's hard to picture it here. Let's head over to the venue and see for ourselves!"

Without waiting for a reply, she hooked Gabriela's arm and tugged her along.

By coincidence, Wesley was already there with Roger and Rebecca's parents, overseeing the final touches of the engagement setup. The moment his gaze landed on Gabriela, his brow drew together ever so slightly.

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Rebecca observed Wesley's darkening expression and swiftly moved forward, linking her arm through his. "Gabriela has agreed to help coordinate our engagement party."

Wesley's mood was already sour, and he turned glacial at these words. His gaze fixed on Gabriela. "You accepted this job?"

Gabriela's eyes remained downcast as she gave a reluctant nod.

Rebecca pressed on with theatrical enthusiasm. "Getting Gabriela to say yes proved quite the challenge! She turned me down flat initially, but after I offered triple her usual rate, she finally agreed."

The silence that followed stretched taut between them.

Wesley's penetrating stare traced every feature of Gabriela's face. Unease crawled up Gabriela's spine under his relentless scrutiny. Yet logic reminded her that he was the one pledging himself to another woman. He possessed no grounds for anger.

Gabriela raised her chin defiantly, returning his stare with equal intensity.

This bold gesture only drew a derisive laugh from Wesley. The thought struck him like a blade — this mercenary woman valued money above whatever they had shared.

Lauren sensed the crackling tension and offered a diplomatic smile. “Rebecca, won’t you introduce us to your friend?”

Rebecca brightened immediately. “This is Gabriela Haynes. She once served as Wesley’s personal secretary!”

Roger cast a dismissive glance toward Gabriela before announcing his exhaustion and need for rest. His assistant escorted him from the room.

Matthew, however, found himself transfixed when his eyes settled on Gabriela. Shock clouded his thoughts as he studied her features. Could his eyes be deceiving him? The resemblance to someone from his distant past seemed impossible yet undeniable.

Following the introductions, Rebecca’s voice bubbled with forced cheer. “Wesley, I’ll give Gabriela a comprehensive tour and see if any details require adjustment.”

Wesley’s response came clipped and cold. “Fine.”

Gabriela trailed behind Rebecca into the opulent banquet hall.

“Gabriela, I’d love your opinion — would white roses work for the venue and overall setting? These particular blooms were imported specially from overseas — quite rare specimens! Wesley personally selected them. And these exquisite pastries? Wesley’s grandfather commissioned a world-renowned chef to create them. The taste is absolutely divine, guaranteed to delight our guests. You must sample one!”

Though Rebecca’s words masqueraded as requests for professional input, they served primarily as vehicles for shameless boasting.

Gabriela told Rebecca that the venue had achieved near perfection, rendering her further assistance completely unnecessary.

“But your expertise remains invaluable!” Rebecca insisted with calculated warmth. “Having cared for Wesley so intimately, you surely understand his preferences better than anyone — including me!”

Gabriela maintained her professional composure, offering a measured response. “I was just doing my job.”

“Look here — doesn’t the positioning of these flower arrangements strike you as problematic?” Rebecca gestured dramatically toward the potted displays flanking the banquet hall’s entrance. “Could you relocate them slightly inward? I’m concerned about adequate space when Wesley and I make our processional.”

The entrance pathway stretched elegantly before them, bordered by pristine white lilies. Dozens of ornate pots lined each side of the ceremonial route.

Noting Gabriela's hesitation, Rebecca added with practiced sweetness, "Finding additional help proves impossible. Gabriela, please help me with that."

Gabriela drew a steadying breath and rolled up her sleeves with resignation. Payment accepted meant obligations fulfilled.

She methodically repositioned each heavy pot according to Rebecca's exacting specifications. Sweat dampened her clothing by the time she completed the arduous task.

Before Gabriela could fully straighten her aching back, Rebecca's voice rang out again. "Oh dear, I'm afraid they've been moved too far inward now. Could you shift them back just a touch?"

The torturous cycle repeated itself dozens of times, leaving Gabriela thoroughly depleted, her fingernails cracked and bleeding. Rebecca maintained a steady stream of hollow apologies while lavishing praise on Gabriela's unwavering dedication.

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Despite recognizing the calculated cruelty beneath Rebecca's saccharine performance, Gabriela forced herself to endure with grace. "Don't mention it."

Rebecca's inner satisfaction manifested as a barely perceptible smirk, malice flickering briefly across her features.

“Another shipment of decorative arrangements will arrive shortly. I’ll need you to oversee their proper placement,” Rebecca announced with authority.

Gabriela managed a professional smile. “Of course.”

“I must locate Wesley now,” Rebecca declared, her expression radiating manufactured bliss as she departed.

The smile died on Gabriela’s lips the moment Rebecca vanished from sight, her facial muscles locked in painful tension.

She surveyed the romantically appointed venue with its cheerful wall decorations and elegant touches, feeling momentarily disoriented by the scene’s beauty. After finding out that Wesley was the man who had slept with her, she had harbored dreams of such an enchanting engagement party.

“Hello.”

A voice materialized behind her without warning. Gabriela pivoted to find Matthew standing there, and recognition dawned — Rebecca’s father.

She summoned a courteous smile. “Hello, Mr. Howard.”

“Your name is Gabriela Haynes, correct?” Matthew’s question carried an odd hesitation.

“Yes, that’s right.”

Something unsettling flickered across Matthew’s features, leaving Gabriela puzzled by his peculiar intensity.

Before he could elaborate, Lauren glided over with practiced grace. “Becca and Wesley are reviewing the guest arrangements. We should join them.”

“Of course.”

Matthew resigned himself to Lauren’s request, departing with visible reluctance.

Gabriela dismissed Matthew’s strange behavior as the flower delivery truck rumbled into view, demanding her immediate attention for directing the placement.

The delivery crew efficiently unloaded their cargo before delivering their verdict. “We handle transportation only, not arrangement. You’ll need to secure your own assistance,” they announced, departing without ceremony.

Rebecca appeared at precisely that moment. “Would you mind arranging these flower displays, Gabriela?”

Gabriela surveyed the fifty pots scattered before her and released a hollow laugh. Extracting money from the wealthy demanded its own particular form of suffering. Yet refusing Rebecca’s requests today could spell disaster for her company.

The decision crystallized with bitter clarity — she would move every single pot.

Despite her natural resilience, relocating dozens of heavy pots proved monumentally taxing, leaving her completely drained. As she wrestled with the final few pots, Gabriela’s breath came in ragged gasps.

Rebecca maintained her vigilant presence nearby. “Thank you so deeply, Gabriela. I feel terrible asking you to handle such laborious work.”

Rebecca’s refined demeanor, coupled with her seemingly heartfelt apologies and gratitude, stripped Gabriela of any reasonable grounds for complaint.

After positioning the final pot, dizziness overwhelmed her senses. Her legs buckled, and she crumpled to the ground, her knee striking the ceramic edge with brutal force.

“Gabriela!”

“Gabriela!”

Two voices rang out simultaneously as Wesley and Brenden rushed over from opposite directions, their urgency palpable.

Wesley reached Gabriela first, guiding her carefully to a nearby sofa, his expression carved from stone. “What the hell were you doing?”

Before Gabriela could formulate a response, Rebecca inserted herself smoothly into the conversation. “Gabriela noticed the arrangements appeared uneven and insisted on making minor corrections.”

Her gaze locked onto Gabriela’s with pointed intensity. “Isn’t that precisely what happened, Gabriela?”

Gabriela forced a smile. “Exactly right.”

Wesley offered no further commentary and began removing her shoes with methodical care. Even her supposedly comfortable flats had betrayed her — her heels were raw and weeping blood.

Wesley signaled to the hotel staff for first aid supplies.

Brenden immediately produced a small packet from his pocket. “I’ve got bandages right here!”

His recent string of minor accidents had taught him the wisdom of constant preparedness.

Wesley accepted the offering and tended to Gabriela's wounds with surprising gentleness, his touch betraying none of the coldness that had marked his earlier demeanor.

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Wesley bowed his head, his bangs draping over his eyes, masking his feelings. From Gabriela's perspective, only his refined nose and the sharp, graceful curve of his jawline were visible.

Such an attractive man, yet he was about to get engaged to someone else.

Gabriela averted her gaze, her heart heavy.

Wesley carefully applied a Band-Aid to her injury, his fingers grazing the adhesive lightly. The touch was soft, but the wound pulsed with a blend of sting and itch, sending a flutter through Gabriela's chest.

As she moved to retract her foot, Wesley's voice stopped her. "How is your knee holding up?"

"It's fine," Gabriela answered swiftly. "It's just a small scratch. It will heal by morning."

Wesley's eyes flicked to the burn on her hand, his face clouding with concern, though he remained silent.

Nearby, Rebecca's fists were clenched so tightly her nails bit into her skin. She approached with a remorseful look. "Gabriela, why didn't you say you were hurt? I'm really sorry."

Gabriela's instincts prickled at Rebecca's warm smile, and she shook her head quickly, brushing it off. Having navigated her deceitful aunt Marie and spiteful Phyllis, Gabriela was wary of Rebecca's poised demeanor — it set off every alarm bell in her mind.

Rebecca turned to Wesley. "Was I too harsh, Wesley? I promise I won't let Gabriela lift a finger tomorrow."

Wesley rose slowly, his expression unreadable, giving nothing away.

Rebecca felt a nervous thrill under his scrutiny, her ambition to win him over only growing stronger.

Brenden interjected, "The hotel has staff to handle the flower arrangements, Rebecca. Why didn't you let them take care of it?"

Despite Brenden's pointed remark, Rebecca continued her earnest apologies. That evening, she had expressed regret repeatedly, but every apology was hollow.

The true weight of the suffering fell on Gabriela alone.

Worried Rebecca might stir up trouble for her company again, Gabriela waved her hand. "It wasn't Miss Howard's fault. I was just doing my job."

With that, she stood up. "If there's nothing else, I'll head out."

Wesley opened his mouth to speak, but Brenden cut in. "I'll drive you home, Gabriela."

She nodded. "Thanks, Mr. Saunders."

"Come on, why are you so formal with me?" Brenden asked, sounding a bit crestfallen. "Just call me Brenden from now on."

Gabriela found his sincerity unexpectedly charming. She smiled and agreed.

As Brenden escorted her out, Wesley's fists tightened, his gaze darkening with a storm of emotions.

Rebecca looked up at him, her eyes soft. "Do you feel bad for her?"

A flicker of annoyance crossed Wesley's face. Without meeting her eyes, he hissed, "Stay out of my affairs."

It was a marriage of convenience, nothing more. If Rebecca didn't know her place, he wouldn't hesitate to replace her.

Rebecca quickly lowered her gaze. "Understood."

Brenden drove Gabriela home, his heart aching as he watched her delicate silhouette disappear into the villa.

Once she was out of sight, he dialed Wesley. "What's going through your head?" he demanded. "Even if you don't like Gabriela, you can't let Rebecca treat her like that."

After a long pause, Wesley's voice came through, cool and distant. "It's none of your business."

Brenden snapped, exasperated, "If I don't step in, you and Rebecca will push her to the breaking point!"

"I'll handle Rebecca," Wesley said curtly, then hung up.

Brenden glared at his phone, tempted to hurl it in frustration.

Back at his house, still seething, he found Fiona in the living room.

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Seeing him, she lit up. "Brenden, I got you a lucky charm. You should wear it."

Whenever Brenden saw her, his old wounds seemed to throb. He had meant to keep his distance, yet the frustration from earlier gnawed at him, and a need to confide in someone pulled him to the empty seat beside her.

Fiona's eyes sparkled at his willingness to stay close. She pulled out the charm and gave it to him.

Brenden took it and murmured his thanks.

Glancing up, Fiona met his gaze, and her heart skipped. She quickly stepped back.

Brenden spoke up abruptly. "Wesley is getting engaged to Rebecca in three days. Aren't you upset?"

Fiona shot him an irritated look. "I'm aware. You don't need to rub it in."

"Don't you have feelings for Wesley?" Brenden pressed. "Can't you come up with a way to stop their engagement?"

He liked Gabriela and desired to win her heart, but he hated seeing her so distressed and wanted to do something for her.

“I’ve got a plan. Are you willing to help?” Fiona said.

She had been restless for days, crafting a strategy and waiting for Brenden to ask. She gestured for him to lean closer, and they began whispering their scheme.

Three days passed in a flash.

Tomorrow was the engagement ceremony.

After 6 p.m., Rebecca summoned Gabriela to the venue.

“Sorry for calling you over so late,” Rebecca said, wearing a simple yet elegant dress. “What do you think of this for tomorrow?”

The custom-made white gown hugged Rebecca’s figure perfectly.

Gabriela sincerely commented, "The dress is beautiful, but the forecast predicts snow tomorrow. You will want to stay warm."

Snow was rare in Okburg's winters, but when it came, it could bite at exposed skin. Even with heaters running, cold patches lingered. Rebecca's dress, with its subtle V-neck and bare shoulders, left her vulnerable to the chill, her ears already reddened.

Her eyes cooled briefly, but she nodded with grace. "Thanks for your thoughtfulness, Gabriela. You're so kind. Whoever ends up with you hit the jackpot!"

Loretta, who was inspecting the venue, smiled and added, "Absolutely! Gabriela's a gem."

Loretta sighed. She believed that Gabriela and Wesley were a perfect match, but they did not have feelings for each other. What a shame.

Rebecca nodded in agreement, then guided Gabriela through another tour of the venue. It wasn't until after midnight, when Gabriela was utterly drained, that she was allowed to leave.

As Gabriela exited the hotel and climbed into her car, Fiona slipped into the passenger seat.

"What are you doing here?" Gabriela snapped. "This is my car. Get out."

Fiona turned to her, cutting to the chase. "Gabriela, I can tell you have feelings for Wesley."

Gabriela's expression hardened. "What has that got to do with you?"

"Have you ever seen those TV shows where someone crashes a wedding to stop it?" Fiona leaned closer. "What if you disrupted their engagement party tomorrow? I would back you completely."

Gabriela eyed her. "You like Wesley too. Why don't you do it?"

Fiona scowled, exasperated. "I would love to, but Wesley doesn't like me." She inched closer. "But you're different. I can see it — he loves you. If you interrupt the ceremony, he might just walk away with you."

Gabriela leaned back. "Don't get so close."

"Just give me a straight answer," Fiona pressed. "Are you in or not? I've got a dress ready for you. Say yes, and I'll clear every hurdle to make sure you steal Wesley away."

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Fiona spoke with unwavering confidence, convinced that sabotaging the engagement party would make Wesley leave with Gabriela.

Gabriela's heart gave a small flutter. The thought of ruining the party and then living happily ever after with Wesley was something she had never dared to dream. Yet if it truly happened, it would be so wonderful her chest almost ached at the thought.

She took a breath. "Let me think about it."

Fiona urged, her tone sharp with warning, "Let me know by tomorrow morning! Say yes, and I'll bring the dress over. You have to decide quickly, otherwise Wesley will end up with Rebecca."

"Alright." Gabriela nodded.

Only after getting that response did Fiona step out of the car.

Brenden approached, curiosity flickering in his eyes. "How did it go?"

"Judging by her face, she's tempted," Fiona said triumphantly, a smug smile tugging at her lips. "I really am a genius for coming up with this plan."

In her mind, the outcome was clear. If Gabriela stormed the party, Wesley would no doubt walk away with her. Rebecca would be left humiliated, and her family might even sever ties with the Moss family. That would be the perfect moment for her to strike. Her family was every bit as formidable as the Howards, making her a perfect choice as Wesley's future wife.

Brenden raised his hand with a grin, giving her a thumbs-up. “Impressive!”

Gabriela returned home.

Loretta was waiting in the living room with Truett in her arms, her face lighting up the moment Gabriela walked through the door. “You’re finally back! Rebecca really is something — getting so worked up over just an engagement party and keeping you out this late.”

She fussed over Gabriela immediately, asking if she wanted something to eat and offering to cook for her.

Gabriela’s gaze softened as she looked at Loretta. Loretta’s kindness wrapped around her like a blanket. If someone like her could become family, Gabriela thought, then happiness would have no limits.

They were all distinguished figures in the business world, dressed in their finest attire, offering congratulations and lavish gifts.

Rebecca accepted each one with polished grace, her voice warm, her manners flawless. The crowd admired her quietly, impressed by her noble bearing.

Once all the guests had gathered, the host stepped onto the main stage and began announcing the engagement between the two powerful families. Below, Rebecca stood before Wesley, her face glowing with happiness as she gazed at him. It was only an engagement, yet in her heart, it already felt like marriage. This man would be hers — there was no doubt. Even if his heart belonged to another, she vowed she would never let go, not in this lifetime.

After the host finished offering words of blessing, he declared it was time for the couple to exchange rings.

Rebecca extended her hand toward Wesley, a bright, joyful smile lingering on her lips.

But Wesley didn't move. He stood frozen, silent for what felt like an eternity.

Gabriela's messages echoed in his mind. Logic told him that he and Gabriela could never have a future. Yet in this moment, he wished more than anything that she would appear.

"I object to this engagement!"

A voice rang out, cutting through the hall like a blade.

Heads turned. Fiona stood at the entrance, bold and unflinching. Beside her was a tall figure in a flawless white gown, veil and gloves completing the breathtaking look.

The striking entrance instantly drew all attention, eclipsing Rebecca's radiance and making it clear they had come to cause a scene. Guests exchanged shocked glances, instinctively stepping aside to clear a path when they sensed the drama.

