

His kiss 1061

Chapter 1061

“I married into the Howard family as a woman of standing, endured no end of grievances, and now I’m humiliated by the illegitimate daughter from your affair — who even framed me and had me thrown in prison.”

Lauren covered her face and wept. “How could the Howard family treat me this way?”

Scattered among the onlookers were plenty of wealthy women whose own husbands had strayed. Watching her cry so bitterly, they felt for her.

Some even took her side outright, turning their outrage on Matthew.

“Mr. Howard, people might look past a successful man’s indiscretions, but backing your mistress’s daughter as she bullies your wife — that’s simply unacceptable.”

“The Howard family has always had a good name. How could you do something so shameful?”

Unwilling to expose the truth of their arranged marriage in public and humiliate Lauren further, Matthew swallowed his anger.

“Lauren. That’s enough.”

Knowing exactly how soft-hearted he was, Lauren pressed her advantage.

She retorted through tears, “Matthew, you’re the one in the wrong here. Why are you being so harsh with me?”

At that moment, Gabriela spoke up, unhurried.

“Mrs. Howard, Rebecca told me how much you love this pair of earrings. Why aren’t you wearing them today?”

With that, she produced the very earrings Rebecca had stolen from her.

Lauren’s expression froze, caught completely off guard. She stood there stiffly, forcing out a few more tears.

Gabriela had taken her cherished earrings — and now she dared to flaunt them, out in the open, in front of everyone?

It was a direct provocation.

Seeing the earrings, Rebecca could only think one thing.

This was insane.

Gabriela had lost her mind.

The earrings had been stolen — why would she show them off in front of an audience like this?

Gabriela hadn't planned on pulling this card in a setting like this.

Her father had put so much care into preparing today's event, and she didn't want to embarrass him.

But with Lauren pushing this hard, twisting the truth to make her father suffer in silence, Gabriela had no qualms about shutting her down on the spot.

The guests looked thoroughly lost at the shift in conversation.

Wasn't this supposed to be about infidelity and family recognition?

How had it suddenly turned into a conversation about earrings?

The pivot felt jarring to everyone watching.

Lauren frowned, glancing instinctively at Rebecca's reaction.

Rebecca's furrowed brow and visibly guilty, uneasy manner only frustrated Lauren further — such wasted potential.

It was just a pair of earrings, and yet Rebecca looked ready to fall apart, like a thief caught red-handed. Utterly disappointing.

A thief—

The thought clicked into place for Lauren.

The earrings were in Gabriela's hands, and no one else knew Rebecca had stolen them to hand over to her.

If Lauren simply claimed Gabriela had stolen them herself—

Seeing Lauren fall quiet, Ariadne leaned in. “Second sister, what’s going on? How did your earrings end up with that illegitimate girl?”

“I honestly have no idea how she got them,” Lauren said, then leaned closer to explain the situation to Ariadne under her breath.

Once Ariadne heard it, an unspoken understanding passed between the two of them.

Chapter 1062

Gabriela had a lot of nerve — they’d pin the label of “thief” on her and see how she handled that.

While the two of them schemed, Matthew was quietly asking Gabriela about the earrings himself. Gabriela didn’t hide anything, and told him plainly what had happened.

Matthew asked under his breath, “Then why bring them out now, of all times?”

Gabriela answered without lowering her voice at all. “To return them to Lauren, and apologize — hoping that’ll be enough to make her stop slandering you.”

Still worried about how this would affect Rebecca, Matthew murmured, “Gabriela, let’s just leave the earrings out of it for now. Let me take you inside, all right?”

Gabriela nodded. "Sure. As long as they don't start something, I won't provoke them."

Ariadne cut in immediately. "Gabriela, do you really think returning stolen goods clears you of anything?"

Gabriela seemed briefly thrown by the question.

She'd only meant to return something that belonged to Lauren and use the moment to hand it back.

She hadn't expected the conversation to twist this way.

Well — she couldn't be blamed for not sparing her father's dignity now.

Seeing Gabriela pause, Lauren felt a surge of satisfaction and stepped out from behind Ariadne to glare at her.

"I'm telling you, I kept those earrings carefully, and this morning they were simply gone. Clearly you stole them!"

The crowd gasped.

Gabriela, a thief?

That didn't add up. She owned a company, held a star-rated hotel under her name, and was Wesley's woman — what could she possibly want that she didn't already have?

As the guests murmured amongst themselves, Lauren pressed on sharply. "Gabriela, if you'd simply taken them out of spite, fine. But flaunting them like this, out in the open — what exactly are you trying to prove?"

"Lauren, you'd better think this through carefully. Are you sure I'm the one who stole them?" Gabriela turned to look at Rebecca, standing beside her mother. "Your precious daughter should be the one telling you how these ended up in my hands."

"Rebecca. If you haven't already told your mother, why don't you tell her now — how did I end up with these earrings?"

Startled by the direct question, Rebecca couldn't bring herself to admit she'd stolen them, so she fell in line behind her mother instead. "Gabriela, you stole them. Why are you asking me?"

"Oh? So you're both convinced I'm the thief here?"

A faint, playful smile crossed Gabriela's face, and it only made Rebecca more nervous — she couldn't shake the feeling that Gabriela was setting up another trap for her.

"I don't know anything," Rebecca said, looking away. "But those earrings are my mother's. If she says you stole them, then you stole them."

"Do you want to say that again?"

Gabriela took two steps closer, and Rebecca flinched, retreating behind Lauren.

She'd been burned by Gabriela's schemes so many times that any strange behavior from her now set off alarm bells.

Chapter 1063

"Don't you dare try to intimidate my daughter," Lauren said, taking Rebecca's hand and patting it reassuringly before stepping toward Gabriela to reach for the box holding the earrings.

"The earrings are unharmed, but you stole them, plain and simple. Admit it, apologize properly, and given that we're about to become family, I'll let it go — just this once."

"You just called me a mistress's daughter, unfit to even walk through the Howard family's doors," Gabriela said, amused. "And now stealing suddenly makes us family?"

"Does stealing make me more charming? More likeable, somehow?"

Even Wesley, who'd been fuming moments earlier, couldn't help a small laugh at her sharp retort.

His Gabby was as quick-witted as ever.

The onlookers burst out laughing despite themselves.

Lauren's face flushed red, embarrassment curdling into anger. "Gabriela, if you didn't steal them, then why do you have them?"

"You really want to know?" Gabriela asked, smiling. "I can tell you — but you should ask your precious daughter first whether she wants me to."

Seeing how composed Gabriela remained only made Rebecca more anxious, and she quickly cut in. "Mom, let's just drop it. It's only a pair of earrings, nothing that valuable. Let's go inside — we shouldn't keep the guests waiting out here."

But Lauren wasn't ready to let it go.

She finally had something to hold over Gabriela, and she wasn't about to let her bluff her way out of it.

Then Beverley appeared.

The butler helped her make her way slowly through the hotel doors, and her lined face creased with displeasure at the sight of everyone gathered outside.

“What is going on here? All of you blocking the entrance instead of going in to attend to the guests?”

The butler had already filled Beverley in on everything, and she was deeply unhappy with Lauren.

But the priority right now was smoothing things over for the guests, before this turned into any more of a spectacle.

As for Lauren, acting so recklessly on her own — that could wait.

With Beverley stepping in, no one had any choice but to head toward the banquet hall.

Once inside, Beverley called Gabriela over and spoke to her gently.

“Child, what Lauren did to you out there wasn’t fair.”

“I wasn’t wronged,” Gabriela said. “After all, I didn’t have to crawl in through the side door...”

It was only a shame the matter of the stolen earrings had been cut off so abruptly.

Watching from a distance as Beverley showed Gabriela such warmth only deepened Lauren's resentment.

She suddenly strode straight over to Gabriela.

"Mom, I know you don't approve, but I need this stolen-earrings matter cleared up today."

Beverley's brow furrowed. "Whatever you have to say can wait until after the party. Step back."

"Mom, Gabriela stole from me, and she should answer for it. If we let this slide, she'll only grow bolder."

"Whatever else happens, Gabriela needs to admit she's a thief and apologize properly today. Otherwise—"

Lauren raised her voice. "I won't hesitate to air out our family's secrets and call the police!"

The guests were stunned.

Chapter 1064

They'd suspected this party might not go smoothly — but no one had expected drama on this scale.

How would Gabriela respond this time?

Those rooting for her felt a flicker of worry, but Gabriela showed no trace of fear, her lips curving into a smile.

“Lauren, you said you'd call the police. Whatever happens to your daughter after that — don't come crying to me.”

Gabriela had barely finished speaking when, before Lauren could even respond, Ariadne cut in, her brow furrowed with contempt.

“Brother-in-law, just look at your daughter. She steals without a shred of remorse, and now she has the nerve to threaten Rebecca. Does she have no shame at all?”

“I'll say it plainly right now — if Gabriela doesn't apologize to my sister properly today, we won't have any choice but to call the police.”

Matthew's expression darkened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but the elder Mrs. Howard raised a hand to stop him.

Leaning on the butler's arm, she stepped forward and fixed Ariadne with a cold stare. "The Howard family's affairs don't need outsiders weighing in."

Despite her considerable standing abroad, Ariadne still owed the elder Mrs. Howard a certain amount of deference.

Swallowing her contempt, she said with a sneer, "Madam, my sister married into your family and has endured years of grievances. Now, with earrings worth millions stolen from her, is she just supposed to swallow it? This stopped being purely a Howard family matter the moment it happened."

Right on cue, Lauren's eyes reddened, as though she were the long-suffering daughter-in-law of some harsh matriarch.

Ariadne's tone hardened further. "You think you can push my sister around just because she has no one standing behind her? Well, I, Ariadne McCoy, am here to prove she's not someone to be trifled with."

Lauren straightened at once.

Ever since her time in prison, she'd become something of a laughingstock in their circle, barely able to show her face in public.

But now, with her family standing behind her, her confidence was surging back.

Whatever else happened, she was determined to reclaim her dignity.

Wesley's brow creased slightly as he walked over to Gabriela and asked quietly, "Gabriela, what's the real story with those earrings?"

She shook her head and murmured, "Don't worry about it."

Then she turned to Matthew.

"Dad, you saw it yourself. I was willing to let Rebecca off the hook. It's Lauren who won't drop it."

Matthew let out a heavy sigh and turned to Rebecca.

"Rebecca. Do you have anything to say?"

Ariadne's displeasure only grew. "Brother-in-law, what kind of attitude is that? Gabriela's the one who stole something, and you're questioning Rebecca?"

"Is Gabriela your only daughter now? Doesn't that make Rebecca your daughter too?"

Debby jumped in as well.

“Brother-in-law, you haven’t even finalized the divorce from my sister, and already you’re rushing to bring your illegitimate daughter into the family. My sister has been more than patient with this.”

“And now you’re treating her and Rebecca like this? Is this what the Howard family calls noble conduct?”

Chapter 1065

Matthew had no patience left for the sisters’ back-and-forth. He kept his eyes fixed on Rebecca.

At first, Rebecca had been genuinely afraid of Gabriela.

But with Ariadne and Debby now backing her, that fear had all but evaporated.

Besides, did her father honestly expect her to admit, in front of everyone, that she’d been the one who stole the earrings?

Absolutely not.

Her mind made up, she quickly let her eyes go red. “Dad, I’ve had my conflicts with Gabriela before, sure, but everything was out in the open, and I paid for it.”

“Now Gabriela’s the one who took Mom’s things. What exactly do you want me to say? Should I just pretend nothing happened and welcome a thief into our home as my sister?”

Having watched the whole scene unfold, most of the guests were now fairly convinced Gabriela really had stolen something.

They murmured among themselves, a note of disdain and self-satisfaction creeping into their voices.

“It’s understandable, honestly. Growing up in that kind of chaos, how could her hands stay clean? Without a bit of thieving, she probably wouldn’t have survived.”

“Even running her own company now, she still can’t shake the habit, it seems.”

“And yet the heir treats her like a treasure. That’s the part we can only envy.”

“The heir’s taste really is one of a kind.”

“Maybe he’s just tired of proper, well-bred women and finds a little thief refreshing — something different.”

As the guests traded whispers and smug little laughs, feeling every bit as refined and superior as they pleased, they were certain that someone like Gabriela — raised in the slums — would never truly belong in their world, no matter how Matthew acknowledged her, and no matter if Wesley made her his wife.

“Are you quite finished?”

The whispers hadn’t been loud, but Gabriela had caught every word.

Unhurried, she turned to face Lauren. “I was willing to let this go, for my father’s sake, and my grandmother’s.”

“But since you’re so determined to make a scene out of it — go ahead, then. Call the police.”

Gabriela’s calm, at this point, was enough to make Lauren’s confidence waver.

Could she have some kind of counter-move ready?

After all, the earrings hadn’t actually been stolen by Gabriela.

What if this ended up dragging Rebecca into it instead?

The realization sent a cold sweat down Lauren's back, and she quickly reached out to stop Ariadne, who'd already pulled out her phone.

"Sister — let it go."

Turning back to Gabriela, Lauren forced an air of magnanimity. "It's just a pair of earrings. Since you've returned them, I won't hold it against you."

She turned to the gathered guests, offering an apology. "Sorry for the scene, everyone. When the younger generation misbehaves, it's best handled quietly at home, not paraded in front of others."

The guests responded with approving nods all around.

"Mrs. Howard is remarkably understanding. Honestly, Mr. Howard hosting this whole banquet to acknowledge an illegitimate daughter, right in front of his wife — that's simply not right."

Chapter 1066

"You don't get it. No matter how wonderful things are at home, they can never compete with the thrill of something forbidden."

“Looking at it now, the mistress dying young almost feels like karma.”

Hearing the conversation veer in that direction, a flicker of irritation crossed Gabriela’s face.

She let out a cold laugh and spoke up.

“How exactly did Lauren end up marrying my father? If you don’t know, go ask your own family’s elders. You think you sound clever, but you’re just talking without thinking. Do you people have mouths with nothing behind them?”

Her voice rang out clear, each word crisp and deliberate, and the room fell utterly silent.

Everyone froze, certain Gabriela must have lost her mind to pick a fight with an entire room over a few careless words.

But Gabriela paid their reactions no mind and kept going.

“Years ago, the McCoy family took advantage of the Howard family’s decline to sabotage our project in Hopolis, forcing my father into marrying her.”

Most of the guests present were of the younger generation and had never heard any of this before, and a ripple of shock spread through the crowd.

Gabriela pointed toward the earrings still in Lauren's hand, her voice carrying clearly across the hall. "Lauren forced my father into that marriage, threatening to rally other families and drive the Howards into ruin and bankruptcy. He had no choice but to agree — and afterward, she constantly pressured him into performing affection for her in public."

"Those earrings she's holding were bought under exactly that kind of pressure, not long after the wedding."

Seeing Lauren's face darken, Matthew reached out, trying to pull Gabriela back. "Gabriela. That's enough."

"I will say this." Gabriela's eyes burned as she swept her gaze across the room. "None of you know the first thing about what happened, and yet you all took Lauren's word without question. Why is that?"

"A so-called noblewoman who served nearly two years in prison — have any of you stopped to consider just how deep her corruption must run to earn a sentence like that? And still, you follow her lead without a second thought."

Those who met her eyes found themselves looking away — though a moment later, they wondered why they should feel any need to flinch under the gaze of an illegitimate daughter.

Gabriela let her eyes travel across the room once more before settling back on Matthew.

“Lauren counts on you being soft-hearted. That’s exactly why she dares to twist the truth like this.”

“Dad, you’re a good man. Why should good people be the ones who end up bullied by the wicked?”

“Now that I’m your daughter — I won’t let anyone push you around anymore.”

Gabriela spoke with quiet resolve, a barely perceptible flicker of anger in her eyes.

She was standing up for her father.

Matthew looked into his daughter’s eyes for a long moment.

Long enough that his own eyes began to sting.

After all these years, he’d thought he’d grown used to compromising for the sake of the family.

Chapter 1067

Used to marrying a woman he’d never loved.

Used to enduring Lauren's endless suspicion, day and night.

Used to watching the woman he loved most vanish from his life.

He remembered a time, long ago, when Everglow Group had stood on the brink of bankruptcy, and Herman had brought Lauren to see him, every word laced with quiet threats. He'd been so worn down he'd gone numb, and had thought, Fine, let's just get married. It's not as though there's anyone I love anyway...

But then he'd met Alanna — sharp, capable, gentle, and steady in a way that calmed him.

He'd proposed to her once, hesitant and anxious. "I don't even remember who I am. I don't know if I'm a good man or a bad one. Would you still marry me?"

Alanna had laughed then, her eyes bright as stars. "Even if the worst happens, and you end up a beggar buried in debt, I'll help you pay every cent of it off."

By the time he'd recovered his memory, he'd believed that divorcing Lauren and going home to Alanna would finally bring him real happiness. He hadn't known then that goodbye would turn into forever.

Those memories, ones he'd thought were nearly forgotten, came rushing back as vivid as if they'd happened only yesterday. Matthew's eyes burned, and he said softly, "Gabriela."

“Dad, today’s banquet is my stage,” Gabriela said, looking at him, her voice low. “Let me handle this. All right?”

Matthew said nothing more. He only nodded.

Today belonged to his daughter. She could do as she saw fit.

Whatever mess she made of it, he would always be there to help her clean it up afterward.

Watching Matthew’s expression, Lauren felt a sudden surge of jealousy.

After all these years, that woman still occupied every corner of his heart. Even her daughter was favored over his own.

Lauren rose to her feet without another thought and said sharply, “Gabriela, do you honestly think you can just fabricate stories about things that happened decades ago?”

“But I understand. To earn Matthew’s shares, you have to prove your loyalty somehow. You’ve done well today, speaking up for your father — even stealing my earrings. You’ve certainly gone to great lengths.”

“But cheap tricks like that are the sort only someone like you, an illegitimate daughter, would resort to. My Rebecca is nothing like that — pure, honest, someone who’s only ever relied on her own effort. She’d never stoop to scheming.”

Gabriela let out a soft laugh. “Even if these are cheap tricks, they’re a good deal less cheap than hiring someone to throw acid on me to get rid of your husband’s illegitimate daughter.”

“Or Rebecca trying to run me over with her car.”

The moment the words left her mouth, both Lauren’s and Rebecca’s expressions shifted.

Not just Beverley, but several senior Howard family members and board members from Everglow Group rose to their feet as well, their faces darkening with displeasure.

“Young lady, mind what you’re saying!”

Chapter 1068

Just then, Alissa and Tyler arrived on the scene.

Alissa gave Gabriela a quick thumbs-up. Ignoring the elders entirely, Gabriela pulled out her phone and tapped at the screen.

The large display behind the main platform in the reception hall suddenly lit up with surveillance footage.

A red car sat parked quietly behind Gabriela, then suddenly lunged forward, accelerating straight at her. She was knocked to the ground, her elbow clearly taking the brunt of the impact.

A moment later, Stewart appeared, reaching to help her up, but she pulled away from him.

The guests stared, stunned, their eyes flicking between Gabriela and Stewart.

Murmurs of speculation broke out over who might have been behind the wheel.

“That’s vicious. If Gabriela had reacted even a moment slower, she could have been seriously hurt — or worse.”

Rebecca hadn’t imagined Gabriela would somehow have gotten hold of surveillance footage from years back. She lowered her head, guilt written across her face, not daring to speak.

Gabriela looked at her and smiled. “My pure, honest sister — why won’t you look up?”

Rebecca finally shot her a glare, humiliation and fury coloring her voice. "What are you implying? Did you just find some random car footage to frame me with?"

"No rush. Keep watching."

Though the red car's plate wasn't visible in that clip, the full trail of footage had been recovered.

At the next intersection, as the car turned onto another street, it came to a stop. The door opened, and out stepped a woman with dark purple hair and sunglasses, her expression ice-cold.

That woman was Rebecca.

The room fell into stunned silence, every set of eyes fixed on her.

Terror flooded Rebecca's face, draining it of color.

For all her arrogance and cruelty, she had always carefully maintained the image of a refined socialite.

Today, Gabriela had torn that carefully built reputation apart with nothing more than a few clips of footage.

In that moment, Rebecca hated Gabriela more than ever, regretting bitterly that she hadn't finished the job back then. If Gabriela had actually died, her brother would have made it all disappear.

Matthew looked equally shaken, though what he felt ran deeper than shock. It was disappointment.

This was the daughter Lauren had raised — and ruined.

Unable to bear her father's gaze, Rebecca spat out, bitter, "Gabriela, don't push this too far."

"I can be even more direct than this," Gabriela replied, turning back to Lauren. "Didn't you accuse me of stealing your earrings? Let's have everyone hear exactly how they ended up with me."

Beverley stepped in at once to stop her.

"Gabriela. That's enough."

"This is supposed to be a family reunion. Does it really need to turn this ugly?"

Other elders and uncles of the Howard family rose as well, fixing Gabriela with cold, disapproving stares.

Especially the two gray-haired elders, Kern and Caspien.

Chapter 1069

Within the Howard family, the two of them commanded enormous respect, their standing beyond question — key figures on the Everglow Group board, whom even Beverley treated with a measure of deference.

Standing there, their clouded, aged eyes carried an authority that could make anyone's knees weaken and breath catch.

If Gabriela crossed them today, she would find life at the company considerably harder going forward.

Wesley instinctively moved to stand in front of her, shielding her, at least in part, from the weight of the family elders' displeasure.

"I don't think it's enough at all." Gabriela stepped out from behind him, meeting Beverley's eyes directly, her voice clear and even. "My father has endured injustice after injustice for years. Why did none of you ever say 'enough' and let him finally be free of it?"

For a moment, Beverley had nothing to say.

Gabriela didn't wait for a response. Ignoring the elders' evident irritation, she played two recordings straight through.

They captured Rebecca agreeing to steal the earrings, and the conversation that followed once she'd taken them.

"Fine. I promise you."

"Don't worry, they're definitely my mom's. She bought them at an auction — worth over three million dollars."

The room erupted into fresh murmurs.

So Rebecca had stolen the earrings, after all.

And just moments ago, this same mother and daughter had been furiously accusing Gabriela of the theft.

Whispers spread through the crowd, one after another. You really never know someone until... Well, this is certainly eye-opening. The McCoy family's tactics really are as sharp and toxic as people say.

Rebecca no longer dared make a sound.

Gabriela turned to Lauren, a cold, satisfied smile settling on her lips.

“Lauren, your precious daughter, unable to accept losing a bet, stole from her own mother without a second thought just to hand it over to me. They’re valuable earrings, and I intend to find the right moment to return them to you.”

“And yet you thought you could pin all of this on me?”

“Compared to the two of you, my little tricks really don’t measure up, do they?”

Faced with the bright, unflinching look in Gabriela’s eyes, Lauren felt a flicker of guilt cut through her fury.

It was like staring at a ghost.

For the first time in her life, she found herself afraid of a mistress’s daughter.

Gabriela turned to Ariadne and Debby. “Do the two of you have anything else to add?”

If Ariadne still planned to lean on her outside connections to pressure Gabriela, she wouldn’t mind letting Tyler make his three hundred brothers’ presence felt right there on the spot.

Seeing Gabriela flanked by Tyler — built like a mountain — and the prince standing guard beside her, the two aunts swallowed their anger and said nothing.

There was little they could do now, even if they'd wanted to scold her.

Rebecca, meanwhile, had proven so utterly disappointing, handing over one weakness after another for anyone to exploit.

"If neither of you has anything more to say, then it's my turn."

More? She wants to say more?

The McCoy family members looked stunned.

Hadn't she already had her moment? What more was there?

Chapter 1070

Ninth Uncle and Seventh Uncle, still simmering, exchanged a glance before Ninth Uncle stepped forward and set a hand on Gabriela's shoulder, his voice cold with anger.

“Girl, everything has its limits. You’ve had more than enough of the spotlight today. If you want to be welcomed back into the Howard family, settle down now.”

“Ninth Uncle, I’m standing here defending myself and proving my innocence, and you think I’m just after attention?”

Gabriela stepped back, shaking his hand off her shoulder. “In that case, I intend to make the most of this moment.”

Ninth Uncle’s eyes went wide with fury. “This girl has no sense of respect whatsoever...”

“Ninth Uncle, you’re not a young man anymore. Try not to let your temper get the better of you — it’s not good for your health.”

Gabriela didn’t much care whether they were pleased with her or not. Having dispatched them without much effort, she turned her attention back to Matthew, her voice softening.

“Years ago, the McCoy family used underhanded means to force my father into a marriage of convenience. To most people, maybe it looked like he lost nothing, so why pity him?”

“But if the roles had been reversed — if it had been some young woman forced to marry a man beneath her — wouldn’t she at least have earned a few sympathetic looks?”

There was a bite of irony in Gabriela's voice.

"And yet, in all these years, no one has ever once thanked my father."

"All of you have enjoyed what came from that marriage without a second thought, and then turned around and blamed him for straying, for not honoring his family duty — ultimately branding me the shameful proof of it, an illegitimate child bringing disgrace on the family name."

"My mother became the other woman without ever meaning to. Maybe she was wrong to let it happen. But she chose to disappear rather than tear apart anyone's family — and she never once regretted that choice."

Gabriela's words were clear and precisely reasoned, leaving no room for anyone in the room to misread her meaning.

"And yet my mother's decision to step back only meant that Lauren and her daughter turned their sights on me instead — and tried, more than once, to see me hurt."

"As for being called an illegitimate child — I don't consider that a mark of shame. My mother could have taken my father entirely for herself, and I wouldn't be illegitimate at all. But she let that go, simply because she refused to destroy someone else's family."

By now, whatever anger Beverley had felt had long since faded into a quiet, heavy sigh.

It was true — because so much time had passed, and because Matthew was the one who'd been forced into it, no one had ever thought of him as having lost anything. The entire Howard family had simply taken his sacrifice for granted.

And now, when all Matthew wanted was to finally acknowledge his own daughter, these very elders dared to call it indecent?

Matthew murmured, “Gabriela, you don’t need to say any more.”

Message 2 from Noa: Dear ones, did you know that God has known us since we were in our mothers’ wombs? (Jeremiah 1:5). Many times we think of God as someone distant, when in truth He has known us since before we were born and formed each of us with care (Ephesians 1:4). God loves us and has been present with us in every moment, every sad moment and every happy moment of our lives. Buuut, even though He’s by our side, He can’t do anything if we don’t give Him permission to work in our lives — if we don’t ask Him. We can only receive from that love, that healing, that salvation if we accept it. It’s a decision we can make at any moment, accepting Him as Lord and Savior, through faith in Jesus Christ. (Romans 10:9)