

His kiss 651

Chapter 651

“But I have no desire for your company.” Wesley pried her hands away, his stare arctic. “I’ve made myself clear—my love for you has died. My illness doesn’t transform me into someone desperate enough to accept your pity. Leave now, and stop deceiving yourself with fantasies.”

“I refuse to believe you. If I meant nothing to you, why did you transfer the Lakeshore Building to my name?” she shot back.

“You’ve just reminded me of something important.” Wesley’s expression turned glacial. “Since I’ve already dissolved my engagement with Rebecca, there’s no purpose in maintaining any premarital asset transfers. I’m reclaiming the Lakeshore Building.”

Gabriela dismissed every cruel word that spilled from his lips.

“You violated my privacy by entering my place uninvited. Out of respect for Grandma, I’ll overlook this transgression once. Get out!” Wesley pivoted away, refusing to meet her gaze.

He understood that one more glance at her face would shatter his resolve—he’d surrender and crush her against his chest. But he couldn’t bear the thought of her spending whatever remained of her life chained to a dying man.

He wouldn’t allow it!

Gabriela's eyes had swollen into crimson slits from her tears, and eventually Wesley forced her out of the apartment.

She had barely stepped out of the car when she spotted Stewart outside her villa. He clutched a bouquet of flowers.

Gabriela felt too emotionally drained to engage with anyone. She intended to slip past unnoticed, ducking her head and quickening her pace toward the entrance.

"Gabriela." Stewart crossed the distance between them, intercepting her path. "You sought out Wesley, didn't you?"

Gabriela nodded with blunt honesty. "Yes!"

Stewart wavered. "Did you two...?"

"Wesley threw me out. He's dying, and we'll never find our way back to each other." In that moment, Gabriela's frustration erupted, and she spoke with sharp precision. "Stewart, what other details do you need?"

The air crystallized into silence.

As she observed Stewart's wounded expression and his bandaged arm, guilt crashed over Gabriela.

She wrestled her emotions back under control and said quietly, “Forgive me. My mood is poisonous right now. Could you please go home?”

“I just commissioned this bouquet,” Stewart interrupted, extending the flowers toward her. “The truth is, I couldn’t shake this gnawing anxiety—this terror that you’d simply walk back into Wesley’s arms. I just returned from the hospital after getting fresh bandaging and came directly here with these flowers to see you.

“Gabriela, you probably think my timing makes me a selfish bastard. But isn’t love fundamentally selfish? If we’re discussing fairness, shouldn’t you fall for me since we met each other before you met Wesley?”

Stewart’s voice roughened, his throat constricting with emotion. “Gabriela, I never finished expressing what I needed to say yesterday. Stop torturing yourself over Wesley. Look at me—really see me. I swear to cherish you properly, a hundred times more tenderly than Wesley ever could.”

Chapter 652

Gazing into Stewart’s deep eyes, Gabriela felt a wave of sorrow wash over her.

In that instant, she sensed the depth of his affection for her. Yet she knew that his heartfelt confession didn’t obligate her to return his feelings.

Rebecca and Fiona had poured their hearts out to Wesley, only to face his indifference.

“Stewart, I don’t have feelings for you,” Gabriela admitted bluntly, too drained for gentle words.
“Please, I need some space. Can you go?”

Stewart shook his head, clutching the bouquet in one hand while his injured hand struggled to hold hers.
“Gabriela, now more than ever, you need to open your heart. Give me a chance to support you through this, please.”

He wanted to say that Wesley’s looming death shouldn’t chain her forever, but those words felt too cruel to voice.

Facing him, Gabriela exhaled deeply, her defenses crumbling. “You know how much I love Wesley. Knowing this, do you still want to be with me?”

Stewart nodded with unwavering conviction. “I’m certain I can win your heart.”

“I come from nothing, no family to speak of. I’m an orphan, hardly a match for your status. Does that not matter to you?”

His gaze grew even firmer. “It doesn’t.”

“Fine,” Gabriela said, pulling out her phone. “I’ll call Wesley right now, in front of you. If he agrees, I’ll be with you.” She paused, searching his face. “Does that not bother you?”

Stewart's response was steady. "It doesn't."

Gabriela knew her actions were selfish, using Stewart to push Wesley into a corner.

But with Wesley's time slipping away, she felt she had no other choice.

She dialed Wesley's number swiftly.

Just as the call nearly timed out, he answered, his voice low and strained. "What is it?"

She murmured, "Wesley, Stewart just confessed his feelings for me."

A long pause followed before a gruff "Hmm" came through.

She continued, "If you're okay with it, I'll agree to be with him."

A sharp breath sounded on the other end, Wesley's tone edged with anger. "Gabriela, who you choose to be with is none of my concern!"

She pressed, deliberate and slow, “Do you agree?”

His voice stayed cold. “Do whatever you want. It’s not my business.”

“I need someone to build a life with. If I can’t marry you, Stewart’s a good choice. He’s wealthy, attractive, and caring. He says he will treat me well, and he doesn’t even mind...”

“I don’t agree!”

The voice boomed, not from the phone but behind her.

Gabriela spun around, startled to see Wesley standing there, unnoticed until now. He gripped his phone, his intense, ocean-deep eyes locked on her from a short distance.

She met his gaze, her heart catching at the sight.

He stood tall in a black patterned shirt, exuding a commanding presence despite his frail condition. Her eyes welled up as she looked at him.

He was dying, and the thought was unbearable.

Seeing Wesley, Stewart felt all hope vanish. He walked away with the flowers in his hands, his face shadowed by defeat.

Erik pulled up slowly. "Mr. Williams, shall I drive you home?"

Stewart waved him off, choosing to walk alone along the quiet road.

Chapter 653

As he crossed a bridge, he spotted a disheveled woman, about fifty, sifting through garbage bins with a tattered sack. Hesitantly, she pointed to an empty bottle near his feet and asked, "May I take this?"

Glancing down, Stewart stepped aside, clearing her path.

She thanked him profusely, stooping to retrieve it.

Abruptly, he offered her the bouquet he held, murmuring, "These are for you."

Stunned by the fragrant roses, the grimy scavenger wiped her hands on her worn clothes before accepting them, her eyes gleaming with gratitude. "Thank you! You're so kind! I've never had such lovely flowers!"

Stewart forced a smile at her joy, then turned away.

A soft chuckle escaped him, growing louder, laced with a bittersweet ache.

Others cherished his gestures, but Gabriela recoiled from him.

Was he truly so unworthy?

He refused to believe it.

Clenching his fists, he resolved that Wesley, teetering on the edge of death, had no right to claim Gabriela. This time, he wouldn't relent, no matter the cost.

Wesley ushered Gabriela into the hospital to meet his doctor, insisting on a thorough explanation of his prognosis.

"Tell her how little time I have left," he urged.

Gabriela's face drained of color as the doctor, visibly hesitant, detailed Wesley's condition.

"Costly treatments keep Mr. Moss functioning like a healthy man, but he has less than three months. His willpower might sustain him until the very end."

The words sent an icy shiver from Gabriela's fingertips to her spine, the reality far graver than she had feared.

She had seen Wesley eat, walk, and work like a normal person. She thought there might be a chance for a miracle, but it was all a fragile illusion.

Once the doctor had laid out the grim details, Wesley guided Gabriela out of the hospital.

Her face was ashen, paler even than his own, and he opted against returning to the villa, wary of upsetting Farley and Ken. Instead, he brought her to his apartment.

Unlocking the door, he ushered her inside, her hand icy and lifeless in his.

A flicker of worry crossed his features as he poured her a mug of steaming water, gently urging her to sip it.

As a hint of color returned to her cheeks, he spoke softly. "Gabriela, you heard the doctor. I may have less than a hundred days left."

Her eyes brimmed with tears, and she threw her arms around him. "I don't care how little time you have—I want to spend it with you."

"I just broke off my engagement with Rebecca," he murmured. "Aren't you afraid that being with me will bring endless trouble?"

Her voice was firm. "I'm not afraid."

"Choosing me means you're mine forever. Even when I'm gone, I would want our love to live on in you. Are you scared of facing that solitude?"

Sobbing, her throat tight with grief, she choked out, "No."

Wesley started to say more, but Gabriela's arms wound around his neck, her kiss silencing the harsh words he nearly spoke.

"Wesley, I fear nothing. As long as I'm with you, I..."

Her voice broke, and Wesley leaned down, his kiss swallowing her trembling words, quieting all she longed to express.

Chapter 654

Wesley kissed Gabriela with a fierce intensity, as if trying to bind her to him for eternity.

His love for her burned so fiercely that it threatened to consume him. Yet his illness had always forced him to restrain himself, never daring to fully confess his feelings. Suppressing his desires for so long had bred dark, selfish thoughts that lingered in his mind.

With her in his arms, he could no longer hold back.

His nimble fingers grazed her buttons, slipping beneath her clothes.

Gabriela trembled, each touch igniting sparks of pleasure across her skin.

Her cheeks flushed a deep red, but concern for his frail condition clouded her mind.

“Wesley, stop... your health.”

Her voice faltered, caught between their lips.

Pinning her beneath him, Wesley’s gaze smoldered with desire. Gabriela, breathless, whispered, “Can we at least go to the bedroom? Not here.”

His warm breath tickled her ear as he murmured, “No one else is coming... Just stay still and be good for me.”

Before they knew it, their clothes littered the floor.

Guiding her hand to his belt, Wesley's voice, soft yet dangerously husky, asked, "Gabriela, is this alright?"

His eyes held her captive.

Entranced, she unfastened the buckle with a faint click.

A surge of longing erupted in Wesley's chest, and unable to restrain himself, he pulled her close, their bodies melding together.

The night was a whirlwind of passion.

Morning sunlight spilled warmly into the room.

Wesley stirred, his gaze softening as he saw Gabriela asleep beside him, her lips curved in a gentle smile, a faint bruise on her neck.

He hadn't realized how intense he had been; her skin was so fragile.

Leaning down, he kissed her lips, a quiet sigh of contentment escaping him.

For the first time in ages, he felt eager for the day.

Wrapping her in his arms, he held her tightly, aware of his uncertain fate.

When his final day came, what would become of Gabriela?

The thought of her with another man ignited a possessive fire. His grip tightened instinctively.

Gasping for air, Gabriela woke, her eyes meeting his intense stare.

She smiled, her eyes crinkling. "Morning, Wesley."

"Still calling me Wesley?" he teased with a chuckle. "You seem so intimate calling someone else by name."

Blushing, she guessed he meant Stewart and hurried to clarify. "He is just a friend."

Wesley hummed. "A rich, handsome, kind friend."

Gabriela froze, mortified.

Oh no. Her sharp words from last night, meant to get Wesley to relent, were now backfiring spectacularly.

"You know I was just mad," she muttered, exasperated.

"Only you know if that's true," Wesley replied, leaning up to study her. "So, how will you prove you meant nothing by it?"

"Believe what you want," she replied, pushing him aside. "I'm going to brush my teeth, wash up, and make you breakfast."

Wesley tugged her back, swiftly pinning her beneath him. "Breakfast won't be enough."

"What more do you want?" Gabriela rolled her eyes. "Do you want me to call Stewart right now and discuss the matter of how I address him?"

"Not a terrible idea," Wesley said, smirking with a raised brow. "Go for it."

Stunned, Gabriela snapped, “Wesley, are you serious? You’re being so childish!”

Chapter 655

Her retort was silenced by his kiss, leaving her dazed. Only later did she realize her clothes were gone again.

Struggling, she pleaded, “Wesley, your health...”

Last night’s marathon had left her drained, and yet here he was, insatiable upon waking.

Normally so distant and composed, he was a wildfire in these moments.

“Just once,” he urged, his voice rough with desire.

Worried for his fragile condition, she gave in.

Despite his illness, his fervor was overwhelming, pushing her to the edge of tears.

After two more rounds, Wesley finally let her go.

He appeared completely satisfied, tenderly holding her as he guided her to freshen up. “Take a moment to lie down and relax. I’ve arranged for some food delivery—it will be here soon.”

The meal was delivered by Billy. He had directed the cook to craft a wholesome, nourishing dish and ensured it was rushed over.

For the first time, Wesley was absent from the office today.

Could his health be faltering again?

Billy, knowing the code to Wesley’s place, walked right in. There, he spotted his boss lounging on the sofa in a bathrobe, phone in hand.

Wesley’s hair was still wet, the robe’s collar parted, showing clear marks—vivid traces of his passionate night with a woman.

Billy swiftly looked away.

Was there a woman tucked away in the apartment?

Given his frail condition, how could Wesley even think about sex?

Inside, Billy was a mess, but he kept his cool on the outside, saying, “Mr. Moss, here’s the meal you requested.”

“Set it down,” Wesley replied, glancing over some files on his laptop before adding, “I’ve gone through the Dialland highway plans. All is in order. Get Brenden to sign off when you return to the company. He needs to manage this project from beginning to end.”

“Understood,” Billy responded with respect.

Wesley went on, “You can leave. I’ll be away from the office for a bit, so make sure Brenden’s fully briefed.”

“Don’t worry, Mr. Moss,” Billy replied before heading out.

Just as he was shutting the door, he caught sight of a slim figure stepping out, dressed in what looked like Wesley’s shirt, her long legs striking.

Billy didn’t dare linger, quickly closing the door and departing.

Only after driving some distance did he finally relax.

It seemed that Wesley had spent the night with a woman in his apartment, and things had gotten pretty intense.

Realizing this, Billy felt a mix of joy and sorrow.

Wesley was so young, yet he had less than three months to live. No matter why that woman was with him, Billy hoped she genuinely cared for Wesley, at least enough to be by his side in his final days.

Gabriela had no clue that Billy had wrongly pegged her as a gold digger with hidden agendas.

Wesley had summoned her, and she dutifully sat next to him, ready to dig into the meal. But when she glanced over, she noticed the clear marks of their passion on his neck.

Recalling how he had carried her out to the balcony, her cheeks flushed, Gabriela quickly dropped her gaze.

Wesley, catching her thoughts, let out a soft laugh. He teased, "Guess what Billy said when he stopped by?"

Chapter 656

Gabriela's cheeks still burned pink. She ducked her head and murmured, "Oh... so Billy stopped by to talk business with you?"

“He actually dropped off lunch,” Wesley answered, the usual coldness in his expression easing into a faint smile. “And while he was at it, he told me I should show some restraint given my frail health.”

Gabriela’s cheeks flushed an even richer crimson, the color climbing all the way to her ears.

Billy had discovered what had happened between her and Wesley the night before...

Being exposed like this in front of a former colleague made her want to vanish into the floor.

Wesley caught the flicker of embarrassment on her face, and something in his chest eased; the urge to tease her melted into quiet affection.

“Relax,” he said gently, lowering his voice. “I was just kidding. Billy only reminded me to ease up on the workload and watch my health.”

Gabriela glared daggers at him, her cheeks still flushed.

Wesley reached over, tousled her hair with a soft laugh, and said, “Come on, let’s eat first.”

“Fine,” she muttered.

Even though irritation lingered, she bit back any retort. He was unwell, after all.

His appetite wasn't great, yet his spirits soared, and he ended up finishing more than usual.

Whatever tomorrow might bring, this moment left him at peace. Because right now, he had someone who would stay by his side without hesitation, right up to the very end.

At the Howard family estate, Beverley punished Rebecca by confining her to her room for two weeks of reflection.

In Beverley's presence, she never dared show defiance; she emerged again with the same graceful composure expected of a Howard daughter, every movement polished and controlled.

Beverley's eyes, sharp and unsparing, swept over her. "Can you see what you did wrong now?"

Rebecca's lashes lowered, her voice a hushed murmur, meek and pliant. "Yes."

Beverley's tone hardened, cold as stone. "And do you still carry any bitterness over calling off your engagement with Wesley?"

Rebecca dipped in a restrained bow, her demeanor shrinking even further. "I hold no resentment," she whispered.

Beverley's gaze sharpened as she leaned back in her chair. "So, you're not going to ask me why?"

Rebecca answered with quiet respect, "No, Grandma. I know everything you decide is for my good."

The answer pleased Beverley. A faint nod, deliberate and slow, betrayed her satisfaction.

Beverley had overseen Rebecca's upbringing from the cradle, and in her heart, this granddaughter remained the jewel of the Howard family.

"One day," Beverley murmured, her tone clipped but meaningful, "you'll understand why I've done this."

Rebecca already did.

The Howards were powerful enough that she could have her pick of an eligible man, entering a marriage where she could enjoy freedom. But to marry into the Moss family was to marry above her rank, and that came with strict expectations.

Still, she refused to let Wesley go.

Nowhere in Okburg did she see another man worthy of her hand. Wesley was the only one who was right for her. Even with his frail health and uncertain future, she had resolved to marry him, whether or not his feelings matched her own. To wed into the Moss family was to gain dominion over all of Okburg.

With a pleased flick of her hand, Beverley dismissed Rebecca. “You may leave.”

Rebecca offered a parting bow and drifted from the living room. Behind her lowered lashes, a spark of cold determination glimmered to life.

Even with her body already failing, that old woman, Beverley, still dared to dictate her marriage?

Her parents had always indulged her whims, but what right did her grandmother have to seize control of her future?

Rebecca clenched her resolve, determined to seek out her father and Jasper, intent on persuading them to renegotiate her marriage to Wesley with the Moss family.

When she returned home, she was met with her father’s furious roar. His face twisted with rage as he thundered, “Lauren, I always knew you were scheming, but I never imagined you’d stoop this low. This is a society ruled by law—how dare you hire someone to kill!”

Lauren’s fury flared, tinged with hurt. “Matthew, after all these years together, is that truly how you see me? How could you condemn me on nothing but gossip?”

Chapter 657

His glare sharpened. “Do you really need me to lay out the evidence before you admit the truth? You sent the fugitive Dustin after Gabriela, didn’t you?”

“I don’t know any Dustin! Stop slandering me!” Lauren’s voice cracked with outrage.

From the doorway, Rebecca froze, her heart pounding as their words cut through the house.

An uneasy thought struck her—had her mother’s scheme against Gabriela really gone so far as to involve murder?

The argument swelled to a fever pitch in the living room, and Rebecca, her pulse racing, rushed inside to pull them apart.

Lauren’s voice rang out, sharp with fury. “I know the truth, Matthew. Gabriela is the daughter you had with that woman—that’s why you’ve treated her so well.”

Rebecca froze mid-step, her breath catching at the sound of her father’s wavering reply.

“You... you already know?”

The hesitant words struck like a confession.

Rebecca's chest constricted, her heart plunging into a pit of ice.

Gabriela was her half-sister?!

She saw Gabriela as a wretched nobody—how could such a creature possibly be a Howard?

"You admit it, huh." Lauren's voice spiraled into hysteria from the living room. "You fathered an illegitimate child. Matthew, how can you betray me?"

The air seemed to freeze in place for several long seconds.

Matthew's eyes were icy, shadowed by a trace of resentment. "Lauren, you know exactly how our marriage came about. I never had feelings for you."

Lauren was furious at the flat chill in his tone. "Matthew! Even if you can't stand me, you can't deny the truth. Without the McCoy family propping you up, the Howard Group would've collapsed years ago! If it weren't for me, would your family hold the prestige it does today?"

Matthew's expression hardened further, his voice edged with scorn. "It was your family that set up my family with fabricated evidence. You even joined hands with other companies to strike when we were down. You would have destroyed the Howard Group if I hadn't swallowed my pride and agreed to marry you."

Matthew's voice came down like a hammer, heavy with years of bitterness. "If it weren't for you, my family would be stronger than it is now!"

The words hit Lauren hard, knocking the color from her face.

For so long she had perched above him, convinced she was the one who had rescued the Howard family, carrying herself with a constant air of superiority.

What did it matter if Matthew never loved her? The McCoys had propped up the Howard family for decades—surely that entitled her to his lifelong loyalty.

Yet now, with his resentment laid bare, all her self-assurance curdled into something laughable.

Her eyes darted away from his, a rare flicker of unease tightening her throat. "Who fed you such lies?" she asked.

"I uncovered the truth on my own." Matthew's expression carried only disappointment. "Lauren, whatever schemes you pulled to enter the Howard family, I never held them against you. We've lived as husband and wife for so many years—I don't wish to turn this into a bitter battle."

Lauren's pulse quickened at his steady, measured tone.

Then came the blow she feared. Matthew's voice was calm but final. "Let's end this peacefully. We'll divorce. I'll allocate half the company's shares to Rebecca, and every piece of property will go to you. Just promise me you'll never sink to such crimes again, and I'll keep Dustin's matter buried."

Walking away like this was no better than walking away empty-handed.

Lauren's lips curved in a cold sneer. "So that's it—you're hoarding half the company's shares for that bastard daughter of yours, aren't you?"

Matthew exhaled, the sound a weary sigh. "Lauren, I'm not here to dig into what you did to Alanna. All I want is for us to end this quietly, without tearing each other apart."

The Howard family now towered at the top, its influence far eclipsing the McCoy's.

And yet, in the back of his mind lingered the dread that if Lauren truly lost control, her family might dust off their old ruthless tricks and drag the Howards down into ruin with them.

Chapter 658

Lauren's mind went blank, her pulse thundering in her ears as she stared at Matthew in disbelief. Her lips trembled before she managed to whisper, "Matthew... are you actually trying to threaten me?"

Matthew drew in a deep breath, forcing steadiness into his voice though his eyes betrayed exhaustion. "No, Lauren. This isn't a threat. It's a plea—I'm begging you, let me walk away."

Her gaze sharpened, catching the cold distance in his expression, the absence of the warmth that once bound them. A jagged laugh tore from her throat, rising higher until it echoed through the room like madness.

"Matthew, how merciless you are! After three decades as husband and wife, I mean less to you than some child born out of wedlock."

Matthew shot back, his tone like steel, each syllable pressed with finality. "If you hadn't schemed and forced Alanna out of my life, Gabriela would have grown up as my daughter from the very start."

Lauren's face contorted, her voice breaking as rage laced every word. "And Rebecca? Have you forgotten her? She's your flesh and blood as well. Do you mean to cast her aside just to cherish that illegitimate daughter?"

Matthew's voice carried a heavy finality. "Half my shares are already in her name. Everything else—my assets, my properties—will one day belong to you and Rebecca. Lauren, I'm only doing this for Rebecca. I feel sorry for her, but I've done nothing to wrong you."

The words struck like a slap. Rage flared in Lauren's widening eyes. "Matthew, how dare you!"

Unable to win in argument, she shifted her fury into physical defiance.

She would rather trap him in misery than let him walk away.

Rebecca, watching the scene boil over, pressed down her resentment. Her heart pounding, she hurried forward, feigning innocence, pretending she hadn't overheard a single damning word. "Mom, Dad, what's happening here? I just walked in and heard you two shouting."

The fear flickering across Rebecca's face made Matthew force his temper back down.

However furious he was with Lauren, their daughter bore no blame in this.

Lauren quickly buried the venom in her gaze and arranged a brittle smile for Rebecca. "Rebecca, you're back. Tell me, has your grandmother forgiven you?"

"Forgive me? Why would I need her forgiveness?" Rebecca's tone cut sharp as glass. "Gabriela only had a few dozen computers smashed, yet somehow she walked away with three hundred million in compensation."

Her eyes cut sharply toward Matthew as she pressed, her voice laced with accusation. "She'd probably be thrilled if I kept smashing things until the Howard fortune ran dry. Isn't that what she wants, Dad?"

Matthew's face darkened, lips parting to reply, but Lauren's cold sneer cut across the room. "Gabriela is nothing but a greedy woman. You don't need to waste your energy on her."

Ignoring Lauren, Rebecca turned her gaze back to her father, her tone direct and biting. “Tell me, Dad, why did you hand Gabriela so much money? Last time, she only ended up with a scratch on her neck from someone I sent, and that tiny wound somehow drained a hundred million out of the Howard family’s accounts. Now you’re giving her three hundred million! Are you trying to make me look like a fool?”

Chapter 659

Matthew’s brows drew together, a hard line settling on his face. After half a month of being locked up at Beverley’s place, her temper was still as violent as ever.

She had orchestrated a sexual assault on Gabriela, but downplayed it as a simple attack.

Rebecca pressed on, her voice sharp. “She’s just an orphan. So what if I slapped her around? Even if Wesley’s lawyer steps in, they won’t dare sue me. Dad, tell me the truth—why hand her such a fortune?”

Rebecca lashed out with biting aggression, and Matthew’s chest tightened with growing irritation.

Did Rebecca really think ordinary people were supposed to bow their heads and accept humiliation without resistance? She had once been soft-spoken, almost tender—when had she turned into someone so sharp and unreasonable?

Lauren, meanwhile, watched with narrowed eyes, her expression full of quiet approval at Rebecca’s defiance.

“Dad,” Rebecca began, her voice trembling with accusation as she stared him down. “People outside are saying you treat Gabriela so well only because she’s beautiful. Do you actually have feelings for her?”

The charge ignited Matthew’s frustration. “Rebecca, Gabriela is—”

Rebecca leaned forward, cutting in with a bitter laugh. “Dad, how could you be interested in another woman? That’s a betrayal of Mom. Don’t make me feel ashamed of you.”

Rebecca had once held a shred of respect for Matthew, but right now she searched for the cruelest words to cut him down.

How could he dare betray her mother?

Matthew swallowed the urge to expose Lauren’s true nature in front of his daughter. Drawing in a deep, steady breath, he refused to rise to Rebecca’s venom.

Sensing a chance to steer things in her favor, Lauren slipped in quickly with a practiced smile. “Rebecca, you’ve only just returned. You must be exhausted. Why don’t you go upstairs, take a shower, and lie down for a while? I’ll have the kitchen send up something comforting.”

Lauren clung to the thought that as long as Matthew kept Gabriela’s identity buried, their marriage didn’t have to unravel. And she would find ways to keep him bound to her forever.

Matthew's jaw tightened, but he forced back the words pressing at his lips and turned toward the study.

Better to let the divorce wait until Lauren's temper cooled.

When the door to the study clicked shut, Rebecca's restraint shattered. Her nails dug lightly into her mother's palm as she gripped her hand, her voice trembling with a mix of fury and dread. "Mom... tell me the truth—is Gabriela really my half-sister?"

Lauren froze, her expression tight. "You heard all of that?"

Rebecca's eyes glinted with ice. "Just give me a straight answer—yes or no?"

With a reluctant nod, Lauren admitted, "Yes."

Rebecca's voice sharpened, each word like a blade. "So Dad really wanted to divorce you back then because of that wretched woman and her daughter?"

Chapter 660

When she was a child, fragments of gossip about her parents' impending divorce had drifted through the house.

Lauren's lips pressed together, but at last she gave another nod. "Yes."

"Dad looked unusually resolute today," Rebecca remarked. "What exactly did you do back then to drive Gabriela's mother away?" she asked.

Lauren gave a contemptuous smile. "A woman with no status or support—pressuring the people around her was enough to make her retreat."

Rebecca's eyes sparked with sudden realization.

Why had that strategy never crossed her mind before?

Who could Gabriela possibly call her closest friend?

Was it Tessa? Aubrey? Tyler? Or perhaps one of the two elderly men she lived with?

A dozen ruthless strategies for forcing Gabriela to retreat flickered through Rebecca's mind, each one sharper than the last.

Catching sight of her daughter's faraway stare, Lauren called softly, "Rebecca, what's on your mind?"

“Nothing at all.” Rebecca gave a small shake of her head, choosing not to let her mother glimpse the schemes circling in her mind.

Her mother’s attempt at murder had been laughably transparent—her father had seen through it with ease. As such, she decided to deal with Gabriela in her own way.

After a pause, Rebecca’s voice softened with feigned curiosity. “Mom, how did Dad end up marrying you back then?”

That single question touched the rawest corner of Lauren’s past, one she least wished to revisit.

She had fallen hopelessly for Matthew the very first time their eyes met, but he had shown her nothing but indifference. In desperation, she had begged her father to use the most ruthless measures to bind Matthew to her as a husband. Yet, in her heart, she had always insisted—it was all because she loved him.

After marrying into the Howard family, she had tried to play the part of a dutiful wife and mother, yet Matthew’s heart remained as unyielding as stone.

That cold indifference only deepened her hatred for Alanna.

As she recounted the past, she painted herself in a noble light. “The Howard family’s downfall had nothing to do with the McCoys,” she insisted, her voice steady, almost righteous. “If I hadn’t married your father, the Howard Group might not even exist today. And what has he given in return? Nothing

but a frozen heart. He's turned his back on the kindness the McCoy family offered, eager to burn the bridge the moment he crossed it."

Rebecca's brows drew together, a faint crease of doubt shadowing her expression.

She had overheard Matthew's words that the McCoy family had orchestrated the Howard Group's downfall.

Yet with her mother denying it so firmly, she chose to believe her instead.

That version of the story best served both her and her mother's interests.

Catching the venomous glint in Rebecca's eyes, Lauren hurried to rein her in. "Rebecca, don't let your anger get the better of you. Gabriela is insignificant—hardly worth your attention. Stay patient. I'll handle her myself."