

## **His kiss 1011**

### Chapter 1011

“Who do you think you are? Why would I prove anything to you?”

Cindy glanced toward Rebecca’s direction and steeled herself. “If you can prove it, I will kneel here and apologize to you in front of every one of these cameras.” Her voice sharpened. “And if you cannot — then you will admit, on record, that you are an illegitimate child, and that your mother was a woman who destroyed another family.”

The temperature in Gabriela’s expression dropped entirely.

If Cindy had questioned only her work, she would not have dignified it with a response. But to stand here, in front of all these people, and drag her mother into it —

“If I prove myself,” Gabriela said, her voice perfectly level and cold, “then you will take that live camera to my mother’s grave and deliver your apology there.”

Cindy did not hesitate for a single second. “Fine.”

She raised her hand. The camera swung to frame Gabriela directly.

The live stream had been running the entire time.

The account Cindy had created for the broadcast already had millions of followers, and the moment it went live, viewers flooded in. When Cindy's accusations landed, someone in the comment section immediately supplied background context:

"I know about this! A few days ago, Princess Alvira from Ewraso attended a count's birthday party carrying a bag designed by Gabriela. The design was rich with Oswa's cultural elements and received significant praise."

"She was widely celebrated at the time. Who would have thought she might be a fraud?"

"It's not uncommon for an aging master to retire and quietly lend their skills to an apprentice's reputation..."

The audience followed the lead quickly. Hired trolls shaped the narrative with practiced efficiency, and within minutes, Gabriela had been labeled a fraud in the comment stream.

Then Gabriela appeared on camera.

The lens caught her first at the waist — the clean, fluid line of a water-blue dress. It traveled upward: the dress at her collar, her slender neck, her delicate chin. Then her face filled the frame. Dark, clear eyes carrying a faint coolness. An expression that gave nothing away.

The comments stopped entirely for several seconds.

Then:

“That’s Gabriela? She’s stunning.”

“With looks like that, who needs talent? She could walk into the entertainment industry tomorrow. I could look at her indefinitely.”

Cindy, unaware of the shift happening on her own stream, fixed Gabriela with a hard stare. “Draw something original. Right now.”

Gabriela showed no reaction to the calculation behind the demand. She turned to Alissa with a calm smile. “Please prepare the ink and brushes.”

Before Alissa could move, Cindy had already produced the materials herself — a long table appeared as though conjured, paper and brushes laid out in advance. The preparation made the trap obvious. This had been planned.

Wesley stepped close to Gabriela and said quietly, “Don’t push yourself. You don’t have to do this.” Genuine creation required inspiration and time. Being cornered here by reporters and cameras, even an hour would be draining.

Chapter 1012

Leo looked at her with the same concern, already preparing to have Cindy removed from the premises.

Gabriela shook her head. "It's alright. Don't worry."

She walked to the drawing table.

The camera followed without mercy, capturing every shift in her expression as she settled in. The live stream audience saw her full figure now — the blue dress catching the light as she moved, rippling faintly like water disturbed by wind.

Comments filled the screen again:

"Her ankles — almost impossibly graceful."

"Who are the two men beside her? Both incredibly good-looking. Are they celebrities?"

"The unsettling thing is, neither of them can quite pull the eye away from her..."

Gabriela picked up a brush and lowered her gaze.

She worked with quiet focus, sketching with patient, deliberate strokes — three night-blooming cereus flowers, rendered across three stages: the first opening, the bloom deepening, and the full white unfurling. Each captured in a handful of marks. The composition was assured, the flowers arranged with an ease that communicated something rich and solitary and cool all at once.

It took her forty minutes.

Anyone with trained eyes could see immediately that the foundation was genuine.

Leo could not help himself. “Night-blooming cereus at full flower — impossible to forget. The restraint in the brushwork here is something most professional artists cannot achieve.” It was the first time he had praised her publicly in front of the press, and the remark landed with weight. Reporters angled their cameras toward the painting, shutter sounds overlapping.

Gabriela set down her brush and looked at Cindy with a small, even smile. “Cindy, you have lost.”

The work was plainly impressive. Even Cindy, had she been honest, could not have denied it. Her expression shifted.

The surrounding crowd murmured in admiration. The live stream audience, having watched the entire process, began to push back:

“So Gabriela genuinely has ability. Was Cindy just here to stir up trouble?”

“Presley wouldn’t have taken on an apprentice without good reason.”

Cindy could not bring herself to imagine kneeling at the grave of a woman she had publicly called a mistress and delivering eighteen full kowtows. She steadied herself and pressed on. “Knowing how to draw is only half of it. You still need to demonstrate that you can embroider — otherwise, you could simply be supplying the design while your master does the actual handwork.”

A murmur of agreement moved through the onlookers. After all, the most celebrated element of the princess’s handbag had been the embroidery itself.

Gabriela was quiet for a moment.

So this was the real trap. She ran the calculation quickly: purchasing and sorting the threads alone would take time, and executing the embroidery properly would require at minimum nine hours. She had already been on her feet for most of the day. The stamina required was not guaranteed.

Her brow drew together slightly.

## Chapter 1013

Cindy saw it and smiled, satisfied. “What’s wrong? Are you afraid? With your half-learned skills, you thought you could defend the honor of a woman called a mistress?” She let the cruelty sit in the open air. “Ridiculous.”

Rebecca stood at the edge of the crowd, quietly gratified as observers around her whispered. Once Gabriela’s reputation was sufficiently damaged, she intended to purchase trending topics and push

carefully curated information into circulation — enough to make Gabriela a public target. After that, she would see whether Matthew still dared to acknowledge her, and whether Wesley would continue to look at her the way he did.

Leo, who had witnessed Gabriela's embroidery work firsthand, had no doubt about her ability. What concerned him was the time and physical cost. She had been at the show all day. He was about to intervene when Gabriela spoke.

"I will accept the challenge," she said. "But I want to raise the stakes."

The calm in her voice sent a chill through Cindy. She had underestimated Gabriela before, more than once, and the familiar bad feeling returned before she could stop it.

"If you lose," Gabriela continued, "you will begin at the base of the hill where my mother is buried. You will kneel and kowtow — three times, then nine — the entire way up to her grave. And when you arrive, you will deliver eighteen more kowtows, each one full and audible, while announcing aloud that you are an idiot."

A stunned silence fell over the crowd.

Cindy's face drained of color. She glanced toward Rebecca, who gave a single, tight nod. Cindy's lips trembled, but she did not dare refuse.

Gabriela looked through the camera's viewfinder toward where Rebecca stood and let her gaze settle there. "And Rebecca will kneel and kowtow alongside her."

Rebecca's expression pinched. She had wanted Gabriela humiliated — not to be dragged personally into the spectacle. Public scenes of that kind were beneath her. This illegitimate girl had no right to make demands of her.

Gabriela looked at her steadily. "What — are you afraid to accept?"

Stung by the smile, Rebecca stepped forward from the crowd before she had time to think it through. "Why would I be afraid?"

Gabriela had set the terms deliberately harsh, expecting them to balk and give her a graceful exit. She had not expected Rebecca to accept.

But Rebecca had — and Gabriela had never been the kind of person to step back from her own word. The faintest smile crossed her lips.

"I hope you both keep your word." She turned to Alissa. "Please go and buy the embroidery threads."

Before long, all the silk threads and satin needed for the embroidery had been purchased and laid out.

Gabriela set up her workstation, washed her hands with careful thoroughness, and began mapping out the patterns and stitching directions in her mind — the entire composition arranged mentally before a single needle touched the fabric.

She looked out at the crowd gathered around her and spoke sincerely. "Embroidering this piece will take a considerable amount of time. If anyone here has experience managing threads, I would be grateful for your help."

## Chapter 1014

A fashion show of this caliber naturally drew skilled artisans, including several professional embroidery masters. But they had no personal connection to Gabriela, and most quietly suspected the princess's handbag had been executed primarily by Presley, with Gabriela playing a lesser role. No one came forward.

Gabriela had expected as much. She turned to Cindy without a trace of disappointment. "This embroidery will require a long stretch of time, and I will need breaks. You may assign people to take shifts monitoring the live camera until I finish."

Cindy, who understood nothing of the craft, waved a hand dismissively. "Those white and green flowers aren't complicated. Don't use difficulty as an excuse for lack of skill." She paused, then added, "You drew in forty minutes. I'll give you three hours for the embroidery. If it isn't done in three hours, you lose."

Before Gabriela could respond, Leo cut in. "I don't claim expertise in embroidery, but I understand it takes significantly longer than drawing. Three hours is simply not realistic." He said it plainly, as a statement of fact.

Cindy did not dare challenge Leo directly and fell quiet.

Rebecca stepped in at once, her voice carrying a cold edge. “Leo, you’re obviously on her side — of course you’d speak for her.”

The remark made Leo pause almost imperceptibly before he replied, “I’m simply being accurate. Consult a professional if you’d like confirmation.”

Wesley, already burning with controlled fury at Rebecca’s interference, fixed her with a gaze that cut. “Rebecca. Enough.”

Rebecca held his stare for a moment, then pushed further. “Why are you so eager to defend her? Are you afraid she’ll fail and embarrass herself? Or worried that Mr. Roger will use it as a reason to forbid the marriage?”

Wesley’s gaze traveled over her slowly, deliberately, until the weight of it made her retreat two involuntary steps. She did not speak again.

Gabriela rested a hand lightly on Wesley’s arm. “Let me handle this,” she said quietly.

He suppressed the anger and turned to Billy. “Find professional embroidery masters — get an accurate estimate of the time this would require.”

“There’s no need,” said a woman in her thirties, stepping forward from the edge of the crowd. She spoke with the measured confidence of someone who had earned the right to her opinion. “I’ve studied embroidery for nearly twenty years and have some standing in the field. At my pace, a piece like this would take at minimum eight hours.” She studied Gabriela briefly. “With two or three years of training,

completing it in twelve hours would be an achievement. Factor in breaks and meals, and fourteen hours is a more honest estimate.”

The colors appeared simple at a glance — white and green — but the thread selection alone was deceptively complex. Different practitioners would produce vastly different results based on shade choices alone. To a seasoned eye, Gabriela was still a novice, and the thread organization alone could consume an hour or two.

“Twelve and a half hours, then,” Rebecca said coldly. “Gabriela, you agreed to our terms — you must honor ours.”

“Exactly,” Cindy added. “You can’t take ten days and embroider a few stitches between shopping trips. Even I could produce something decent at that pace.”

## Chapter 1015

The framing was deliberately misleading. Gabriela did not bother to argue it. “Twelve hours is fine.”

It was already more time than she had initially calculated.

Wesley leaned close and murmured, “Gabriela, don’t push yourself beyond your limits. I can find another way to make them answer for this.”

He had the means to make both of them kneel at that grave whether Gabriela finished the embroidery or not.

“Wesley, thank you,” she said warmly. “But I truly have this.” She glanced at the camera. “Let’s begin.”

She was grateful, in hindsight, that she had chosen to sketch pure white epiphyllum earlier. Avoiding vivid color had been the right instinct — though even pure white required dozens of graduated shades to render with depth and life.

Gabriela bent her attention entirely to organizing the threads.

Leo found a staff member with some knowledge of embroidery to assist her. Once the threads were sorted, Gabriela began the foundational stitching.

Unlike painting, embroidery demanded an almost meditative patience. The crowd, which had pressed in with curiosity, grew restless within the hour. Some drifted away, promising themselves they would return in twelve hours to see the outcome. The live stream viewers fared similarly — Gabriela’s face was striking enough, but the near-stillness of her figure, only her fingers moving in small, precise motions, was not compelling viewing over time. The viewer count began to fall.

Cindy’s camera operators took shifts to ensure no one could claim Gabriela had taken any unsanctioned shortcuts.

Time passed with unusual slowness.

Even Leo, who had been overseeing the entire fashion show through a long and demanding day, was visibly exhausted. Gabriela urged him to rest and go back. He refused without discussion. He arranged for chairs to be brought for those who were watching, and he stayed.

With Leo unwilling to leave, Wesley had no intention of going anywhere either. He remained beside Gabriela, watching her work with quiet attention.

Stewart sat further back among the crowd, observing from a distance, his fingers curled tightly in his lap. The plan that had been taking shape in his mind surfaced again. The desire to act on it grew stronger. What he wanted remained so far out of reach — but he was not prepared to surrender it.

Gabriela, absorbed entirely in what was in front of her, was unaware that someone nearby was willing to go to considerable lengths to possess her.

Two hours passed.

Leo's staff member, her eyes aching from concentration, needed a rest. Leo excused her gently. She washed her face, closed her eyes for fifteen minutes, and then returned.

Around them, the watchers were beginning to show the toll of the hour — some had nodded off in their chairs, others slumped with their chins propped on their hands.

Only Gabriela's pace was undiminished. If anything, her stitching seemed to have quickened. She had entered a state of deep focus, her expression unhurried and intent, her gaze unwavering. Something in her bearing seemed to hold a quiet gravity that the tired watchers could not entirely look away from.

## Chapter 1016

Perhaps it was that quality which moved a short-haired woman who had been managing the timer to finally rise from her seat. She stepped forward and said simply, "Let me help you with the threads."

Leo's staff member had no real expertise in the craft, and Gabriela had been dividing her attention between embroidering and guiding her — a division that cost time. Gabriela looked up at the woman and said, with genuine warmth, "Thank you."

The short-haired woman sat down without ceremony and began organizing the threads with evident skill and confidence. Gabriela's speed increased noticeably almost at once.

Some time later, a middle-aged woman with glasses approached as well. "I can assist with the needlework." Gabriela thanked her and accepted. By the time Leo's staff member returned, her help was no longer needed, and she sat back to watch with everyone else.

Approximately four hours in, two white epiphyllum flowers had taken form. The green leaves seemed to emerge organically from the pale gray fabric beneath them, and the epiphyllum bloomed among them — cool, composed, and quietly extraordinary.

Leo's staff member stared at the work and thought, with no small degree of awe: it's stunning.

When mealtime came, Alissa brought food and pressed Gabriela to eat before continuing. Gabriela complied without argument, stepped aside briefly, and then returned to her needle.

By around eight in the evening, the live stream viewers who had fallen away earlier began drifting back. What they found waiting for them was two fully realized white epiphyllum blossoms — and something else entirely.

Seated beside Gabriela was a young man no one had introduced. He kept a respectful distance, but his gaze was fixed on her with an attention that was unmistakable even through the screen.

The comment section erupted:

“Is that handsome man her boyfriend? He looks completely devoted.”

“This feels like something out of a romantic drama. There is clearly something between them.”

“I just want to reach through the screen and tell Gabriela — look up at him, just once!”

The live stream had erupted into lively discussion.

Someone had captured a still of Wesley watching Gabriela, paired it with a romantic song, and shared it across platforms. Their striking appearances gathered likes and reposts almost instantly, and before long, Gabriela and Wesley had become subjects of considerable online fascination. Newcomers who stumbled across the clip asked:

“Is this from a drama series? The visuals are gorgeous — what’s it called?”

Long-time viewers quickly shared the stream link, pulling new audiences in. The fresh arrivals clicked through, bewildered by the motionless leads and Gabriela’s unbroken focus on her needle. Veterans explained the wager patiently, detail by detail.

“We’re just waiting for the ending now.”

The buzz surrounding the bet drew more viewers in by the hour.

Gabriela did not keep them waiting long.

With assistance from the two professional embroiderers, she completed three moonflowers within the allotted time. On the flower in full bloom, she had embroidered a single water droplet, positioned at the edge of a petal as though it were about to fall.

The audience stilled for a moment, then broke into noise:

“That droplet — it’s extraordinary.”

Chapter 1017

“Who is still doubting her after this?”

“Cindy accidentally turned herself into Gabriela’s greatest promoter. We all came to watch and ended up witnessing mastery.”

The short-haired woman who had been assisting with the threads studied the finished piece with quiet admiration. “Gabriela — you’ve been learning for less than three years?”

The skill on display surpassed her own twenty years of experience in ways she could not easily put into words. It was not merely technical proficiency — it carried a vitality, an aliveness, that spoke to something deeper.

Gabriela smiled. “I studied painting in school. The embroidery began when I became Presley’s apprentice.”

“I’m Gilda,” the woman said, extending her hand with a sincerity that was unmistakable. She offered her business card. “You’re remarkable. Let’s be friends.”

“You’re remarkable too,” Gabriela replied, accepting the card warmly. “Thank you for your help.”

Alissa quietly slipped Gabriela’s business card into Gilda’s hand. Gilda glanced at it — CEO, Haynes Group — and looked up at Gabriela with undisguised surprise, then gave her a slow, appreciative thumbs-up.

The crowd reacted online:

“I recognize Gilda — she’s the vice-chair of the Xamfield Embroidery Association. Her background is even more distinguished than that — look her up.”

“Gilda is notoriously difficult to impress. If she’s giving praise, Gabriela is the real thing.”

The audience, absorbed in conversation, suddenly remembered why they were there. The embroidery was finished. The reporters who had lingered pushed forward at once, cameras raised. “Ms. Haynes, may we photograph the piece? Can we zoom in on the embroidery?”

Gabriela nodded.

The lenses focused on the completed work — The Fleeting Bloom of Moonflowers. Under the lights, the silk threads seemed to breathe life into the flowers, rendering them beneath a soft, imagined moonlight. The scene was composed with a stillness that felt genuinely fleeting, as though it might dissolve if observed too long. The atmosphere of the title and the reality of the piece were perfectly matched.

Alissa straightened with visible pride. “Gabriela completed the embroidery — including all breaks — in under nine hours.”

“Gabriela won!”

Cindy’s expression collapsed. Rebecca’s face turned to stone.

Gabriela had actually won.

Which meant Rebecca would have to travel to North Village and prostrate herself before the grave of a woman she had publicly dismissed as a homewrecker.

That was not going to happen.

Rebecca turned to leave. Wesley glanced at Billy, who moved immediately to block her path.

“Miss Espinoza,” Billy said, his bearing composed and immovable. “You have unfinished business here. Where are you going?”

Rebecca’s eyes flashed. “Get out of my way. Who are you to stand in front of me?”

Billy did not move.

Cindy, embarrassed and panicking, had already killed her own stream. But other reporters had launched their own broadcasts the moment the drama escalated, and the coverage was now broader than ever.

“I almost missed the best part — thank you to whoever kept their stream going. Following immediately.”

Gabriela walked toward Rebecca, unhurried and composed.

## Chapter 1018

Rebecca held her ground, her expression curdling into something venomous. “Gabriela, you are nothing but the bastard of a homewrecker. You have no right to speak to me about winning or losing.”

She took a certain comfort in it — in her legitimacy, her rightful birth, the status her mother’s marriage had conferred. Gabriela’s mother had been despised. That hierarchy, in Rebecca’s mind, was immovable.

Gabriela regarded her with cool, steady eyes and smiled faintly.

“Rebecca, you and your mother know the truth about my mother better than most. Before you continue smearing her reputation, I suggest you consider the things your own mother has done that don’t bear close examination.” She flexed her sore wrist with deliberate ease. “If you want to have this conversation fully, I’m ready.”

Rebecca seethed. The sheer audacity of it — standing before her with that composure, the daughter of a woman like that, demanding she kneel —

“Gabriela, step aside. I’m leaving, and no one is stopping me.”

“I am.”

Wesley stepped forward from behind Gabriela, his gaze falling on Rebecca with a cold precision that made the air around them feel thinner. “Honor the bet. Now.” He turned, finding Cindy attempting to slip away at the edge of the group. “And you. Get your people together and go to North Village.”

Cindy shrank visibly under the weight of his attention, retreating behind Rebecca. The resentment in her was at a breaking point. “Gabriela, you are a disgraceful bastard!” she shrieked, her voice stripped of all pretense. “Even if we prostrate ourselves, your mother will always be what she was!”

Gabriela’s fist closed slowly at her side.

“Even as a bastard,” she said, her voice quiet and level, “I am my father’s daughter.” Her gaze moved to Cindy and settled there with an unhurried precision. “But you, Cindy — who exactly are you? A distant relative of the Howard family with no claim to the inheritance, trailing after Rebecca like a marionette, imagining that makes you noble.” She let the words sit in the open air. “Where is your dignity? Did you discard it somewhere along the way?”

Every word landed. Cindy’s face burned with shame and fury, the color rising and staying.

But with Wesley standing at Gabriela’s side, immovable and glacially composed, Cindy did not dare open her mouth again.

Seeing everyone side with Gabriela, Rebecca seethed.

Why were they all focused on the surface result — who won, who lost — while completely overlooking Gabriela's status as an illegitimate child? And with Wesley present, there was no easy way out. Was she truly expected to kneel before that woman's grave?

Rebecca gritted her teeth.

In her mind, Gabriela and her mother were both undesirables. Kneeling before either of them was a humiliation worse than anything else she could imagine. But once she was back in Okburg, the matter between her and Gabriela would become a family affair — and Wesley, regardless of his history with Gabriela, had no legitimate grounds to interfere in the internal business of another family.

## Chapter 1019

That thought steadied her somewhat. She arranged her expression into something resembling concession. "Gabriela, I accept that I lost. Just tell them to move aside."

Gabriela studied her without warmth. She had clashed with this half-sister enough times to know her nature. A clean, graceful concession was not in Rebecca's repertoire.

Reading the skepticism in Gabriela's expression, Rebecca's composure cracked slightly. "North Village is far, and it's already dark. Traveling there at night isn't feasible." Her tone shifted into something that expected accommodation as a matter of course. "I have significant responsibilities at the company. Even if I honor the bet, I need to return and manage those first. Come find me in Okburg in a week. I'll fulfill it then."

She had lost — and yet spoke as though Gabriela still owed her consideration.

Alissa was the first to react. “Gabriela, don’t fall for it. If she won’t admit it here, she’ll be even less likely to follow through back in Okburg.”

Gabriela patted Alissa’s hand to settle her, then looked at Rebecca. “Alright.”

If Rebecca still refused to honor the bet when the time came, Gabriela had other means of ensuring accountability — means far more consequential than a trip to North Village.

Relief crossed Rebecca’s face, quickly replaced by disdain. “Wise of you to know your place.”

She told herself that Gabriela still needed to be careful. Matthew and Beverley would not simply hand her everything once she returned to the Howard family — not while Rebecca held her position in the company and enjoyed Jasper’s backing. There were many ways to make someone stumble quietly.

Wesley and Leo stepped aside. Cindy fell in behind Rebecca, shooting Billy a look of contempt as she passed. “Move aside, you fool.” Billy stepped back calmly. Cindy shouldered past him deliberately as she went.

The rudeness made Alissa’s hands curl. She managed to stay quiet — barely.

As Rebecca’s group departed, the remaining camera operators hurried after them, leaving the live stream audience watching an empty space in frustration.

“All that buildup and that’s the ending?”

“When is the kneeling broadcast scheduled? Give us something.”

“At least be a person of your word, Miss Howard. Don’t embarrass yourself further.”

Online, the commentary continued to ferment. The consensus that emerged was blunt: Gabriela, whatever her background, had demonstrated genuine talent and composure. Rebecca, the legitimate eldest daughter, had shown neither grace in defeat nor the basic dignity of honoring her own word. Within hours the topic had climbed onto the trending list.

After ten hours of sustained drawing and embroidery — an output that would have broken most people — Gabriela walked out of the fashion venue in a state of complete exhaustion. Her fingers would not stop trembling. The pale fatigue on her face was impossible to conceal.

Wesley noticed immediately. Without a word, he stepped forward and gathered her into his arms.

The sudden movement startled everyone around them.

Gabriela, lifted off the ground, protested at once. “Wesley, what are you doing? Put me down.”

“You’re exhausted. I’ll carry you to the car.”

## Chapter 1020

She began to shift against him. He lowered his voice. “The reporters haven’t gone yet. Don’t move — we’ll get there faster.”

His arms were steady and his bearing left no room for argument. Gabriela went still and let him carry her.

He reached the car quickly, settled her inside, and drove back to the hotel.

Leo watched from a distance, saying nothing.

Stewart appeared beside him and remarked with a casual air that did not quite reach his eyes, “It seems Gabriela and Mr. Moss will reconcile before long. Truly enviable.”

Leo gave a polite response, offered a brief farewell to those remaining, and returned to his own car.

Alissa and Billy exchanged a glance. What had gotten into Stewart today?

Stewart, oblivious to the looks, got into his car and said immediately, “Arrange for us to leave for Silvermoon Village first thing tomorrow.”

Erik blinked. “Mr. Williams, the fashion show continues tomorrow—”

“I’ve been restless and sleeping poorly,” Stewart said, his impatience evident. “I need Dr. Hill to help adjust my health.”

Erik fell silent.

That explanation was so unconvincing he wasn’t sure even Stewart believed it himself. And after everything — all the gestures, all the effort — Gabriela had turned away at every opportunity. With Wesley clearly still in the picture and the odds of reconciliation rising, Erik genuinely could not follow what his employer was still hoping to achieve.

But Stewart’s tone left no room for further comment. Erik kept his thoughts to himself.

Gabriela was genuinely spent.

Back at the hotel, she thanked Wesley briefly and was asleep before she had even considered showering. She slept through the night and well into the following afternoon, missing the day’s SK Elite Boutique events entirely.

She reached for her phone to apologize to Leo and found dozens of missed calls waiting for her — two from Matthew, several from Beverley, and the rest from unknown numbers.

She was about to return Matthew's call when one of the unknown numbers rang again.

She answered. A sharp, agitated voice cut through immediately.

"Gabriela, you insignificant upstart — you finally answered. I am warning you: release a statement online right now and put a stop to this ridicule before it goes any further."

Lauren.

Gabriela found the demand so absurd she had nothing to say to it. She ended the call without a word.

On the other end, Lauren stared at her phone, her fury at a full boil. That girl had caused Rebecca to become a target of public mockery — and now she dared to hang up?

Lauren rounded on Matthew, her voice cutting. "Matthew, I tolerated you bringing Gabriela into the company. I even held my tongue when you planned a celebration for her. But now she is openly overshadowing Rebecca? Who does she think she is? An illegitimate child, behaving with such arrogance!"

Even Beverley, who had considerable patience for Lauren's moods, drew the line there. "Lauren. Watch your words."