

His kiss 1021

Chapter 1021

The reminder of Beverley's particular leverage over her made Lauren pull back slightly from that specific phrasing. But the anger did not leave her face. "Matthew, we are not yet divorced. Tell me — how exactly are we going to resolve this?"

Matthew's expression was flat, his voice stripped of warmth. "Lauren, you know better than I do who started this. You cannot place this on Gabriela."

"If not her, then who?" Lauren snapped. "She won — fine. But pressing on about the kneeling? Does she have no understanding of her own position? How dare she demand that Rebecca kneel before anyone?"

Rebecca, tears pooling at the edges of her eyes, added her voice to the room. "Exactly. Gabriela hides behind Wesley's protection and treats me as though I don't exist as her sister. She has no refinement whatsoever."

Listening to Rebecca's baseless complaints, Matthew felt his headache deepen.

He had carried guilt about bringing Gabriela back into the Howard family precisely because of Rebecca — a lingering sense that he owed her something, that he always needed to make it up to her. But he had watched the embroidery livestream the night before. He had seen with his own eyes how aggressively Rebecca had confronted Gabriela, and how graceless her retreat had been when the outcome went against her.

He had already been quietly disappointed then.

Now Rebecca stood before him not with remorse, but with fresh accusations to deflect the blame.

“Enough,” Matthew said, his voice sharp and final. “I have nothing more to say to you right now. Go to your room and think about what you’ve done.”

Rebecca’s eyes flooded with fresh tears. She was being mocked online — practically hounded — and her father’s response was not comfort, but a reprimand.

“Dad, whatever I’ve done wrong, those people online are bullying me. It’s obvious Gabriela is behind it, paying to stir up trouble. Don’t you feel any sympathy for me? In your eyes, is Gabriela the only daughter you have now?”

Matthew exhaled slowly. “Rebecca — if Gabriela had lost yesterday, would you have let it go?”

Rebecca answered without flinching. “If she had lost, it would mean she wasn’t skilled enough. Why should I forgive her for that?”

“And then you would have bought trending topics, dug up scandals, and paid commenters to lead the pile-on online. That was your plan from the beginning.” Matthew’s tone was not a question — it was a quiet confirmation. “But now that it has come back to you instead, you cannot take it?”

Rebecca felt the sting of it but let indignation take over. “Dad, is that truly what you think of me?”

“Rebecca, you keep telling me how wronged you are. Have you thought for even a moment about whether Gabriela feels wronged? You push and push — and then expect her to yield to you?”

“She is an illegitimate child trying to take what isn’t hers!” Rebecca’s eyes burned. “A girl in her position should know to stay quiet and keep a low profile!”

“Enough!” Matthew’s hand rose sharply.

Rebecca’s chin lifted, her eyes red and defiant. “Are you going to strike me for the sake of an illegitimate child, Dad?”

Chapter 1022

Matthew looked at her tear-streaked face and lowered his hand. He could not bring himself to follow through. Unable to reason with her, unable to strike her, unable to reach her — he turned and walked out of the room.

Rebecca turned her wet, accusing eyes on Beverley. “Grandma — are you biased toward Gabriela too? I’m the one who’s been wronged here. Why should I be punished for Mother’s mistakes?”

Beverley, who had watched Rebecca grow from an infant, still carried a deep affection for her that logic could not entirely override. She sighed. “Stop crying. I’ll call Gabriela and ask her to release a statement.” Having the legitimate daughter make a public kowtow to a woman who had been dead for over a decade — a woman many still called a mistress — did strike her as unnecessary.

Rebecca finally swallowed her tears. "Thank you, Grandma."

On Gabriela's end, Lauren's call had already told her most of what she needed to know.

She called Leo first, to apologize. "Leo, I need to return to Okburg immediately. I won't be able to attend the rest of the fashion show."

Leo understood at once and said gently, "If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

She thanked him and ended the call.

Alissa came hurrying in moments later, eyes wide and bright. "Miss Gabriela, you're awake! I overheard — are you rushing back to Okburg to deal with those two?"

Gabriela shook her head. What she was returning for was more significant than that. She suspected Beverley would try to smooth things over on Rebecca's behalf, as she had before. This time, Gabriela had no intention of letting it pass so easily.

She packed without dawdling and left the room with Alissa, dragging her suitcase toward the lobby.

They had barely crossed into the lobby when they found Wesley and Billy already in the process of checking out. Billy brightened immediately. "Miss Gabriela! You're leaving too? Heading back to Okburg?" Gabriela nodded.

Billy's smile gained a subtle warmth. "What a coincidence — Mr. Moss has urgent business there as well. Shall we travel together?"

"There's no need," Gabriela said pleasantly. "I have my own car."

Wesley pressed his lips together. Seeing his employer's expression dim, Billy felt the quiet helplessness of a man whose best efforts keep falling short. He had learned from Alissa that Gabriela was checking out, which had prompted their own accelerated departure. And still, no shared ride.

As Billy was quietly turning over alternatives, Wesley said, "Gabriela, my car has broken down. Could you give me a lift?"

Billy went very still.

Gabriela looked at Wesley with frank skepticism. His car had broken down. Conveniently, at this precise moment. Wesley was not a man who ever needed to beg rides from anyone.

She was about to decline when Alissa stepped in cheerfully. "Of course — it's nice to have company on a long drive."

Catching Gabriela's sideways look, Alissa dropped her voice. "You always sleep in the car anyway. I get bored staring at the window by myself."

Wesley added quietly, "Thank you."

Chapter 1023

Gabriela thought of the previous evening — how steadily he had stood beside her, how much safer she had felt for it. She thought of Truett. She could not avoid Wesley indefinitely, and this was just a car ride. Five hours. She would sleep through most of it.

"You're welcome," she said.

They checked out and went to the parking area. Billy took the wheel. Alissa claimed the front passenger seat with practiced speed, fastened her seatbelt, and beamed. "Thanks for the ride, Billy!"

Gabriela found herself in the back seat with Wesley.

She leaned against the window and closed her eyes, intending to sleep. But having slept through the entire previous day and well into the afternoon, she was thoroughly awake. After some time of unsuccessful pretending, Wesley's voice came quietly from beside her.

"Gabriela, you don't have to do that."

She opened her eyes.

“I understand how you feel,” he said. His voice was low and slightly rough, carrying something careful in it — not quite a plea, but close. “I won’t push you toward anything you don’t want. But some things deserve the chance to be made right. For Truett’s sake, at least — don’t avoid me so completely.”

Gabriela looked at him. His eyes were dark and searching, his expression more open than he usually allowed.

Something shifted quietly in her chest.

After a brief silence, she said, “Alright.”

The corner of his mouth lifted — a small, grateful smile. “Thank you.”

He leaned back after that and closed his eyes, and he did not disturb her again.

The car settled into silence. Even Alissa, reliably noisy in any confined space, had gone quiet. Gabriela glanced into the rearview mirror a few times, puzzled — and discovered Alissa was fast asleep, head tipped against the window.

She stared at the road ahead, somewhere between amused and exasperated.

Then she felt a weight settle against her shoulder.

Wesley had drifted off, his head coming to rest against her. His familiar scent reached her. Something in her chest stirred before she could stop it. She pushed his head back toward the headrest.

Within five seconds, it tilted back onto her shoulder.

“Wesley, wake up.”

Gabriela called his name softly a few times. He did not stir. If anything, he nestled closer, his head settling against her neck with the comfortable ease of a loyal dog seeking warmth.

She suspected he was pretending.

But her quiet calls produced nothing, and she could not bring herself to shove him away. In the end, she let him lean there.

The car was very still. Alissa’s soft, rhythmic snoring drifted from the front seat, gentle enough to be almost soothing. The road hummed beneath them. The drowsy atmosphere settled around Gabriela like a blanket, and before long, despite herself, she drifted off.

Wesley opened his eyes slowly.

He studied her for a moment, checking that she was genuinely asleep. Then, with careful movements, he shifted away from her shoulder and guided her head onto his instead. Gabriela, responding instinctively to the warmth, turned into him — her soft hair brushing against his neck, her breathing slow and even.

Wesley exhaled quietly.

Chapter 1024

It was a small and slightly pitiful thing, he thought — having to rely on tricks like this just to be near her. He wrapped an arm around her and held her closer.

Up front, Billy glanced into the rearview mirror and, without quite meaning to, eased his foot off the accelerator.

By the time Gabriela's group made it back to Okburg, Stewart had already arrived in Silvermoon Village.

He had contacted Leo in advance to let him know and had brought gifts for Patrick and Adalynn. The elderly couple knew Leo was hosting a fashion exhibition in Xamfield — their son had extended an invitation, but neither of them had much familiarity with the fashion world, and they had decided against the long journey. Stewart's unannounced visit caught them pleasantly off guard.

"Why have you come alone, Stewart? Is it Myah's eyes — have the problems returned?"

Stewart replied with a rueful smile. “Her eyes are fine. It’s her spirits that have suffered.” Patrick and Adalynn received this with quiet sadness. Myah had spent nearly a year in Silvermoon Village during her treatment, and the villagers remembered her as a thoughtful and considerate young woman.

Adalynn shook her head. “Blind for so many years without crisis, and now that she can see again, it’s her mind that gives way. How unfortunate.”

Stewart offered little further explanation. “I haven’t been feeling well myself lately. Western medicine hasn’t helped much. I thought Dr. Hill might be able to help with some traditional remedies. I may need to stay a few days.”

Patrick and Adalynn were welcoming without hesitation. They prepared two guest rooms and cooked a generous meal to receive their visitor.

After dinner, Stewart and his assistant walked over to Dr. Hill’s clinic. When they arrived, a well-mannered young man was helping lay out herbs to dry, addressing the older man respectfully as “mentor,” though the doctor paid him little particular attention. Stewart assumed he was a new apprentice and gave him no further thought — though the young man glanced at Stewart more than once.

After a consultation and the dispensing of medicine, Stewart returned to Adalynn’s home. She offered to brew the herbs herself, and Stewart accepted gratefully, settling in to chat with her while she worked.

Erik, fully aware of his employer's underlying purpose in coming here, recognized there was nothing useful to say about it. He followed the secondary set of instructions instead, making his way to Snowport Village to locate Maura's residence.

He found her in the courtyard, idly cracking sunflower seeds and scrolling through her phone. She was genuinely striking — the kind of looks that drew notice without effort. She looked up at him with immediate suspicion.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

"A friend of Leo's," Erik said pleasantly, presenting the gift box with a polished smile. "I'm visiting Adalynn and wanted to bring you something from him — an apology for the awkwardness of your last meeting."

At Leo's name, Maura's wariness receded somewhat, though she replaced it with deliberate coolness. "Apologizing now? That's a bit late. You can just leave."

Chapter 1025

She had considered pursuing things with Leo on the strength of his appearance alone, despite his ambiguous income. His indifference had put her off. The matchmaker had insisted he was the most promising young man to come out of Silvermoon Village and pressed her not to let the opportunity pass. Maura suspected the woman of exaggeration. She had heard that Leo had money but refused to donate even a modest sum toward improving the village — which, to her mind, suggested either that the wealth was overstated or that the man was simply tight-fisted.

After receiving Adalynn's apology gift, she had decided to let the whole matter drop. There were other eligible men who looked her way without all the complication.

“Miss Maura,” Erik said, opening the box.

Inside lay a gold necklace and a pair of gold earrings. Maura’s expression shifted despite herself. She feigned indifference. “How do I know those aren’t fake? Why would I accept them?”

Erik produced the receipt from the bottom of the box and offered it to her. The combined value exceeded six figures. Maura reached for the necklace. It was cool and satisfying in her hand — the kind of weight that felt unambiguously real.

“Leo actually bought these for me?” she asked, disbelief edging into her voice.

Erik nodded, settling into his explanation with the practiced ease of someone accustomed to managing delicate situations. “The truth is, Leo has a girlfriend. They had a falling-out, and he came back home in frustration, thinking of ending things and settling into something simpler. But they’ve since reconciled — and now he feels guilty for having involved you the way he did. He wanted to make it right.”

Maura’s expression soured. He had been seeing someone while sitting across from her at a matchmaking visit?

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Erik continued. “His girlfriend is a formidable businesswoman. Their relationship has always been complicated.”

Maura's disdain deepened. A man propped up by a powerful woman — so that was the kind of person Leo was.

Then Erik turned his phone toward her and opened the live stream of SK Elite Boutique's fashion show in Xamfield.

"Leo's quite occupied with an important exhibition right now. If you have the time, you might want to support him there." He let a beat pass. "SK is the brand Leo founded, by the way. It's one of the leading fashion labels in the country — popular with the wealthiest clientele."

Maura stared at the screen.

Leo stood at the center of the show — expensive suit, composed bearing, the unhurried confidence of someone entirely at home in a room full of powerful people. Admirers circled him naturally, as though drawn by gravity.

She kept staring long after Erik had concluded his business, gathered himself, and left.

He returned to Adalynn's home to find Stewart's medicine already brewed and waiting. Erik gave a discreet signal. Stewart received it with a slight, unreadable smile, picked up the cup, and drank the herbal mixture down without flinching.

Whatever he was thinking, he kept it entirely to himself.

On Gabriela's end, what should have been a five-hour drive took Billy seven to complete.

When Gabriela stirred awake, she found herself leaning fully against Wesley's shoulder. She shifted — and felt it immediately. A damp patch on his shirt, directly beneath where her cheek had rested.

She had drooled in her sleep.

Chapter 1026

The embarrassment arrived in a single, full wave. She sat up quickly, pressing her lips together and staring straight ahead at the road, too mortified to look at him.

How she had slept that soundly — using Wesley as a pillow, of all people, and then drooling on him — was entirely beyond her.

Gabriela fumbled for a tissue, mortified.

A hand appeared beside her before she could find one, offering exactly that. The fingers holding it were long and pale.

She took it without looking at him, murmuring her thanks.

Wesley watched her — the embarrassed expression, the way she pressed the tissue to her cheek and stared determinedly at nothing — and felt a quiet, helpless fondness rise in his chest. He could not stop a soft laugh from escaping.

His laughter only made it worse.

“Sorry,” Gabriela said, composing herself with effort. “I must have fallen asleep and ruined your suit.”

“It’s fine. Just wash it for me.” He said it simply, already shrugging off his jacket and holding it toward her.

Gabriela hesitated. She and Wesley were no longer in a relationship that came with laundry duties. But both assistants in the front were conspicuously quiet, clearly listening with great interest. She took the jacket.

“I’ll have it dry-cleaned and sent to your office.”

She got out of the car the moment it stopped.

Alissa jogged to catch up. “Gabby, slow down! Wait for me.”

Gabriela turned and fixed her with a look. “Alissa, don’t think I don’t know you were the one who tipped Billy off about our return to Okburg. Do it again, and I will let you go.”

“That serious?” Alissa tucked herself under Gabriela’s arm with practiced ease. “Come on, don’t be angry. It wasn’t intentional.”

Gabriela nearly rolled her eyes. Tipping people off, calling for company out of boredom, claiming the front seat only to fall asleep before they had cleared the parking area — and she still dared to call it unintentional.

“Honestly, it wasn’t a big deal,” Alissa said, watching Gabriela’s expression carefully. “And just between us — while you were asleep, Mr. Moss pulled you into his arms on purpose. He even kissed your forehead while you weren’t looking. Very gently. It was almost heartbreaking to watch.”

Gabriela’s chest gave a small, involuntary lurch. She was about to respond when Alissa pressed on.

“If you really don’t want to wash his clothes, just give them back. It’s not like you leaned on him on purpose.”

Gabriela looked at her for a long moment, then gave up the argument entirely.

Washing one suit was not a difficult task. And explaining to Wesley that she hadn’t leaned on him intentionally and that he should therefore wash his own shirt — the mere image of that conversation was more embarrassing than just taking the jacket.

Back at the villa, Gabriela called Matthew.

Chapter 1027

He answered immediately and went straight to the heart of it. "I'm sorry you had to go through that." His voice was weighted. It was because of him that Alanna had lived without recognition for so many years — and that Gabriela had spent her life carrying the label of an illegitimate child.

"Dad, you don't need to say that," Gabriela replied softly. "I don't mind."

The moment she had begun calling him "Dad," she had already let it all go. Neither she nor her mother had done anything wrong, and she had long since stopped seeing her origins as something to be ashamed of.

Matthew felt the guilt deepen at her composure. He asked carefully, "Did you call because you need something?"

"Dad, I want to ask you something," Gabriela said. "Why did you hand the company to Jasper when you were still so young?"

A long silence followed — the kind that carried old pain in it.

"Gabriela, I truly loved Alanna. After she left, I had no appetite for power or competition." Matthew had held on for years out of obligation, running on empty, until finally he could no longer manage it and resolved to pass the company to his daughter. But Rebecca was still young and temperamentally unsuited for the demands of leadership. After a period of quiet observation, he had chosen Jasper — capable, gentle, devoted to Rebecca. Whatever ambitions Jasper carried, Matthew had accepted them as the price of stability.

After listening, Gabriela asked, “Dad, if my return to the company causes significant losses, would you still want me there?”

Matthew paused. “Gabriela, what are you planning?”

“I want Rebecca and Lauren to face real consequences.”

Gabriela had never set out looking for a fight with Rebecca. But the repeated provocations had accumulated beyond what she could continue to absorb quietly.

Matthew was silent for several seconds. Then he said, “Gabriela, even if you spend every penny of the family fortune, I will not blame you.” The way things stood, Rebecca’s abilities could not sustain the Everglow Group indefinitely — it would drift into Jasper’s hands regardless. Better to let Gabriela move as she saw fit. He had promised, again and again, to make things right by his daughter. This time, he intended to hold to that without reservation.

“Thank you, Dad,” Gabriela said, and meant it fully.

After the call, she arranged to meet Mason.

From the moment she had decided to return to Everglow Group, Gabriela had been quietly researching Rebecca’s failing seaside resort project. In truth, recovering it was not beyond reach — it required capability, the willingness to think unconventionally, and the right connections. Gabriela had all three.

They met at Phoenix Court. She laid out her plan. Mason listened with the focused attention of someone who recognized substance when he heard it, then leaned back and looked at her.

“Gabriela, if you and Rebecca don’t get along, why would you go out of your way to clean up her mess?”

Gabriela answered evenly. “Precisely because we don’t get along.”

She explained the rest quietly. Mason’s weathered face creased a little further, caught somewhere between astonishment and admiration.

“Gabby, you’ve got nerve.”

She asked, with just a trace of sheepishness, “Mr. Garner, can you help me?”

Chapter 1028

“I can,” he said, tapping the table once. “If it weren’t for you, Alphacom Electronics might not exist today.” He meant it. Gabriela’s intervention, and her successful persuasion of both the Williams Group and the Vasquez Group, had brought Alphacom substantial financial and technical support at a critical juncture. Thirty thousand employees still had their livelihoods because of it. That was a debt he did not take lightly.

“But I should warn you,” he added, his voice dropping slightly. “Doing this is likely to upset every elder in the Howard family.”

Gabriela smiled. “I’m not afraid.”

She had returned to the Howard family for Allan. What the elders thought of her was not something she had the bandwidth to worry about.

After she left, Mason immediately called Wesley and relayed the full plan.

Wesley listened without interrupting.

“Mr. Moss,” Mason said, lowering his voice with the careful gravity of someone delivering an honest warning, “Gabriela’s idea is bold — perhaps too bold. She may end up in serious trouble with that old woman. Shouldn’t you try to talk some sense into her?”

“Follow her instructions,” Wesley replied. “Whatever consequences follow, I’ll handle them.”

Mason exhaled in quiet resignation. “That old lady from the Howard family was a formidable figure in her day. You young people should tread carefully.”

“Thank you for the reminder, Mr. Garner.”

After hanging up, Wesley turned to Billy and relayed the plan in brief. “Help her strategize carefully. Make sure she’s covered.”

Billy gave a small, helpless sigh. “Miss Gabriela is genuinely bold.”

Wesley thought of the expression she must have worn when she devised it — the calm certainty, the quiet spark of challenge behind her eyes — and felt a smile form before he could stop it.

“She always has been,” he said.

Even before she had known she was a Howard, she had stood against that family without hesitating. That had never changed.

Gabriela had no idea Wesley was quietly working behind the scenes on her behalf. She drove home at a leisurely pace.

As she pulled up outside her neighborhood, she found exactly what she had half-expected — a butler sent by Beverley, who had clearly been waiting for some time.

“Miss Gabriela, the matriarch would like you to visit the estate.”

Gabriela said little. She called Farley to let him know, then followed the butler.

At the Howard family estate, Beverley sat in a pavilion beside the lotus pond, eyes closed, prayer beads moving slowly through her fingers. As the weather had warmed, she had taken to spending her quiet hours here. Screens had been added on both sides to block the lingering chill. Gabriela approached and greeted her respectfully. “Grandmother.”

Beverley opened her eyes and studied her.

The first time she had seen this girl, her face had still carried something girlish and unguarded. A few years on, her eyes held an entirely different quality — composed and knowing. Beverley waved her hand, gesturing for Gabriela to sit, and came to the point without ceremony.

“Gabriela, you’re a perceptive girl. I’m sure you know why I’ve asked you here.”

Gabriela settled calmly into her seat. “I don’t, actually.”

Beverley blinked.

Chapter 1029

This was not how the exchange was supposed to go. Gabriela was meant to say she understood, giving Beverley a natural opening to make her request. With the rhythm disrupted, Beverley was left having to state her case plainly — a position that carried less weight.

"I watched the embroidery livestream," she began. "Rebecca was in the wrong — I'll acknowledge that." She paused, waiting. When Gabriela offered nothing in return, she continued. "But in the end, you came out of it rather well. The livestream brought you considerable recognition. Given that, could you find it in yourself to let this go?"

Gabriela did not hesitate. "No."

Beverley was accustomed to Gabriela's resistance, but it still irritated her. "Rebecca is family. When she loses face, so do you."

"Grandmother," Gabriela replied evenly, "my surname is Lu. Rebecca's is Jiang. We are not family."

Beverley was briefly without words. In her experience, invoking family had always been sufficient leverage — particularly for someone on the verge of formally rejoining the household.

She pivoted. "Speaking of which, I must address this on your father's behalf. If you are returning to the Howard family, how can you refuse to change your surname? What does that say about your father? Returning in the position of an illegitimate child is already an awkward matter. Keeping the Lu name only invites more talk."

Gabriela had never felt shame about being a Lu. But she had no interest in debating it with Beverley at length. She steered back to the matter at hand. "Grandmother, Rebecca provoked this. If I yield too easily, she will simply continue. She has done it before."

Beverley had rarely met a junior who refused to bend, and her patience was thinning. “Then what do you want?”

Gabriela glanced at the silhouette visible through the screen behind Beverley — and deliberately raised her voice. “If Rebecca feels the public kneeling is too humiliating, I am willing to offer an alternative.”

The old lady looked at her.

“She may kneel before me privately and kowtow three times.”

The audacity of it silenced the pavilion for a full second.

Then Rebecca could hold back no longer. She burst through the screen. “Gabriela! How dare you demand that I kneel to you? Who do you think you are?” She turned on Beverley, her voice shaking with fury. “Grandma, I told you — Gabriela has no manners. Look at how she carries herself, and she hasn’t even officially returned yet. If she does come back, she’ll have no respect for anyone.”

Beverley was equally taken aback. “This is absurd. You are sisters. How can a younger sibling demand her elder kneel before her?”

“Then there is nothing further to discuss.” Gabriela rose. “If there is nothing else, I’ll take my leave.”

“Stop right there.”

Beverley’s voice was cold and absolute. “You need to find a middle ground on this. Otherwise, no matter what your father says, you will not be welcomed back into the Howard family.”

Gabriela turned. Beverley’s displeasure was plain. Rebecca stood beside her, her expression a knot of resentment cut through with the faintest trace of smugness.

Gabriela smiled faintly. “I don’t necessarily have to return to the Howard family.”

She left.

Chapter 1030

She did not have to wait long. On the afternoon of the third day, Beverley summoned her back to the estate.

“Gabriela, is it true you have been spreading rumors about the seaside resort project?”

In isolation, Rebecca’s loss-making project had been a manageable embarrassment — a few unfortunate contracts with limited startup capital, something the Howard family could have absorbed quietly. But beginning the previous day, rumors had begun to circulate with unusual momentum: that Rebecca was positioning herself to displace Jasper and claim the Everglow Group inheritance; that this heir, well-resourced but short-sighted, had already signed multiple failing ventures; and that once she took the reins, the company would not survive a decade.

The combination was damaging. Rebecca being Matthew's only daughter made the succession story plausible — and the embroidery incident had already established, publicly, that she could not accept defeat gracefully. The image of a narrow-minded heir steering a venerable company was not one that inspired investor confidence. Everglow Group's stock had plummeted, erasing billions in a matter of days.

"Grandmother," Gabriela said, with full composure, "I didn't spread rumors calling Rebecca a fool. She truly isn't very clever." She delivered this seriously, without cruelty, as though offering a straightforward observation.

"Nonsense!" The teacup slipped from Beverley's trembling fingers and shattered on the ground.

The butler's eyelids twitched. He moved forward quickly to help her, casting a barely perceptible look of reproach toward Gabriela.

Beverley had spent years cultivating her calm since stepping back from company affairs. She had not lost her temper like this in a long time.

Gabriela watched the color in her face carefully. Despite the fury, her lips remained a healthy shade — she was not in danger of collapsing from the anger. Gabriela softened her voice. "Grandmother, please don't be so quick to anger. This situation is actually not difficult to resolve."

She leaned slightly toward Beverley and lowered her voice, walking her through the plan.

Beverley's fury stilled. For a moment she simply stared, anger displaced by something closer to calculation.

"Is this actually feasible?"

"It is." Gabriela's gaze was steady. "The original project involved a degree of deception — Rebecca was simply too inexperienced to recognize it. But the Howard family currently holds priority rights to the land surrounding the island. Securing that land and redirecting the project entirely would not only recover the losses but turn the venture profitable. The rumors would dissolve on their own."

Beverley listened without interrupting. When Gabriela finished, the old woman gave the smallest of nods. She had the unmistakable quality of someone who recognized capability when it sat across from her.

This girl had something of her own younger self in her. Had she been raised under this roof, Everglow might never have passed to a collateral branch.

"And the matter of the bet with Rebecca?"

Rebecca was proud. She would not yield easily.

"Grandmother, that matter is between Rebecca and me. You don't need to intervene. I give you my word — I will go easy on her."