

His kiss 941

Chapter 941

Stewart sat in the rear seat, the window halfway lowered, his presence swallowed by shadow. He watched in silence as Myah was forcibly hauled into the psychiatric hospital. Only after her figure vanished into the entrance did he slowly raise the window.

His face remained unreadable, yet his thumb kept circling his forefinger — a small habit that betrayed the storm beneath his composed exterior.

He had not expected Myah to truly be committed to a psychiatric institution. Nor had he imagined the entire arrangement had come directly from Gabriela's hand. The carefully crafted facade Myah had worn for so long had finally shattered — and Stewart found himself wondering whether, in her unraveling, she had dragged him into the light as well. Did Gabriela already know that he, too, hid a darker side beneath polite composure?

Even Erik, sharp-eyed and seasoned, failed to notice how tightly Stewart's nerves were wound in that moment. Seeing Stewart's gaze fixed on the hospital gates, he hesitated before asking, "Mr. Williams, would you like to go in and see Myah?"

"Drive back to the villa," Stewart replied, lifting his hand in a restless, dismissive gesture.

Erik did not dare press further and started the engine.

After Myah was locked away, Gabriela's life slid back into its familiar rhythm. Her days remained crowded with work, though the steady presence of Alissa and Kaleb eased the burden. Her attention stayed anchored on the handbag adorned with flowers and fluttering butterflies.

Presley, however, watched her closely, concern etched into every glance. “Gabriela, you’ve weathered too much lately. You can afford to rest for a few more days. I already spoke with the princess — she agreed the delivery deadline can be stretched a little.” As for the banquet, the princess attended countless grand occasions. As long as the bag reached her hands, timing would not be an issue.

Threading a deep crimson silk through the needle, Gabriela curved her lips into a faint smile. “Presley, I’m really fine. You don’t need to fuss over me.”

Yet Presley couldn’t bring herself to relax. Especially since Wesley had been waiting outside for half the day, draining pot after pot of coffee — and Gabriela would rather sit here stitching in silence than step outside to face him.

Two people who had once loved each other, torn apart by the interference of a single young girl. The absurdity of it was almost laughable, if it were not so cruel.

With quiet resolve, Presley pressed Gabriela’s hand down. “Enough sewing. Keep this up and you’ll stitch your thoughts into knots.”

Presley knew Wesley well, and she naturally hoped her apprentice could mend what was broken. She was aware of some of the details surrounding Myah and understood the bind Wesley had been caught in. He had been misled, blinded by misplaced trust — yet he was still Truett’s biological father. Even Matthew, thinking of Truett, would wish for Gabriela and Wesley to find their way back to each other. No matter how fractured things were, they all hoped the family could remain whole.

Having studied under Presley for years, Gabriela saw through her mentor's intentions with ease. After a brief pause, she accepted the kindness, set aside her work, and stepped outside.

Wesley was still there, now well into his fourth pot of coffee. The moment he spotted Gabriela, light flared in his eyes. "Gabriela, have you finished your work?"

Gabriela let out a quiet sigh. "Not until the delivery is completed. But Presley ordered me to rest today, so I have no choice but to comply."

Wesley cast Presley a grateful glance. Presley smiled back. "Wesley, do you remember those rare orchids you kept at your estate last year? I planted some unusual flowers in my garden too, and they've just come into bloom. Why don't you take a look and see how they compare?"

A few months earlier, Presley had acquired a batch of pale smoky tulips — notoriously difficult to cultivate in Oswa, yet her gardener had not only kept them alive but coaxed them into full bloom. Gabriela understood her mentor's quiet arrangement and didn't object. She smiled at Wesley. "Come on. I'll show you."

Wesley was taken aback but quickly fell into step beside her.

They soon reached the rear garden, where a swath of pale smoky tulips bloomed in hushed splendor. Among the seven rarest flowers in the world, Presley had spared no expense to obtain them. At full bloom, the pale petals looked as though they were wrapped in a veil of morning mist. Wesley spoke with genuine admiration. "They're stunning."

Gabriela found them beautiful as well. Her thoughts drifted back to four years ago, when she first moved into Wesley's estate and everything felt unfamiliar yet dazzling. Back then, she had been pragmatic, measuring everything by its price. Those exotic orchids had been breathtaking, yet to her they had resembled an extravagant display — lovely but distant. She had never imagined that years later, her mentor would also delight in nurturing such costly elegance.

Perhaps that was why Wesley and Presley found common ground so easily.

They stood before the flowers for a long while.

At last, Gabriela broke the quiet. "Wesley, you shouldn't come looking for me anymore."

A flicker of panic crossed Wesley's eyes. "Gabriela, the root of everything was Myah. Now she's been admitted to a psychiatric hospital. I know I let you down — but at least..." He wanted her to grant him the chance to atone.

"Was Myah truly the only crack between us?" Gabriela met his gaze steadily. "Wesley, if you had trusted me even a fraction more, Myah would never have found room to manipulate things. All that talk about Allan saving your life and your obligation to protect Myah — those were nothing more than convenient shields. Our relationship was already fragile. Even if you had never gone abroad for treatment or lost fragments of your memory, the fractures would still have surfaced."

Her voice was calm, her words sharp but measured. It was precisely that composure that made them devastating — because disappointment, once planted, only deepened with time until nothing remained.

Wesley's breath hitched. He reached out and clasped her hand. "Gabriela, even now there are memories I cannot retrieve. But I remember how fiercely I once loved you." He had come to understand that whether or not Gabriela still loved him, his own love meant trusting her without reservation. If only she would give him one more chance, he believed they could find their way back.

Gabriela waited until he finished, then smiled faintly. "Wesley, when I first learned about your memory loss, despair nearly crushed me. I thought you were my entire world. You're Truett's biological father — I was willing to sacrifice anything just to make you fall in love with me again, so the three of us could stand together as a family. But after all the explanations, all the effort that now feels foolish in hindsight, you still chose to trust Myah and the lie she spun. In that moment, I lost you."

Seeing the distant calm in her eyes, Wesley instinctively tightened his hold on her hand.

"Wesley, when I truly decided to let you go, I finally understood." Gabriela's voice wavered slightly. "I had already clenched my teeth and walked this long road by myself." She had survived the darkest stretch alone — and there was no reason she could not continue forward on the smoother path that lay ahead.

Gabriela finished saying what she needed to say and turned, prepared to walk away.

Wesley reacted on instinct, tightening his hold around her wrist — his usual composure and pride crumbling in an instant. In that moment, he was no longer the successor of the mighty Crownridge Group, but a man on the brink of being left behind, something raw and desperate flickering in his dark eyes. "Gabriela, do you truly mean this?"

Gabriela met his gaze calmly. "Wesley, I once lost my memory as well. When I encountered you again afterward, I failed to recognize you, and for that I am genuinely sorry. But I stepped into the wrong room and became entangled with you. You knew I had mistaken you for someone else, yet you chose silence.

Because of that, time slipped through our fingers, and you missed Truett growing up.” Some moments, once lost, were gone forever — and no amount of regret could reclaim them.

She looked straight at him, her honesty unwavering. “Now I truly believe we were never meant to last.”

“You lost your memory and still crossed paths with me. You entered the wrong room and it was me inside. Can’t you see that the universe wants us together?” His voice quivered as his fingers tightened around her hand, desperation laced with stubborn resolve. “Gabriela, you already have a child with me. In this lifetime, you are mine. I will not let you go.”

“Then do your worst,” Gabriela said quietly, and gently but firmly peeled his fingers away before turning toward the living room.

Presley, waiting inside, caught the chill in Gabriela’s expression at a glance and understood immediately that the conversation had reached another impasse. She released a quiet sigh. Young people were always like this — dramatic and unyielding. And her apprentice was especially headstrong. Once Gabriela made up her mind, she saw it through, come what may. Unless something earthshaking occurred, Wesley and Gabriela might truly be finished.

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Gabriela greeted Presley and returned to her studio, resuming her work without pause.

Wesley lingered outside the studio for a long while before finally turning and leaving in silence. Gabriela was harboring resentment, and no amount of pursuit would soften her heart now. Pressing further would only push her further away. Giving her time was the wiser choice.

After leaving, Wesley didn't remain idle for long and soon buried himself in work. Brenden's condition was steadily improving — at this pace, he would be back at the office within two months. Once Brenden returned, Wesley intended to relinquish control of the Apex Group and hand everything over.

Roger had already begun urging him to return and assume responsibility for the family enterprise. But the Moss family was vast, and its internal relationships were tangled beyond measure — cousins and uncles who were ambitious, sharp, and untrustworthy. Taking over the business would only be the beginning. The true challenge lay in steadying the board and guarding against internal strife and betrayal: the unspoken rules of ruling a family empire.

Wesley had never cared to entangle himself in family power struggles before. But now he wanted to stand at the peak of Okburg, believing that such weight might finally tip the scales in Gabriela's heart. After all, Gabriela had once loved wealth with her whole heart. Perhaps if he became the most powerful man in the city, she might grant him more patience for that reason alone.

At that thought, he felt strangely fortunate that what she once valued most was something he could so easily command.

"Mr. Moss?" Billy's cautious voice broke through his thoughts. "Is there an issue with this document?"

It was merely a routine signature — something that usually took seconds — yet Wesley had been staring at the page for over ten minutes.

"No issue," Wesley said, snapping back. He signed swiftly and passed the file to Billy.

Billy accepted it, wanting to voice concern but finding no safe way to begin. He certainly couldn't ask whether his boss was distracted because of a quarrel with Gabriela. Such questions were better swallowed than spoken.

Noticing Billy's hesitation, Wesley frowned slightly. "Anything else?"

"No." Billy straightened immediately and exited the office.

With a capable assistant like Billy around, Wesley could afford the occasional lapse. But he made no habit of it.

At the same time, Gabriela was drowning in responsibilities. Her efficient assistant Alissa had taken leave to accompany her father, Boden, to the nearby city of Holtsley — to meet the son of the Wilson family, the wealthiest household in that city. After much effort, Boden had finally secured the opportunity, hoping to marry his daughter into that family. Alissa would be gone for at least three days, leaving Gabriela buried under an avalanche of work.

Only now did Gabriela fully grasp how indispensable Alissa truly was. So even during her busiest hours, when Alissa called for guidance through video, Gabriela never had the heart to refuse.

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Today marked Alissa's second day with the young Wilson heir. She secretly initiated a video call, asking Gabriela to assess the most eligible bachelor in Holtsley.

His full name was Huntley Wilson. He was well-built, pleasant-looking, and unfailingly polite, with an air of quiet gentleness and no obvious flaws. Gabriela set aside her work, studied him carefully, and offered an impartial opinion. "He looks quite handsome and seems courteous."

Alissa frowned, unconvinced. "I think even Billy looks better," she muttered.

Alissa judged people heavily by appearances, and to her, most conventionally handsome men blurred together. Her recent fondness for Billy probably stemmed from something far more specific — that belt of his, which apparently came undone with remarkable ease.

Gabriela's eyelid twitched. "Do not ever say that in front of your father, or Billy might suffer for it."

"Of course. I know." Alissa whispered on, complaining that their dates consisted only of coffee and discussions of classical literature. With no interest in such pursuits, she felt that marrying Huntley would be a life sentence of boredom.

Gabriela found it quietly amusing, though a screen could reveal little of a person's true nature. She wished Alissa luck and ended the call to resume her work.

Over the next few days, Alissa fell strangely quiet and made no further video calls.

Then, four days later, she returned to the office and immediately threw herself into Gabriela's arms, seeking comfort for her deeply bruised innocent heart. "Gabriela, you would never imagine this — Huntley has extremely strange tastes. He enjoys pain."

Gabriela's heart gave a small jolt. An old rumor from years ago surfaced briefly in her mind — something about Wesley being a masochist — though of course that had been utterly false. She asked carefully, "Alissa, did you see this yourself? Is there any chance you misunderstood?"

Alissa gulped down a large mouthful of coffee before continuing. "He has a hidden room filled with whips and various tools. And he likes wearing women's clothes. He owns an entire wardrobe of dresses, wigs, luxury bags, cosmetics, and jewelry." She looked completely shaken. "He even showed me the room and asked me to whip him."

Gabriela fell silent for a moment, genuinely unsure how to respond. Then, slowly, she said, "If you think about it, it's not entirely terrible. If you married him, he could be your husband and your shopping companion — and even a stress outlet when the need arose. You could share clothes, too. It might be worth considering."

Alissa looked utterly drained, her frustration written plainly across her face. "Gabriela, how do you manage to deliver such a terrible joke without even blinking? That was not funny in the slightest."

"Alright, I'll stop." Gabriela reached out and gently pinched Alissa's puffed cheeks before softening her voice. "If you truly cannot stand Huntley, you should take matters into your own hands and find a way out of this arranged marriage."

The moment Gabriela spoke, Alissa caught a hidden meaning. Her eyes lit up. "You already have a plan, don't you? Tell me now."

Gabriela paused briefly, weighing her words, before asking, "You have a half-sister, correct? I heard she was only brought back to the Hopkins family eight years ago."

"That's right." At the mention of Nicole Hopkins, irritation surfaced immediately in Alissa's expression. "My father may be charming, but he knows where to draw the line. He always cleans up his affairs and never brings outsiders into the house." Nicole's mother, however, had been far more calculating. After being abandoned by Boden, she secretly gave birth and raised the child for over a decade, only to collapse dramatically at the Hopkins family gate eight years ago. Such a performance was bound to stir sympathy. Boden not only arranged a mansion for the pair but spared no expense on Nicole's education, enrolling her in elite schools and hiring renowned instructors. Now at twenty, Nicole attended a top university, studied piano under masters, and traveled with assistants and drivers — living no differently from a legitimate heiress.

After hearing all this, Gabriela laughed lightly. "I'm also an illegitimate child. Do you resent me because of that?"

"That's completely different," Alissa said without hesitation. "I don't interfere much in my parents' affairs, but my half-sister is unbearable. She plays the victim in front of my father every day, as if I torment her constantly. It's infuriating." If Nicole didn't provoke her again and again, Alissa wouldn't be so relentless toward her.

Gabriela thought aloud. "So your sister lacks substance."

"Let me put it plainly," Alissa replied. "How you feel about Myah is exactly how I feel about Nicole."

Their talent for manipulation was equally matched. If those two ever crossed paths, it would be impossible to predict who would emerge victorious.

Gabriela nodded slowly. "Then do this." She leaned in and whispered a few words. Alissa's eyes sparked as if fireworks had gone off inside them. "Of course — you truly are brilliant, Gabriela. This is perfect."

Seeing Alissa finally relax, Gabriela patted her shoulder. "Now that you feel better, go get back to work."

Alissa straightened and gave a playful salute. "Understood, boss."

Once Alissa disappeared, the smile on Gabriela's lips slowly faded.

Since sending Myah to Ravenbrook Hospital, Gabriela had deliberately pushed her from her thoughts. Anyone who brought nothing but darkness into her life was someone she preferred to forget. Marie and her family were proof of that — after severing ties, Gabriela had barely spared them a thought for years.

Yet today, hearing Myah's name resurface stirred something faint and uncomfortable within her. There had been a time when she had genuinely treated Myah like her own sister. She found herself wondering how Myah was faring — whether regret had ever crept into her heart, or whether she had ever mourned the cruelty she had shown toward the brother who raised her.

The answer, had she known it, would have been a long time coming.

Life inside Ravenbrook Hospital was a nightmare for Myah.

The place was filled with people who behaved erratically and without warning, their unpredictability keeping her constantly on edge. When she had pretended to suffer from depression before, the hospitals she stayed in had been pristine and refined. Here, there was filth and chaos at every turn. Patients would fling food at others while eating. Some relieved themselves openly and smeared the mess with childish delight. The sight alone was enough to churn her stomach.

Myah wanted to escape immediately.

Yet Ravenbrook Hospital was built like a fortress. One afternoon, when she made it as far as the rear exit, attendants intercepted her before her fingers even grazed the door handle. She was dragged back, injected with sedatives, and locked in a narrow, lightless room for days. After that ordeal, she no longer dared to attempt escape.

Her hatred toward Gabriela deepened into something venomous. If not for Gabriela, Wesley would never have agreed to lock her away in such a place.

Just as Myah was scheming how to reach Wesley and display her misery, an unexpected visitor appeared.

It was Stewart.

They sat side by side on a bench in the hospital's back garden. Myah cradled the warm milk tea Stewart had brought, sipping without focus. "Stewart, why did you come here?"

Stewart studied her quietly. She wore a patient's gown, her hair slightly disheveled, her eyes dull and flat. The image of an innocent girl-next-door had completely vanished. Though his gaze was sharp and probing, his voice remained gentle. "Myah, how did things between you and Gabriela deteriorate so badly? Would you like me to help smooth things over?"

"Enough pretending." Myah shot him a scornful look. "You're here to find out whether I exposed you, aren't you?"

Stewart's eyes narrowed for a moment before he smiled faintly. "You're correct."

"Then rest easy. I haven't said a word." Myah sneered. "If you hadn't encouraged me to go against Gabriela, I wouldn't be trapped here. I want you to suffer — never knowing whether you're safe or not."

"I can get you out," Stewart said calmly. "Tell me the truth, and I'll take you away from this place."

Myah paused, then burst into laughter. "Stewart, I may play foolish at times, but I'm not stupid. If I leave without exposing you, do you think you'd allow me to live peacefully and cross paths with Gabriela again? And if I did expose you, whether I lived or died would no longer concern you." She had seen through him completely.

This was a confrontation between two schemers, neither capable of deceiving the other.

Stewart remained silent for a few seconds, then let out a quiet chuckle. "Unfortunate. You're right again." He rose from the bench. "If you refuse to speak, that's fine. I'll uncover the truth myself." He left Ravenbrook Hospital without looking back.

Myah glared at his retreating figure with pure malice.

She despised Stewart — but the person she loathed most was Gabriela. She would never warn Gabriela about how monstrous Stewart truly was. She hoped he would succeed in tearing Gabriela and Wesley apart. If she could not have Wesley, Gabriela would not be allowed to keep him either. If she could not possess happiness, she would ruin it.

The cold curve of her smile had not yet faded when a hand suddenly yanked her hair from behind.

Pain twisted Myah's face.

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"Trying to escape again? Kneel down and confess." It was another patient — one who lived in a delusion of being a righteous police officer, convinced that most of the hospital's inmates were criminals on the run. Every day was spent identifying so-called fugitives, and once someone was targeted, a beating inevitably followed. Hair pulling and torn clothing were considered mild.

Today was especially humiliating. The patient demanded that Myah kneel and loudly confess to being a fugitive. Having endured beatings before, Myah was terrified. She could only obey — collapsing to her knees and bowing until her forehead struck the ground. Blood trickled from the impact as the patient tore at her clothes, only stopping when attendants rushed in to restrain the patient and pull them away.

Myah was left trembling, barely holding herself together.

For the first time, regret crept into her heart. Had she not provoked Gabriela, she might still be living in the comfortable apartment Wesley had bought for her, cared for by Delia.

But Gabriela had already stopped thinking about Myah altogether.

Her attention was now focused on Alissa. Word had spread that Huntley had arrived in Okburg that day, intending to deepen their relationship. Overjoyed, Boden insisted that Huntley stay the night at the Hopkins residence, even arranging for him to sleep in Alissa's room.

Huntley received an almost ceremonial welcome from the Hopkins family that afternoon.

From the instant Boden laid eyes on him, the grin on his face seemed permanently fixed. That ingratiating attentiveness stirred a quiet but sharp contempt in Alissa's chest.

Huntley remained composed beside the coffee table, lifting his cup with measured ease, his expression detached — as though indulging a routine he had long grown accustomed to, including his future father-in-law's tireless flattery.

A subtle knot of unease tightened inside Alissa. If she truly married into the Wilson family, she feared dignity would become a luxury she could no longer afford.

Still, escape was never an option. For years, she had leaned on her family's influence and benefited from elite schooling paid for by them — resources that had carefully molded her into the polished woman she was today. No matter how often she clashed with Boden over trivial matters, when family interests were

on the line, resistance was a privilege she could not claim, regardless of how deeply his obsequiousness repulsed her.

For now, she had no choice but to employ the tactics Huntley had drilled into her, meeting each obstacle as it appeared.

Recalling his counsel, a spark flashed in Alissa's eyes. She promptly lowered herself into the seat beside Nicole and, with practiced arrogance, said, "Nicole, having such a handsome and captivating fiancé must make you green with envy."

"I am," Nicole answered, a gentle curve to her lips. "Congratulations on finding someone so admirable to marry."

"Envy suits you." Alissa cast a condescending glance her way. "My fiancé is not only easy on the eyes — he is endlessly patient and tender, never striking back even when provoked or mistreated. What matters most, though, is that his family's fortune is beyond imagination."

She casually tugged back her sleeve, allowing a dazzling bracelet to catch the light. "He recently took me to an auction. The moment I lingered on this piece, he bought it without hesitation."

Chapter 949

As her words settled, Alissa caught the faint flicker in Nicole's gaze — a betrayal of admiration she could not fully suppress.

So you can feel it burning, Alissa mused. Envy looks good on you, no matter how hard you deny it.

She leaned closer, her voice lowered deliberately, each word a spark. “This bracelet cost over three million dollars. Hard to believe, isn’t it?” Nicole’s lashes fluttered ever so slightly, and Alissa’s lips curved in quiet victory. She knew the hook had sunk deep. “Nicole, something like this will likely remain out of your reach forever.”

Then Alissa rose gracefully and crossed the room to settle beside Huntley. “Huntley, you have been sitting here far too long. Aren’t you exhausted? Why don’t we step away for a moment? I recently bought several lovely dresses — would you care to look?”

A shadow briefly crossed Boden’s face, as though prepared to chastise her for the impropriety. Yet Huntley’s eyes gleamed with unmistakable interest. “Of course,” he replied. And so Alissa guided him toward her dressing room.

Inside hung a collection of new gowns, each carefully selected with his preferences in mind. She deliberately held a sheer black dress against herself. “Huntley, does this suit me?”

Just as she had anticipated, he nodded, visibly entranced. “It suits you perfectly.”

“There are more. Stay right there,” Alissa said, casually setting the dress aside as she turned to browse for another.

When she faced him again, Huntley was already wearing it — paired with bold stockings and freshly colored lips.

The once-polished Huntley lounged across the sofa in a provocative sprawl, leaving Alissa stunned despite having braced herself for something strange. Propping his head lazily on one hand, he cast her a sultry glance. "Alissa, take a photo for me." The exaggerated softness in his voice clashed jarringly with his broad, imposing frame.

What made the scene impossible to ignore was the coarse hair on his legs pressing defiantly through the delicate weave of the stockings, each strand unapologetic.

Even Alissa, who prized appearances above all else, recoiled from the overwhelming sight and hurled her handbag at him. "Why would you put on my dress!"

Her shout only seemed to amuse him further, delight blooming across his face. Each strike fueled his pleasure, his expression tipping into something unrestrained.

"Harder," he urged, in a tone that made her skin crawl. "Don't hold back."

No performance was required anymore. Alissa screamed and fled, terror propelling her out the door.

Outside, Nicole lingered just as Alissa had predicted, listening intently. When Alissa burst through the door in disarray, Nicole rushed forward, feigning concern. "Alissa, what happened? Weren't you showing Huntley your new clothes?"

"He is horrifying!" Alissa cried, clinging to Nicole as if shaken to the core. "He enjoys wearing women's dresses — and finds pleasure in being punished!"

Nicole's eyes widened. "What are you saying? He does what?"

Chapter 950

"He craves pain. The harsher, the better," Alissa continued, carefully watching every twitch of Nicole's face. "I refuse to marry him. I would rather face death than become his wife. I do not care if he is the wealthiest man in Holtsley!" With her message delivered, Alissa fled again — only to pause discreetly at the corner to observe.

Nicole lingered for a few seconds, then quietly pushed open the dressing room door and stepped inside.

Alissa had not expected her to actually enter, yet satisfaction bloomed nonetheless. Now Nicole knew. That was enough. Whether she spread the secret or seized the chance for herself, both outcomes suited Alissa perfectly.

She immediately pulled out her phone and dialed Gabriela. "Gabriela, Nicole took the bait."

On the other end, Gabriela finally released a long-held breath. "Good. Now sit back and see what she does next."

"Alright," Alissa replied. "If she really manages to take that lunatic off my hands, dinner is on me!" If Nicole truly had the cunning to claim the richest man in Holtsley, Alissa would even feel grateful.

Nicole slipped silently into the dressing room.

Huntley stood before the mirror, absorbed in his own reflection — adjusting the hem, smoothing his hair with careful attention.

Nicole froze, eyes stretched wide in disbelief.

Huntley spun around sharply, his gaze turning icy. “Who allowed you in here? Where is Alissa?”

In public, Huntley maintained the image of refinement befitting Holtsley’s most powerful figure. Only here did he indulge in what he hid from the world. Alissa’s taste had aligned too perfectly with his own, and he had assumed secrecy unnecessary between future spouses — an assumption that had led him to change impulsively under another family’s roof. But his secret could belong to no one else.

Nicole was accustomed to feigning innocence, often manipulating situations to cast blame on Alissa or her mother. Never before had she stumbled upon something like this. Her thoughts scattered, words abandoning her entirely.

Huntley’s expression hardened. “Leave. Now.”

Nicole bolted, fear lending speed to her steps.

She had not even lasted two minutes. Watching her flee, Alissa felt only mild contempt. For all her schemes, Nicole proved laughably fragile when confronted with the unexpected.

With a quiet sigh of frustration, Alissa conceded that Gabriela had been right. To truly ensnare Nicole, this was only the beginning.

Alissa fabricated an excuse about overtime and rushed out, heading straight to the office to find Gabriela.

Boden had arranged for Huntley to stay in her bedroom, yet the mere thought of sharing a space with that unsettling man made her skin crawl.

The instant Alissa spotted Gabriela, it felt as though clouds had parted and light poured back into her world. Because Gabriela existed, life still shimmered with color instead of sinking into gloom.

Gabriela was deeply engrossed in paperwork when Alissa walked up and began pleading in a playful, exaggerated tone. “Gabriela, does your household need extra hands right now? I can scrub floors, trim hedges — anything at all. Just let me crash at your place for a few days. I will wash your clothes and cook every meal!”

Only by seeing Gabriela’s breathtaking face every day could Alissa cleanse her eyes after the trauma of seeing Huntley in a dress.