

His kiss 491

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Gabriela's chest ached with regret.

If she hadn't gone to Wesley and demanded answers today, they might have at least preserved some fragile semblance of friendship.

After what felt like an endless silence, she finally bowed her head and murmured, "I'm sorry."

She knew barging into his place uninvited was inexcusable.

Wesley turned his face aside, his gaze coldly withdrawn.

"Take care," Gabriela whispered, her voice barely steady.

She spun on her heel and hurried toward the door.

He kept his back to her, unmoving, until the faint click of the door echoed through the condo. Only then did his body sway.

Wesley gripped the counter for support, a tremor running through him, and a hot rush of blood spilled from his lips.

His eyes narrowed on the dark red stain seeping into the carpet.

Time wasn't on his side — he couldn't afford to linger on this mess when weightier matters demanded his focus.

As Gabriela stepped out of his condo, her phone buzzed in her hand. Kaleb's name flashed across the screen. His voice carried a sharp edge when she answered: a newly signed project had hit unexpected snags, and her presence was urgently required.

Without hesitation, she hurried back to the company.

In what felt like a breath, three days slipped past.

Brenden's wounds hadn't even begun to close when Wesley ordered him back to work.

Every step sent a jolt of pain through his battered body, and he limped along grumbling in a plaintive voice, "These injuries won't heal for at least half a month."

Wesley's reply came flat and cold through the phone. "Be here tomorrow. Miss the meeting, and your position will belong to someone else."

The words left Brenden staring blankly at the receiver. “Why are you suddenly so ruthless, Wesley?” he muttered.

But the line had already gone dead.

With no one else to unload on, Brenden rang Fiona, bitterness spilling from him. “Wesley’s being petty — he’s still nursing a grudge because I crashed his engagement party.”

Though Fiona had vowed never to exchange another word with him, guilt pricked at her chest.

This entire mess had begun because of her.

She showed up with a bag of fruit for Brenden and, with her own hands, rinsed an apple and peeled it.

Brenden leaned back against the pillows, a smug curve tugging at his lips. “Didn’t you say you were done talking to me? And yet here you are,” he teased.

Choosing not to spar with a man covered in bandages, Fiona quietly sliced the apple into neat wedges and passed them to him.

Brenden propped himself up on one arm and edged closer, his grin widening. “You didn’t argue. Haha, I won.”

A faint, unsteady flutter rippled through Fiona’s chest at his words.

She forced down the strange flutter in her chest and shoved a chunk of apple between Brenden’s lips with a scowl. “Shut up!”

Her irritation turned dangerous — she had pressed too hard, and the piece wedged in his throat.

Brenden’s face twisted in agony as he stumbled to his feet, clawing at his neck, his body convulsing with panic.

Fiona’s heart jumped into her throat. Scrambling to remember what to do, she seized him, forced him down, and hammered her palm against his chest.

The apple shot free with a wet pop.

But Brenden, sprawled on the floor from her rough push, felt the wounds on his back rip open again.

His chest heaved, each breath a rasp, before a raw, piercing cry tore from his throat.

Fiona's heart clenched with remorse. "I'm so sorry!" she blurted, her voice trembling.

She reached toward him, but Brenden shoved himself upright, staggering backward until his shoulder slammed into the vase stand.

The jolt tore through his wounds with such searing pain that no sound left his throat.

For a moment, he felt utterly trapped in his own agony, cut off from everything around him.

"Don't come near me!" he rasped bitterly, his face twisted in pain.

Shaken, Fiona let herself be guided out onto the balcony.

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Fiona pivoted toward the window, her movement swift and careless.

Her shoulder collided with the fish tank that Brenden had positioned near the balcony.

The glass container plummeted, exploding into crystalline fragments across the floor.

The brilliant fighting fish landed with a wet slap against the tiles, its body writhing as it fixed Fiona with a murderous glare.

These creatures possessed legendary aggression yet displayed breathtaking beauty — their fins cascaded like silk petals or billowing evening gowns when they moved through water.

Brenden had acquired this specimen for its visual splendor, though after more than a year of captivity, he had never once allowed it to engage in combat. The fish had grown nearly mad with boredom and pent-up fury.

Finding itself suddenly stranded on dry floor, waterless and desperate, it still searched frantically for something to attack.

Fiona recalled how deeply Brenden treasured this particular fish. Without concern for her clothing, she dropped to her knees, water soaking through the fabric as she lunged for the thrashing creature, determined to return it to what remained of the tank.

The commotion drew Brenden from the other room. He appeared in the doorway and witnessed Fiona's rescue attempt. His eyes contracted to dangerous slits as he bellowed, "Stay away from that fish!"

But Fiona had already seized the fighting fish in her cupped palms. The creature responded instantly, driving its razor-sharp spines deep into her flesh.

Blood welled and spilled between her fingers.

Fiona's scream pierced the air as the fish tumbled back to the floor.

Brenden abandoned all thoughts of the fallen creature. He rushed forward, pressing tissues against her wounds before retrieving antiseptic from his medical supplies.

His words tumbled out in urgent streams. "Thank God I keep first aid supplies here because of my own injuries. What possessed you to grab it when it fell?"

Fiona whispered, "I feared it would die."

She had possessed no knowledge that fighting fish could inflict such damage — she understood only that fish perished quickly when removed from water. "Brenden, forgive me."

Ever since Brenden had grown closer to her, misfortune seemed to trail in his wake like a persistent shadow — now even his prized fish tank lay in ruins.

"Don't worry. These fish adapt easily to new environments. I'll transfer it to a water basin temporarily and arrange for someone to deliver a replacement tank later."

He spoke while carefully wrapping her injured hand with practiced movements.

Fiona studied Brenden's face as he worked.

He possessed genuine handsomeness — luminous eyes that sparkled like captured starlight, and lips that curved naturally upward, lending him an effortlessly seductive charm.

For the first time, she recognized how gentle and attentive Brenden could become when circumstances demanded it.

Brenden completed the bandaging with swift efficiency. Noticing her water-dampened clothing, he offered, "Would you prefer to change into something dry?"

"Absolutely not!" Fiona's awareness snapped back to the present moment as she regarded him with suspicious eyes. "Do you maintain a wardrobe of women's clothing here? I refuse to wear garments that have touched another woman's skin."

"No women's clothes exist in my place!" Brenden penetrated her thoughts immediately and responded with matching intensity. "I've transformed my life completely. I severed all connections with those women long ago, and not a single trace of their presence remains here!"

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These words stirred unexpected pleasure within Fiona's chest, though she maintained her composed facade. "Why do you feel compelled to explain this to me?"

Brenden ignored her question. "The air carries a chill, and wet clothing will invite illness. I possess brand-new garments that have never been worn. Change into those, and I'll ensure your wet clothes are properly dried."

His insistence proved impossible to resist, so Fiona accepted the pristine robe he located for her with reluctant grace.

"Rest assured, you can reclaim your original clothing once it's completely dry."

After changing, Fiona settled onto the sofa and absorbed herself in her phone while Brenden moved slowly toward the laundry room, his injuries hampering each step as he carried her damp clothes.

She watched his retreating form and felt something unfamiliar stir within her heart, though she remained silent, continuing to play with her phone on the sofa.

Approaching footsteps echoed through the space.

Without lifting her gaze, Fiona called out, "Wow, you're done already?"

"Done with what?"

The voice carried the weight of years and spoke in gravelly tones.

Loretta had arrived.

Shock propelled Fiona to her feet, and awareness of Brenden's robe draped around her body prompted an instinctive explanation. "Loretta, please don't misinterpret this situation!"

Her words had barely faded when Brenden emerged from the laundry room.

Loretta rotated slowly and fixed him with a penetrating stare.

The intensity of her scrutiny made Brenden shift uncomfortably. "Loretta, why are you examining me in such a manner?"

"Both of you, come here immediately and sit down!"

Loretta's command brooked no argument. The two young people arranged themselves on opposite sofas, too intimidated to produce even the slightest sound.

Observing their obvious nervousness, Loretta released a weary sigh. "I don't know exactly what's going on between you and Fiona, Brenden. However, if genuine affection exists between you two, concentrate on nurturing that connection and cease this involvement with Rebecca. Fiona possesses rare goodness. You must treasure her properly."

Fiona chimed in, "Loretta, you've completely misunderstood our circumstances. I accidentally shattered the fish tank and soaked my clothes, which necessitated this change of attire."

Loretta nodded with apparent satisfaction. "A young woman must maintain proper boundaries before marriage to protect herself from potential harm."

Recognizing that Loretta had woven herself deeper into misunderstanding, Fiona chose silence over explanation, knowing that further words would only tangle the situation beyond repair.

After delivering an extended sermon, Loretta observed their contrite demeanor and concluded her moral instruction.

Her voice mellowed into genuine concern. "Brenden, tell me truthfully — how severe are your injuries?"

News of the whipping had reached her ears. Though no blood relation bound them, she had witnessed his transformation from boy to man and carried profound worry in her heart.

"Nothing that time won't heal," Brenden replied, forcing his spine straight in a display of reassurance. "Give me a few days, and I'll be restored to perfect condition."

"Your recklessness this time defied all reason! Fortune smiled upon you that Wesley and Rebecca possessed generous hearts and chose to let you off the hook. Now let me check your injuries!"

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Loretta inspected his wounds with practiced eyes, instructing him to maintain absolute dryness around the injured areas, then turned her attention to Fiona with implicit expectation. “I’m entrusting his care to your capable hands. Promise me — neither of you will attempt such foolhardy behavior again.”

Both heads bobbed with enthusiastic agreement.

The moment Loretta’s footsteps faded beyond the door, Brenden collapsed toward his bed with desperate urgency.

Had the old woman lingered even moments longer, he suspected that unconsciousness might have overtaken him entirely due to the overwhelming pain.

Witnessing his face contort with each movement, Fiona exhaled a sympathetic breath. “Tell me where the pain strikes worst. Those wounds need fresh medication.”

Despite injuries that screamed protest with every motion, Brenden forced his battered body toward the office the following morning. Wesley’s warning had carved itself into his memory with crystal clarity — absence would guarantee his immediate replacement.

As the elevator doors parted to receive Brenden, Rebecca materialized beside him like an unwelcome storm cloud.

Her expression curdled the moment their eyes met.

Through clenched teeth, her words emerged as barely controlled venom. "Brenden! How dare you show your face before me!"

Guilt pressed against his conscience, prompting a sincere attempt at reconciliation.

The elevator announced their arrival with its mechanical chime.

Rebecca's voice sliced through the opening doors with calculated cruelty. "You want my forgiveness? Very well. Travel to the café nestled within Center Plaza and retrieve my coffee. Americano, untainted by sugar. And don't you dare delegate this task to others!"

Brenden's mind reeled at the impossibility. "Center Plaza lies more than ten kilometers from here."

"That establishment serves the only coffee worthy of my consumption," Rebecca declared with arctic indifference. "Are you going or not?"

Brenden had never mastered the art of denying beautiful women, particularly when his own actions had created the conflict.

His head dipped in reluctant acceptance. "I'll make the journey."

Ninety minutes crawled past before Brenden reappeared, coffee clutched in trembling fingers.

Traffic had transformed the streets into gridlocked rivers of frustration, while the café's popularity had generated serpentine queues of waiting customers. His injuries combined with the extended ordeal had painted his face with dizzy exhaustion by the time he crossed Apex Group's threshold.

Rebecca's complaint struck him like a physical blow. "What took you so long?"

As Brenden began explaining the cascade of delays, his feet carried him forward, unaware that there was a treacherous puddle directly in his path. His shoe lost purchase against the slick surface, and gravity claimed him with ruthless efficiency.

The water had not appeared by accident — Rebecca had orchestrated this final humiliation with deliberate precision.

But fate possessed its own sense of irony. As Brenden's body surrendered to the fall, the coffee container launched skyward in a perfect arc.

The next heartbeat delivered poetic justice as the scalding liquid descended upon Rebecca's form, drenching her from crown to toe before her reflexes could mount any defense, leaving her transformed into a sticky, coffee-stained monument.

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Rebecca stood frozen, her mind reeling with disbelief.

Fury blazed through her shock as she shouted, “Brenden! You planned that deliberately!”

Brenden felt equally stunned by the chaos. He pushed through the sharp ache of his reopened wound, hauling himself upright while insisting, “That wasn’t intentional!” His hand reached desperately for a clean tissue to help her.

The treacherous puddle claimed him again. His feet slipped beneath him, sending his body careening forward into Rebecca’s, toppling her backward as his full weight crashed down upon her.

Rebecca glared up at him with blazing incredulity. “Remove yourself from me immediately!”

The door burst open without warning, revealing Billy’s sudden entrance. “Miss—”

His words died mid-sentence as he absorbed the compromising scene before him.

Billy remained motionless, processing the sight, then stammered quickly, “My apologies. I will take my leave now.” He pivoted to make his hasty retreat.

Rebecca’s voice stopped his escape. “Mr. Clarke, assist me in removing Brenden!”

Billy approached them, hauled Brenden to his feet, then extended his hand to help Rebecca stand.

Rebecca rose with visible displeasure, smoothing her disheveled clothing. When she lifted her gaze, a cluster of colleagues had gathered at the doorway.

Their faces displayed shock layered with unmistakable curiosity.

Rebecca's expression darkened into thunderous rage.

She promised herself that Brenden would pay dearly for this humiliation.

Billy scattered the gawking spectators before instructing Brenden to head to the CEO's office.

Wesley occupied his chair, his stare cutting through Brenden with arctic precision.

Brenden trembled before Wesley's intimidating presence, particularly when silence stretched between them and that forbidding gaze bore into him. Brenden ventured a cautious explanation. "I promise you, today's incident was accidental. Rebecca actually—"

Wesley's interruption sliced through his words. "Maintain your distance from her going forward."

The Howard family wielded extraordinary influence, with Jasper proving particularly merciless and inflexible in his dealings. Wesley knew that without his protection, Brenden would be eaten alive if he ever crossed the Howards.

Brenden nodded. "Understood."

"Examine this thoroughly." Wesley hurled a document across the desk at him. "Master every detail immediately. Billy will accompany you to client negotiations at four o'clock this afternoon."

The papers contained construction blueprints for the Deldown Island Resort project in Solville.

Multiple corporations, including the Williams Group and Vasquez Group, were battling fiercely for this lucrative contract.

Brenden stared at the overwhelming mass of technical specifications, feeling as though he might suffocate beneath the information. "Should we secure this deal, will I personally oversee its completion?"

His previous experience encompassed only sales department management. What justified assigning him this responsibility now?

Wesley confirmed with a nod.

Brenden voiced his bitter objection. "How can you display such cruelty? My injuries still torment me, yet you burden me with this enormous undertaking!"

Wesley delivered a glacial glance in his direction.

Brenden's courage crumbled immediately. He touched his back with pathetic resignation, his fingers emerging stained crimson. "Observe — my wounds continue bleeding!"

Wesley had already immersed himself in reviewing other paperwork, never bothering to raise his head. "Minor bleeding remains perfectly normal for any man. Time grows short, so begin studying that document now. Direct any questions to Billy whenever necessary."

Brenden departed the office feeling utterly defeated, spending considerable time wrestling with the document that seemed designed to confuse him. His frustration finally overwhelmed him, prompting a call to Loretta for sympathy. "Loretta, blood still seeps from my wounds. Wesley demonstrates such heartless behavior. He once delighted in..."

"Tormenting Gabriela this way, and now that she's absent, I've inherited her position as his victim. He must still harbor resentment over my disruption of his engagement celebration."

Loretta experienced genuine compassion as she absorbed his complaints. "Your actions were indeed inexcusable. Offer him a sincere apology. Don't worry, I'll speak with him privately later."

While Brenden poured out his grievances over the phone, Rebecca was simultaneously contacting Fiona.

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"I'm delivering a clear warning, Fiona — cease dispatching Brenden to create problems for me! Otherwise, I'll ensure he's kicked out of Okburg!"

Rebecca dared issue such menacing ultimatums because she depended entirely on Jasper's devoted protection. Jasper certainly possessed sufficient authority to fulfill her threats.

Fiona was receiving a professional manicure when she heard Rebecca's enraged declarations, responding with deliberate nonchalance, "Brenden and I share no meaningful connection! Have you considered why he persistently pursues you? Perhaps examine your own behavior before directing your accusations toward me."

"I understand your feelings for Wesley perfectly." Rebecca's voice carried poisonous satisfaction mixed with cruel smugness. "But abandon that fantasy immediately! Regardless of your desperate schemes, Wesley will only ever choose me!"

"If he's really yours, why waste time threatening me? Shouldn't you be sure enough to ignore me?" With that, Fiona hung up.

She contemplated the situation briefly before deciding to make a call. Recently, she had successfully bribed an Apex Group employee to monitor Rebecca's daily activities closely.

The informant recounted today's dramatic encounter between Rebecca and Brenden with vivid enthusiasm. "The entire company buzzes with speculation that Mr. Saunders might genuinely harbor romantic feelings for Rebecca. What other explanation exists for his willingness to risk Mr. Moss's fury just to pursue her?"

Upon hearing these revelations, Fiona nearly destroyed her perfectly crafted manicure, her nails threatening to snap under the pressure of her clenched fists.

Brenden might harbor feelings for Rebecca?

The notion struck her as absolutely preposterous.

Yet now that Rebecca's engagement to Wesley had already crumbled, what explained Brenden's continued entanglement with that woman? Could genuine romantic interest actually motivate his persistent behavior?

The memory of Brenden's extensive romantic history surfaced in her mind, instantly obliterating every trace of her day's contentment.

She hurled her phone aside with violent force.

The manicurist observed Fiona's sudden transformation with growing concern, venturing carefully, "Ms. Dewitt, would you perhaps desire some decorative nail art?"

"Absolutely! What an excellent suggestion!" Fiona's expression remained thunderously stern. "Inscribe a single letter upon each nail for me."

The confused manicurist inquired, "Which letters would you prefer?"

Fiona articulated each character with crystalline precision.

The manicurist's brow furrowed in disbelief at this extraordinary request. These wealthy young women certainly possessed the most unconventional preferences imaginable.

"Begin immediately," Fiona commanded with urgency. "Exceptional work will earn you ten thousand dollars."

The manicurist's eyes blazed with sudden enthusiasm as she commenced her task.

Upon completion, a single nail remained unadorned. She questioned, "What design shall grace the final nail?"

"Create an exclamation mark!"

Soon, Fiona's ten fingernails displayed nine meticulously crafted letters along with one exclamation mark.

After settling her account, Fiona marched directly to Apex Group headquarters to confront Rebecca face-to-face.

Rebecca had never anticipated Fiona's audacious appearance, demanding with insufferable arrogance, "Have you arrived to offer your apology?"

Fiona elevated both hands immediately, presenting her freshly decorated nails directly before Rebecca's startled gaze.

Rebecca's complexion darkened dramatically upon deciphering the insulting message. She spat, "Damn you, Fiona!"

Fiona maintained complete silence, advancing her fingers closer toward Rebecca's increasingly flushed face.

Rebecca's jaw clenched with barely contained fury.

Fiona was really out of her mind. In many ways, she and Brenden formed an ideally matched pair of lunatics.

Rebecca chose to avoid further conflict with this deranged woman, departing with a menacing final warning. "Both you and Brenden should cease provoking me immediately. My patience approaches its absolute limit." She strode away with purposeful determination.

Fiona savored her wordless victory over Rebecca, her spirits soaring with triumphant satisfaction.

She requested a staff member photograph her artistic nails, then paired the image with an archived picture of Rebecca being doused with red wine, publishing both on her social media platforms.

Both Gabriela and Brenden discovered these provocative photographs.

Gabriela was cradling Truett tenderly when her finger accidentally activated the like button.

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Brenden also liked the post, quickly trailed by a string of thumbs-up emojis in the comments.

He silently praised Fiona as a genius. For a split second, he even toyed with the idea of getting the same manicure, imagining himself flashing the insult on his nails at Rebecca, daring her to boss him around again. But the mental image of a sharp-suited man like him flaunting painted nails made him cringe. He scratched that plan immediately.

Instead, his mind raced, devising ways to dodge Rebecca's inevitable confrontation. Before he could sort out a strategy, a knock broke his thoughts. Billy stepped in. "Mr. Saunders, the client moved the meeting up. We'll need to leave right away."

Brenden was stunned. "I haven't even finished reviewing the proposal."

Billy offered a calm smile. "No worries, I'll fill you in on the drive."

With little choice, Brenden rose and trailed after him, resignation written all over his face.

Meanwhile, Fiona's spirits soared when Brenden liked her post.

She wasted no time taking a screenshot before dialing Gabriela.

"Gabriela, I've already captured proof of your little 'likes.' I'll be sending it straight to Rebecca later."

Fiona's lips curled with satisfaction. She wanted that self-important woman to know the bitterness so many felt toward her.

Gabriela's voice came cold and guarded. "What exactly do you want?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking that?" Fiona snapped. "We've already thrown Wesley's engagement into chaos. Now it's time for you to make a move. Why are you still hiding at home?"

What grated Fiona most was Gabriela's refusal to chase after Wesley. Instead, Gabriela was spending time with Brenden, dangling hope in front of him when she clearly had no intention of returning his feelings.

Gabriela rolled her eyes. She had a child to look after.

She drew in a steady breath, then lowered her voice. "Ms. Dewitt, you and Rebecca can afford these games. I can't. Please leave me out of it. I'm just an ordinary woman trying to survive."

She had tried with Wesley, but he never gave her an opening.

What options were left? To wave their child like a threat?

Gabriela could never stoop to that.

Fiona let out a derisive laugh. "Pathetic. You're nothing but a coward."

Truett's tiny hands and feet never seemed to stop moving.

He wriggled determinedly, attempting to roll over, but when his efforts went unnoticed, the little one latched onto Gabriela's long hair for attention. Her focus snapped back instantly. Without another word to Fiona, Gabriela ended the call and set the phone aside.

Rebecca's influence was enough to cripple her small company in a heartbeat; provoking her was far too dangerous.

Fiona could brand her a coward, and Gabriela wouldn't have minded in the least. Her only concern was making enough to give her child a secure life.

A quick check revealed that Truett had dirtied his diaper.

Gabriela sighed, cleaned him up with practiced hands, and had just finished when the sound of Loretta and Miriam's laughter drifted upstairs, mingling with the voices of someone else.

Balancing Truett against her shoulder, Gabriela descended the stairs. Her eyes widened slightly when she spotted Stewart. "Mr. Williams? What brings you here?"

Before Stewart could answer, Loretta interjected brightly, "Miriam and I ran into him at the supermarket, and he was kind enough to give us a ride home."

Gabriela's brows knit in faint puzzlement. Ever since she'd purchased a car and hired a driver, Loretta and Miriam had little reason to trouble others for rides.

There was no need for Stewart to drive them.

Yet, Gabriela chose not to press. Instead, she gestured politely toward the sofa. "Please, have a seat. Would you prefer coffee or juice?"

“Just water, thank you,” Stewart replied, settling in. His gaze flicked discreetly to the child in her arms as he quietly studied them together.

Meeting the two elderly women at the supermarket hadn’t been a coincidence. Stewart had orchestrated the encounter with care.

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Since he had assisted them with their shopping bags, Loretta invited him over for a meal. Seeing the exact opportunity he had craved, Stewart accepted without hesitation.

It was his first time stepping into Gabriela’s home.

The villa was old, its façade showing its years, yet the inside was warm and lived-in, toys scattered across the living room floor like bright little footprints of childhood.

But one thing snagged at his mind: Wesley’s grandmother living under Gabriela’s roof.

Loretta had explained it away, saying she was simply helping care for a child, but it still didn’t make sense.

Gabriela already had a housekeeper, and Farley and Ken were both capable of lending a hand. Why would she need Loretta here?

Still, Stewart chose not to press. His attention drifted back to Gabriela and to the baby nestled in her arms.

“Gabriela,” he asked lightly, curiosity flickering in his tone, “is this Ms. Ortiz’s child?”

A flicker of hesitation passed over Gabriela’s face before she gave a small nod. Drawn closer, Stewart leaned in and gently tapped the baby’s plump cheek, his expression softening at the sight. The little one was disarmingly adorable.

“May I hold him?” he asked.

Gabriela wavered.

Stewart, exuding an air of wealth, was a man who had grown up with everything handed to him. Could someone like him really know the first thing about cradling a child?

“You just came in from outside,” Gabriela said firmly. “Please, wash your hands first.”

Stewart blinked, then gave a soft laugh. “Of course.”

He dutifully washed, even spritzing disinfectant at her insistence, before Gabriela cautiously placed Truett in his arms.

The baby squirmed, shifting against the unfamiliar embrace. Stewart stiffened, holding him awkwardly.

Then a sudden chill spread down his sleeve.

His throat tightened. “Gabriela, why is my sleeve wet? Did—”

Gabriela quickly took Truett and checked.

Sure enough, the little one had relieved himself again.

With a half-laugh, half-sigh, she scolded gently, “You little rascal! You just pooped, and now you’ve peed on our guest?”

She’d let him go without a diaper for a moment after the last change, never expecting him to pick that exact time to strike again.

Truett only blinked up at her with wide, innocent eyes, babbling as if amused by his own trick.

“Sorry, Mr. Williams,” Gabriela said with an apologetic smile. “I need to change him now.”

Loretta stepped in, scooping the child into her arms. “I’ll take care of him. You deal with Stewart’s clothes.”

With Miriam and Farley trailing after her, Loretta disappeared upstairs, leaving Gabriela and Stewart alone in the living room.

Stewart’s sleeve was damp, his shirt front darkened in patches.

Gabriela bit her lip. “Mr. Williams, would you like to take off your jacket? I can clean it for you,” she asked awkwardly.

Stewart slipped off his jacket, only to reveal that his crisp white shirt beneath was also damp.

Worse yet, a faint sprinkle had reached his trousers as well.

The situation grew all the more awkward.

Catching Gabriela’s flustered expression, Stewart felt something stir inside him.

It was rare to see her caught off guard like this.

He leaned closer, lowering his voice. "My shirt's wet too. What should I do?"

The sudden proximity made her pulse quicken. The masculine scent that clung to Stewart was nothing like Wesley's sharp, dominating presence. He carried a gentler fragrance, warm and understated, yet it lingered in the air and sent her heart racing all the same.

Gabriela instinctively took several steps back. "There's a shop nearby. I'll go get you some new clothes."

As she hurried off, Stewart's lips curved into a quiet chuckle.

She was simply adorable.

As his gaze followed her retreating figure, his usually mild, gentle eyes darkened with determination.

A single desire seared through his mind: to win her heart.

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Gabriela rushed in and out of the boutique in no time, returning with fresh purchases in hand.

“Mr. Williams, would you mind changing into these?” she offered.

Stewart accepted the crisp new garments and disappeared into the bathroom.

The casual dark gray tracksuit Gabriela had selected wrapped him in unexpected comfort.

A wave of physical and mental relief washed over Stewart as the soft fabric settled against his skin.

Loretta and the others gathered in the living room just as Stewart emerged. Her eyes brightened at the sight of his transformed appearance. “Stewart, this outfit looks great on you. Gabriela possesses impeccable taste.”

Stewart’s gaze found Gabriela before his smile bloomed. “Thank you.”

Discomfort flickered across Gabriela’s features. “Anytime.”

The truth gnawed at her — she hadn’t deliberated over style at all, merely snatched something reasonably priced without ceremony.

Rosemont Gardens commanded respect as a premier residential enclave, where over ninety percent of inhabitants wielded considerable wealth.

For someone like Gabriela, who watched every penny with vigilant care, the boutique prices here struck like physical blows. Stewart's preference for custom suits ruled out the cheapest option, forcing her to compromise on a mid-tier choice.

The transaction nearly brought tears to her eyes.

Her son's little escapade had extracted a painful toll.

Stewart read the distress written in her expression and smiled warmly. "What did it cost? Let me transfer the amount to you."

"Absolutely not — it wasn't expensive at all," Gabriela protested swiftly. Inwardly, she was frustrated; twenty thousand dollars was a significant expense for her.

Stewart's chuckle carried genuine warmth. "Then I'll treasure these clothes as your gift. Thank you — they feel perfect."

Gabriela was at a loss for words.

For crying out loud. Those clothes were just compensation for her son's escapade.

Eager to escape the living room's suffocating atmosphere, Gabriela retreated to prepare Truett's bath.

Dinnertime approached with its familiar rhythms, and Ken began orchestrating his culinary symphony in the kitchen.

Stewart maintained easy conversation with Loretta. "I've heard Gabriela creates magnificent meals, though I've never experienced her cooking firsthand."

Loretta immediately summoned Gabriela with authority. "We're hosting company tonight. Ken shouldn't shoulder this feast alone. Go assist him." With that, she lifted Truett from Gabriela's embrace with practiced ease.

Gabriela weighed the request and nodded her acceptance.

Though Ken received payment for his services, he had nurtured her through countless challenges over the years. Now that age had begun claiming its due, reciprocating his kindness felt both natural and necessary.

She glided into the kitchen to lend her hands.

An hour melted away before the meal reached completion.

Loretta made certain to highlight the soup gracing their table. “This represents Gabriela’s signature creation.”

Emotion touched Stewart’s voice. “Far too long has passed since I’ve savored such genuine, home-prepared warmth. Might I capture this moment?”

“Please do!” Loretta said as she pulled out her own device. “I want to take a shot too.”

After photographing the abundant spread, she orchestrated seating arrangements that placed Stewart and Gabriela side by side.

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Gabriela saw through Loretta’s intentions but couldn’t bring herself to say no.

Besides, she had already declined once before at Loretta’s residence, and Stewart had made his dislike abundantly clear.

She resolved to behave naturally.

Truett nestled in her arms as Gabriela savored her meal, pausing regularly to offer him tiny portions.

Surprise flickered across Stewart’s face.

He hadn't anticipated Tessa's child forming such profound attachment to Gabriela.

His observation spilled forth unbidden. "Gabriela, you seem to really love kids."

"Children possess such innocent charm. How could anyone resist loving them?" Gabriela responded.

Stewart's smile deepened with sincerity. "You'll undoubtedly become an extraordinary mother someday. The man who wins your heart will discover himself blessed beyond measure."

Knowing glances passed between Loretta and Miriam. Even the typically oblivious Farley grasped the implication behind those words.

Everyone at the table recognized Stewart's genuine attraction to Gabriela with crystal clarity.

When he addressed her, his attention never wavered, his gaze radiating tender intensity.

Furthermore, his gaze lingered on the dishes that had captured her preference, as though committing her tastes to permanent memory.

This observation strengthened Loretta's matchmaking resolve to steel-like determination.

Following dinner, Gabriela employed dishwashing duties as her shield against Loretta's suggestion that she spend intimate time conversing with Stewart.

Stewart settled onto the sofa, maintaining pleasant dialogue with Loretta while updating his social media presence.

He posted three carefully curated images — one showcasing a living room corner, another capturing his own reflection, and a final shot displaying their abundant feast.

His caption read: "She welcomed me into her home, gifted me new clothes, and prepared a feast for me."

He restricted the post's visibility to carefully selected individuals.

After publishing, he worried that his intended audience might neglect checking social platforms regularly, so he dispatched a direct message to Wesley.

"Please view my most recent post."

At that precise moment, Wesley remained anchored to his office domain.

Stewart's message arrived like an unwelcome visitor, and Wesley's initial instinct whispered to ignore it completely. Yet some mysterious compulsion guided his fingers to Stewart's social media feed.

Recognition struck him like lightning — the first photograph belonged unmistakably to Gabriela's sanctuary.

Inexplicable turbulence erupted within Wesley's chest.

Hadn't he explicitly warned her to maintain distance from Stewart?

Why was she now extending dinner invitations and opening her home to him?

Then Stewart's comment materialized beneath his post like a poisoned dart. "If I pour every ounce of effort into winning her heart, might victory be mine?"

Wesley's grip threatened to pulverize his phone entirely.

Wrestling with volcanic rage, he bolted toward the bathroom and unleashed frigid water against his burning face.

The winter liquid bit through his skin like crystalline daggers, penetrating to his very marrow. Yet internally, Wesley endured the sensation of molten metal searing his soul. Each time his eyelids descended, vivid scenes materialized — Gabriela and Stewart sharing tranquil moments, their contentment radiating like captured sunlight.

Wesley silenced the flowing tap and confronted his reflection in the mirror.