

His kiss 481

Chapter 481

Hand in hand with the veiled person, Fiona walked steadily toward Wesley. She stopped before him, then pointed squarely at Rebecca.

“Wesley, are you really about to get engaged to this woman?”

His fingers stiffened, shock flickering across his face as his gaze darted between them. Did Gabriela truly care for him that much? Enough to risk everything and crash this event?

Wesley took an involuntary step closer. A sweet, milky scent drifted toward him, familiar enough to make his heart race. Memories of his time with Gabriela surged forward, vivid and unstoppable. His throat tightened. After swallowing hard, he managed to rasp, “Is it really you, Gabriela?”

The person in the gown kept their head bowed, the veil hiding their expression, and offered no reply.

The hall went utterly silent, everyone holding their breath. Someone had dared to crash Wesley’s engagement party. The spectacle was unthinkable!

Rebecca, still with her hand outstretched, had been waiting for Wesley to slip the ring onto her finger. She never imagined Fiona and Gabriela would storm in. She hadn’t expected Gabriela to be this reckless—brazen enough to challenge her in front of everyone.

Rebecca's lips curled into a cold sneer. Leaning slightly toward Jasper, she whispered, "Jasper, please help me bring in the journalists outside."

Several reporters were already present at the ceremony, invited by Rebecca herself. She had welcomed them earlier, insisting they record every detail. The more people who saw her engagement with Wesley, the better. Now was the time for the reporters to get a picture of Gabriela's face. Rebecca wanted everyone to witness this brazen woman's attempt to seduce her man.

Jasper gave a curt nod and quickly called over an assistant to handle it.

Fiona caught sight of Wesley's shocked expression, and a pang of frustration struck her. She knew it—if Gabriela had the courage to crash this party, Wesley could never stay unmoved. But if it were her standing there in a beautiful gown, barging in to stop everything, she would have been nothing more than a joke.

Irritation bubbled up inside her, and she let it spill out in a cutting voice, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Wesley, you didn't choose me because you liked Gabriela — I accepted that. But now? You already shared something real with her. She loves you so much, yet you're willing to cast her aside and get engaged to a woman you don't even love? How can you live with that?"

Gasps rippled through the crowd, and the guests' eyes widened in shock.

Wesley already shared something real with Gabriela?

The meaning behind Fiona's words was clear: Wesley liked Gabriela, and they had been intimate. Did that mean his engagement to Rebecca wasn't his choice — that it was just for family interests?

Whispers rose like a wave across the hall.

“I heard the Howard family offered the Moss family a major project in exchange for this engagement.”

“Rebecca is so pathetic. Forcing a man who doesn’t love her into marriage? That’s a recipe for lifelong misery for both of them.”

“You don’t understand. Once they’re married, they can just live their own lives apart.”

Rebecca’s face stiffened, her expression darkening as the murmurs grew louder.

Wesley, however, seemed deaf to the chatter around him. His entire focus was locked on the veiled figure in white. His hand moved on instinct, reaching out to take Gabriela’s.

In that moment, the only thing he wanted was to cast everything aside and walk away with her.

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Wesley had just brushed his fingers against Gabriela’s hand when she suddenly turned and bolted.

“Gabriela, wait!”

Instinct overrode thought — he rushed after her.

“Wesley!” Rebecca’s voice rang out, sharp with disbelief. Then she yelled, “Someone, stop that woman!”

The reporters who had been allowed in immediately swarmed around Gabriela, cameras flashing.

Rebecca strode forward, her voice cold enough to cut glass. “Gabriela, have you no shame? I even entrusted you with planning my engagement party, and yet here you are, trying to steal my man?”

“Rebecca.” Wesley stepped in front of Gabriela protectively, his usually stoic face carrying a trace of pleading. “This is too sudden. Let’s talk it out privately.”

Rebecca’s eyes narrowed with venom as she glared at Gabriela. “Talk it out privately? No way!”

Her fury had pushed her beyond reason. Ignoring Wesley’s pleas, she yanked off Gabriela’s veil in one swift motion.

The figure instantly raised their hands to cover their face. But in those few seconds, enough had been revealed — short, bristly hair. A man. And not just anyone — many in the room recognized him instantly.

Wesley's cousin.

"Brenden!" Rebecca's voice shook with rage, her teeth clenched as she spat out his name. "What are you doing here?"

The entire hall fell into stunned silence. Why was he here, dressed in a gown, disrupting the engagement?

The answer came quickly.

Brenden straightened and looked at Rebecca with unwavering intensity. "Rebecca, my feelings for you run deep."

A loud gasp rippled through the crowd.

Brenden's expression softened, fading into a look of profound sadness. "Our hearts are bound together. I can't just stand by and watch you get engaged to someone else!"

Rebecca's eyes widened in disbelief.

Before she could respond, Brenden clasped her hand. “Rebecca, come away with me. I may not be as wealthy as Wesley, but I’ll work hard and make sure we live a happy life.”

The guests erupted in another chorus of astonishment. The reporters scrambled to capture every moment, their shutters clicking frantically as headlines already began to form in their minds.

Around the hall, whispers spread like wildfire.

“I know him. He’s Wesley’s cousin. Took his mother’s surname, Saunders.”

“He’s not as powerful as Wesley, sure, but Brenden is wealthy. Didn’t he once spend millions to promote some minor celebrity without blinking?”

“The Howard family is too shallow — forcing their daughter to marry Wesley just because his status is higher, when she could’ve had someone perfectly suitable.”

Rebecca’s parents sat stiff with fury as the murmurs grew louder.

Meanwhile, Wesley’s daze broke. Reality crashed back.

So it wasn’t Gabriela.

Just moments ago, he had let himself hope — if it had truly been her, he would've left everything behind without hesitation. No matter what the future held, he vowed to protect her. If he couldn't grow old with her, then at the very least, he would ensure she never lived a life of hardship.

Thank God it wasn't her.

Watching the chaos unravel, Wesley's face hardened into calm detachment. Without another word, he turned and walked away from the scene.

Watching Wesley's retreating figure, Rebecca felt as if her world were collapsing. She had waited years for this moment — only for Brenden to shatter it by lying to everyone about loving her.

Her eyes gleamed with malice — she would find the right chance to deal with him.

Brenden met her venomous glare with a trembling heart, though he forced himself to look full of affection. "Rebecca, come away with me!"

His greasy display of false devotion made her skin crawl.

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"Brenden, how dare you talk nonsense like this? You're finished!" she snapped coldly.

At that moment, Jasper stepped in. He ordered security to escort the reporters out and then turned to the guests.

“Everyone, a small misunderstanding has occurred at today’s party. It requires private handling. Please, allow me to personally visit you later with a full explanation.”

Despite the chaos, Jasper remained calm, dignified, and impeccably courteous — the very image of the Howard family’s current head.

The guests, already entertained by enough drama for one evening, gradually began to leave.

Soon after, the incident of Brenden making a scene at the engagement party spread like wildfire across social media.

#WesleyRebeccaEngagement

#BrendenCrashesCeremony

#WholsBrenden

#LoveTriangle

#Mismatch

Within hours, these five hashtags shot straight to the top of the trending list.

Reporters, eager for clicks, exaggerated the story, portraying Brenden as a heartbroken man who had dared to call out the Howard family for putting status and wealth above their daughter's happiness.

Netizens dove into the debate with enthusiasm.

"Brenden showed up in a dress, which is a bit ridiculous, but he still looks really handsome!"

"Honestly, he may be a little crazy, but I'm touched by what he did."

"Wesley is rich and good-looking, sure, but Brenden doesn't seem like a bad choice either. Maybe Rebecca should just go with him."

Opinions were divided, yet the most liked comments urged Rebecca to give up her vanity and choose true love.

Rebecca was so enraged by those remarks that she nearly hurled her phone across the room.

Taking a long breath, she forced down her frustration and instead put on a pitiful expression. "Jasper, what are we supposed to do now?"

Jasper's gaze sharpened as he studied her. "Tell me, what's really going on between you and Brenden?"

The question made Rebecca roll her eyes.

"Just the sight of Brenden makes me sick. How could I ever like him? I have no idea what madness got into him today."

Lauren's tone was filled with concern. "Jasper, whatever the case, let's have those trending topics taken down first."

Jasper gave a short nod. "Don't worry. I already asked my assistant to deal with it."

Only then did Lauren allow herself to relax. But Jasper added, "We'll also need to explain this properly to the Moss family."

Rebecca's mind went completely blank at that. She was the one being humiliated, yet somehow she was being made to take the blame for what had happened. In that moment, she wanted nothing more than to tear Brenden apart.

At Rosemont Gardens, Gabriela sat feeding Truett spoonfuls of vegetable millet porridge. The boy was growing quickly, and with that came the need for more kinds of solid food.

She gazed at her son's adorable face, though her thoughts drifted far away.

Just yesterday, she had been determined to crash the engagement party. But it seemed Rebecca had sensed it and called her late at night.

"Gabriela, let me tell you something. No matter how much Wesley cares about you, you will never marry into the Moss family. Wesley's grandfather will never accept your background. You should understand your place. As long as you do, your little company will stay out of trouble."

Gabriela had spent the entire night on the balcony, sleepless, and today she hadn't even gone to work.

From this day on, Wesley belonged to someone else. The fact that she and Wesley had a son was a secret she would take to her grave. And Truett — he would never know what it felt like to have a father.

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Gabriela cradled Truett in her arms, her heart quietly splintering under the weight of her grief. She was on the verge of surrendering to the sorrow, ready to let the tears pour freely, when the front door burst open and Aubrey and Tessa swept inside.

Tessa looked different, almost radiant. The tension that had once clung to her like a second skin was gone. She had finalized the divorce from Fulton and reclaimed her home, and the newfound freedom

seemed to shine from within. Before she even sat down, Tessa blurted, breathless with excitement, "Gabriela, Mr. Moss's engagement party was ruined!"

Gabriela blinked, stunned, her mind scrambling to keep up. "What? Why?"

Tessa leaned forward, lowering her voice as if sharing state secrets. "Because Miss Howard is cheating on him. Her lover crashed the engagement party and made a scene."

Aubrey jumped in, practically buzzing with gossip. "That's not even the juiciest version. Some people suspect Mr. Moss is actually gay, since the guy showed up in a gown to blow the whole thing up."

Neither Aubrey nor Tessa had been invited to the party, and the Moss and Howard families had done a remarkable job keeping the fiasco under wraps. All they had were scattered rumors and wild online theories to feed the frenzy.

Gabriela shook her head sharply. "That's impossible." She didn't know the truth about Rebecca's alleged affair, but she knew for certain that Wesley was not gay.

"Believe what you want," Aubrey said with a shrug. "Check your phone. It's all over the internet."

"It's trending like wildfire," Tessa added.

With trembling fingers, Gabriela snatched up her phone and opened Twitter. She tapped the top link, bracing herself, but the page had already vanished. Every trace of the incident had been wiped clean from the internet. Aubrey and Tessa scrolled furiously, only to find empty feeds and broken links.

Aubrey let out a sharp laugh. "Wealthy families are really something! Burying a scandal before the dust even settles."

As their conversation buzzed, the front door opened. Loretta and Miriam stepped in, both looking weary from the day.

Loretta's sharp eyes swept Gabriela from head to toe before she exhaled, heavy and disappointed. "So much for that," she muttered under her breath.

When the figure in a gown burst onto the scene, Loretta had dared to hope, ridiculous as it seemed, that it had been Gabriela in that dress. But reality had other plans. The person was none other than Brenden.

And why was he doing that? It was completely incomprehensible. One minute he seemed taken with Fiona, the next he was confessing his love to Rebecca.

Loretta was completely dumbfounded.

Gabriela shifted under the weight of Loretta's stare. "Mrs. Larson, what's the matter?"

“Nothing,” Loretta said flatly, though her tone carried a quiet sting.

Without another word, she disappeared into her room.

Miriam lingered just long enough to shake her head before trailing after Loretta, leaving Gabriela sitting in stunned silence.

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Utterly perplexed, Gabriela turned toward Tessa and Aubrey, searching their faces for an explanation. But they could only shrug, quickly diving back into whispers about Wesley’s imploding engagement, their voices low and urgent, as though sharing forbidden secrets.

Meanwhile, Brenden had already returned to his place with Fiona, peeling himself out of the ridiculous gown. The zipper at the back refused to budge, and after a few futile attempts, he sighed in defeat and asked Fiona to give him a hand.

She burst out laughing the moment she saw him, nearly doubling over, before flashing him an exaggerated thumbs-up.

“Brenden, I got to hand it to you,” she said between chuckles. “Turns out if you’re shameless enough, even the most venomous woman will choke on her own words!”

His glare was sharp enough to cut glass. “Shut it. Stop laughing.”

But Fiona, of course, wasn't done. She leaned in, close enough to make him flinch, and inhaled with mock appreciation.

"This scent actually suits you," she said, grinning.

It was a creamy sweetness that lingered softly in the air — she had hunted for weeks before finding one that matched Gabriela's scent exactly.

Brenden's expression darkened. "Get lost."

The edge in his voice finally made her ease up, though a mischievous smile still danced on her lips. Then, unable to resist, she muttered, "I have to say, Gabriela is really cunning. Looking all innocent while wearing something like that? It's quite tempting for men."

Brenden snapped his head up, eyes flashing. "Don't talk rubbish. The scent she's wearing isn't like any perfume at all."

Fiona rolled her eyes, a sly grin tugging at her mouth. "In your world, Gabriela's perfect. I know that."

Brenden had barely changed out of the gown when the door slammed open, the sharp sound ricocheting through the living room.

A tall, imposing figure stepped inside.

It was Casper, Brenden's father.

Casper's expression was a mask of restrained fury, his jaw tight, eyes blazing like storm clouds. In a voice controlled but edged with steel, he said, "Ms. Dewitt, this is a family matter. Leave."

Fiona's gaze flicked to his hand and froze. A whip, coiled and ready. Her stomach knotted, but she forced a nervous smile. "Casper, about what happened today—"

Before she could finish, Hanley appeared in the doorway. "Fiona, come on, we're going home. Now."

She blinked, stunned. Of course word had traveled fast. Her father must have raced over the moment the news broke, ready to drag his wayward daughter home by force if he had to.

Still, Fiona squared her shoulders. "Casper, this wasn't Brenden's fault. He—"

"Fiona!" Hanley's roar cut through the room like a blade. "I said now."

For a moment, she hesitated, torn between loyalty and fear.

Then Brenden spoke, his voice quiet, almost detached. "Go. It's fine. I'll handle this."

His calmness, that strange air of indifference, left her with no choice. Biting back her protest, Fiona allowed Hanley to pull her toward the door.

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The moment she stepped into the hallway, a sharp crack split the air behind her, followed by Casper's guttural roar.

"I've indulged your antics, turning a blind eye to them all," Casper shouted, his voice vibrating with rage. "But today, you dared to ruin the engagement your grandfather arranged for your cousin! You brat, you've crossed a line!"

The whip came down again and again, its vicious snap echoing through the walls.

And yet, Brenden said nothing. No sharp retort. No dramatic outburst.

Outside, Fiona felt her throat tighten, her eyes stinging with tears. Every crack of the whip from inside the house tore through her, making her want to bolt back in and shield Brenden from the storm.

Hanley's arm shot out, stopping her in her tracks. His voice was ice. "This is between the Moss and Howard families. You will not interfere."

“But it was my idea. Brenden only went along with it to help—” Fiona’s voice trembled, desperation breaking through her usual bravado.

“Not. Another. Word. We cannot afford to offend the Moss family,” he said, his tone low but merciless. “And we certainly cannot afford to provoke the Howards. Do you understand?”

Hanley’s gaze hardened, sharp as a blade.

Swallowing hard, Fiona nodded, her voice barely above a whisper. “Understood.”

Without another word, Hanley dragged Fiona home, his words like iron, warning her over and over to cut ties with Brenden and never again cross the Howard family.

Fiona bit back her protest, fearing she might lose her monthly allowance, and simply nodded in reluctant obedience.

But the very next day, Fiona slipped out of the house and made her way to Brenden’s place.

Inside, Brenden lay on his stomach, his body stiff and battered. Every movement was agony, but when he saw her, he still managed a crooked grin.

“What are you doing here?” he drawled, as if nothing was wrong.

Fiona didn't answer. Instead, she knelt beside him, carefully lifting the hem of his shirt. The moment his back came into view, her breath caught.

"It must... it must hurt like hell," she whispered, her voice trembling despite her effort to sound steady.

Brenden chuckled, though the sound was strained. "This? Nah. I'm a tough guy. Give me a few days and I'll be good as new."

Fiona's lips pressed into a thin line, her silence louder than words.

With a wince, Brenden shifted, inching closer to her. "What's this look? Feeling guilty?"

Her brows knitted in frustration. "You're seriously hurt. Stop moving."

"Then do me a favor," he said lightly, though his eyes softened. "Stop picking on Gabriela."

Fiona's temper flared, sharp and instant. She rolled her eyes, heat rising to her cheeks.

Why was she feeling sorry for this idiot?

Even now, bloodied, bruised, and barely able to move, he was still thinking about Gabriela.

Did that woman even bother to come check on him?

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“Come on, cheer up,” Brenden encouraged softly, his voice warm with patience. “I know you and Gabriela never see eye to eye, but you’re not cruel. You wouldn’t really make her suffer.”

If Fiona had truly meant harm, her tricks would’ve gone far beyond swapping hotel rooms or handing out luxury bags and jewelry.

Fiona gave a sharp scoff. “Spare me the flattery.”

The thought still flitted across her mind — she’d find another chance to make Gabriela’s life miserable.

“I’m not flattering you. I mean it,” Brenden pressed, his expression earnest. “You and Gabriela don’t have a deep grudge against each other. The only thing standing between you two is Wesley, so in the end, it all comes back to Wesley.” With a sharp finality, Brenden declared, “You only let yourself get swept away by his charm and ended up doing something reckless.”

Watching the calm ease in his face made Fiona’s chest tighten with unease.

This fool — battered and bleeding — was still worrying about Gabriela.

Her voice slipped out, curious and almost guilty. “Brenden... since the whole scheme was mine, why didn’t you just expose me?”

If he had dragged her down with him yesterday, the punishment would never have been so brutal.

Now his entire back was torn raw, a lash had split the skin across his cheek, and his arms bore angry welts from the beating.

It was a heartbreaking sight.

Brenden stayed unruffled, his tone almost casual. “How could I throw you under the bus? Besides, I don’t earn a living off my face, so a few scars mean nothing. But you’re different — so delicate, so lovely. One slap might leave you bruised for days.”

Fiona’s throat tightened, and she shot him a teary glare. “Brave words, but your body gave you away — you’re scarred now, aren’t you?”

He gave a crooked smile. “It’s fine. Don’t cry, alright? Watching women cry makes me feel like my chest is splitting too.”

Fiona turned her head, quickly brushing at her damp lashes before reaching for the ointment on the table. "It's about time your dressing was changed. Let me handle it."

His expression shifted, a flicker of doubt crossing his face. "Do we really have to? Wouldn't it be safer if a doctor did it?"

She shot him a sharp glare, her voice laced with irritation. "So you're saying I've got clumsy hands? I haven't even complained about how revolting those bloody wounds of yours look!"

Brenden rushed to explain, his voice eager. "How could I dare complain? I'm just thankful you're willing to help with the medicine."

"Then keep still and quit fidgeting!" Fiona snapped.

She dabbed the ointment onto his battered skin, and his wails filled the room, sharp and dramatic.

"You didn't even flinch when your father thrashed you yesterday," she scolded, brows furrowing, "so why are you making a fuss now?"

Brenden pulled a pained face. "To me, my dad feels like a stranger. I can't let myself look weak in front of him."

For a heartbeat, Fiona just stared at him, her thoughts scattering in a daze.

Did he really mean... that he saw her as someone close?

The idea flickered through Fiona's mind, but she quickly brushed it aside. Since Brenden seemed genuinely grateful, she decided she could indulge him with a little more care.

After tending to his wounds, she ordered a meal delivery, then stepped onto the balcony with her phone in hand.

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She hadn't come here today just to check on him — she had a scheme of her own.

If Brenden and Gabriela grew closer and ended up together, she would have the chance to win Wesley over.

With that thought sharpening her resolve, Fiona dialed Gabriela's number without hesitation.

"Gabriela, do you know Brenden took a beating from his father because of you?"

At her desk, shuffling through documents, Gabriela froze in confusion at Fiona's unexpected call. "What are you talking about? What happened to Brenden?"

Fiona's voice carried a trace of exasperation. "Yesterday he barged into the engagement party, stood in front of Wesley and a hall full of reporters, and confessed his feelings to Rebecca. The whole event fell apart because of him."

The words left Gabriela stunned.

So that was what had gone on.

"Not long after, Brenden's father stormed into his house with a whip, striking him dozens of times until his back was shredded. He's bedridden now, probably for weeks. He endured it all because of you. If you have even a shred of conscience, go and see him."

Fiona rattled off the words in one breath and cut the call before Gabriela had the chance to reply.

Moments later, the food delivery arrived.

Brenden glanced at the plain bowl of porridge placed in front of him, then at the steaming, fragrant dishes Fiona had ordered for herself. His face sank with disappointment.

"Fiona, how come my food looks so pitiful compared to yours?"

Fiona gave a firm reply. "You're injured, so for now you stick to plain food."

Brenden looked ready to argue, but when he noticed Fiona happily tucking into her meal without the slightest concern for his misery, he slumped back on the bed.

With obvious reluctance, he forced down spoonfuls of the bland porridge, eyes glued to her plate.

The longer he stared, the stronger his craving grew.

Finally, he muttered, "If Gabriela were here, she wouldn't make me choke down this stuff."

Fiona shot him a sharp glance. "And what exactly are you getting at?"

Brenden's lips curved faintly as he answered, "Gabriela would've cooked something for me herself."

Fiona tilted her head. "What do you want to eat?"

Brenden's eyes brightened. "Would you make it for me?"

“No way!” she scoffed, rolling her eyes. “I’d never step into the kitchen for a man.”

“That’s a lie,” Brenden muttered, sipping the bland porridge with a grimace. “At Loretta’s place, you were all too eager to chop vegetables and play chef.”

Fiona’s tone stayed calm. “But Wesley... he’s the exception.”

If cooking for Wesley meant earning even a fleeting glance from him, then maybe she’d bother to learn.

Brenden couldn’t explain it, but the way she spoke made his chest tighten. He gave a derisive snort. “Sounds to me like you’re the one drowning in lovesickness.”

Fiona’s eyes flashed, her lips curling in irritation. “Oh, please. You’re no different — so devoted to Gabriela.”

“Come on, Gabriela is way better than Wesley — she’d never mess around,” he snapped, voice edged with stubborn pride.

“Wesley is wealthy, powerful, and devastatingly handsome,” she countered, chin lifted like she’d just delivered the winning point.

“Gabriela’s just as stunning,” Brenden muttered, refusing to concede.

Their voices clashed, sharp and insistent, each word thrown like a pebble into a pond. Neither yielded an inch. The scene devolved into a ridiculous standoff, the two of them puffed up with indignation, squabbling like quarrelsome frogs trapped in the same muddy patch.

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Realizing she couldn't win, Fiona pushed back her chair and walked out. "Brenden, if I so much as speak to you again, may lightning strike me!" she hissed, her voice shaking with anger.

Brenden shot upright, face flushed. "Ha! Same here! Don't you dare step foot in my place again — I'm resetting the password right this second!"

Her heels clicked faster across the floor, each step louder than the last as she stormed off.

Even after sliding into the back seat of the car, her fury still burned hot in her chest, her hands clenched tight in her lap.

The driver peeked at her through the rearview mirror, uneasy. "Miss Dewitt... would you like me to head straight home?"

"Hold it," Fiona snapped, her jaw tight. "We're not leaving yet."

Nearly half an hour later, Gabriela's figure appeared in the distance, and Fiona's brow pinched tight without her even realizing.

She always claimed she wanted Gabriela and Brenden together, yet the moment Gabriela stepped into the house, irritation churned hotter inside her. The strange unrest made no sense, but still, she gave the driver no signal to start the car.

Gabriela slipped off her shoes at the door and crossed into the living room.

The sound of her steps reached Brenden, and with a cocky grin he called out, "Fiona, back so soon? I knew you couldn't bring yourself to leave."

Silence answered him. He twisted his head with effort, only to find Gabriela standing in the doorway.

Panic flickered through him. He didn't want her to see the ugly whip marks streaking his back, so he fumbled to cover himself. The movement tugged at his wounds, forcing a grimace across his face.

Gabriela hurried forward, steadying him before he could strain further. "Stay still. Just say what you need."

His brows drew together. "What brought you here?"

She said calmly, "Fiona reached out and filled me in on everything." Her eyes lingered on the cut across his face. Guilt stirred within her as she said softly, "Mr. Saunders, I'm really sorry for your suffering. Thank you for what you have done."

Brenden felt uneasy under Gabriela's earnest gaze.

"There's no need to thank me. It was nothing," he muttered, shifting slightly in his seat.

The mood turned heavy, silence stretching between them until it grew almost stifling.

After a moment, Gabriela's eyes drifted toward the dishes left on the table, and she reached out as if to gather them up.

Before she could, Brenden stopped her. "Leave it for now, Gabriela. Sit with me — I have something to say."

He gave the cushion beside him a small, deliberate pat.

Startled by the gravity in his tone, Gabriela hesitated, then crossed the room and lowered herself onto the seat at his side.

Brenden leaned closer, his voice tinged with urgency. “Yesterday, I put on a dress, the veil, and even doused myself in a perfume that smelled like yours. For a moment, Wesley really thought I was you. He took my hand, and I could feel it — he wanted to walk away with me.”

Gabriela’s fingertips quivered.

If she had shown up at that party to stop his engagement to Rebecca, would Wesley have chosen her too?

Before she could sort through the thought, Brenden pressed on, his gaze locking onto hers. “Gabriela, believe me, Wesley’s heart is with you!”

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Gabriela stayed quiet for several seconds, her mind tangled with doubts. If Wesley’s heart was truly with her, why would he choose to marry someone else?

With his power and influence, who on earth could compel him?

“Trust me, Gabriela,” Brenden said with unusual gravity. “Wesley really does like you.”

She curved her lips into a faint smile. “I’ll take your word for it.”

But deep down, what good would that do? Wesley's warmth came and went like the tide, leaving her unsettled every time.

"You should confront him and demand answers," Brenden urged. "At least let my punishment mean something."

His mournful voice carried such sincerity that it stirred both amusement and a flicker of tenderness in her.

"Fine," she murmured. "I'll bring it up when the time feels right."

"Don't wait for the right time — do it today!" Brenden pressed, leaning forward. "Hesitation only steals your chances."

Before Gabriela could argue back, he had already steered her out of his house. Outside, Fiona brightened the moment she saw Gabriela emerge so quickly. Relief washed over her — Brenden hadn't kept Gabriela holed up inside for long, and that eased her mind.

"Drive us home," Fiona said sharply, her voice cutting through the silence.

The driver, taken aback by her sudden command, glanced at her in the rearview mirror. Sensing the storm in her eyes had passed, he let out a quiet, almost shaky breath and hurried to start the engine.

Gabriela didn't march to Apex Group to demand answers from Wesley.

Instead, her steps carried her to his condo.

At first, she thought she could wait outside, but the icy wind quickly bit through her coat and stole the warmth from her fingers.

Shivering, she gave in, pressing her thumb to the scanner. The lock clicked open, and she slipped inside.

She entered the living room and spotted Wesley leaning against the counter, a glass in hand as he swallowed down some pills.

A jolt of unease shot through Gabriela, and she hurried toward him.

"Wesley, what are you taking?" she demanded.

His hand stiffened mid-motion, clearly startled by her sudden appearance.

Before he could respond, Gabriela snatched the glass away.

“You’re not well, are you? What’s happening to you?” she asked quickly, anxiety edging every syllable.

Wesley blinked back to awareness, his expression hardening as his eyes narrowed on her. “What are you doing here?”

“I... I heard Brenden caused trouble at the party yesterday...” Gabriela faltered beneath the chill of his stare, her voice soft.

“So what?” His gaze sharpened, the frost in it pressing down on her chest. “Even if the engagement party was ruined, it has nothing to do with you.”

He tugged down his sleeves with deliberate calm, his tone stripped of warmth. “You should go.”

Gabriela stood frozen, caught off guard and uncertain of what to say. She hadn’t expected this kind of response; she had thought Wesley would at least let her finish speaking.

“Why are you still standing here?” His eyes hardened, his voice slicing through the air. “Do I really need to make myself clearer? My life has nothing to do with you. Allan saved me, and that was his doing, not yours.” He let the silence stretch before adding, each word weighted with ice, “And don’t forget — my family’s gratitude belongs to Myah, not you.”

“I’ve explained before, I didn’t really blame you for Allan’s death,” Gabriela said, her tone earnest. “Allan and I have only ever been close friends. To him, I’m more like family — nothing beyond that.”

"Family?" Wesley's mouth curved into a mirthless smile, his gaze devoid of warmth. "How touching." His hand flicked dismissively. "Now, get out."

"Please don't push me away like this," Gabriela begged, her lashes wet and trembling as tears clung to her eyes. Her lips quivered as she continued, "Brenden told me you were ready to go with him yesterday."

"Because I didn't want him wrecking the wedding any further," Wesley snapped, his words clipped. "Brenden's body is nothing like yours. Did you honestly believe a dress could disguise that? I recognized him the second he walked in."

Gabriela's complexion drained to a ghostly white, her breath catching.

"Don't fool yourself," Wesley sneered, his tone like steel striking stone. "Just because I once cared doesn't mean my feelings are permanent." His eyes darkened, merciless in their finality. "Leave. I'll erase your fingerprints from the system, and from this moment on, you're never stepping foot in here again."