

His kiss 971

Chapter 971

In truth, she was not the only one. Leo had a genuine fondness for Gabriela, but it had not yet grown into something he could not live without. Still, having used her as his reason, he had no choice but to see the story through.

“I’ve liked her for many years. When you asked her to add me on WhatsApp, I looked into her further and found she was remarkable — she owns a large company and is a well-regarded designer.”

Adalynn had no idea Gabriela ran a company of her own. She was stunned. Having spent time with Gabriela, she had only seen a cheerful, polite, and respectful young woman. There had been no trace of a successful entrepreneur. She had simply never imagined it.

Setting aside the matter of the child, Gabriela surpassed Maura in every way.

Seeing his mother begin to waver, Leo pressed gently. “Give me two more years, Mother. If I still cannot win her over, I’ll come home and marry whoever you choose.”

Adalynn snapped back to herself, nearly swept along by him. “You’re already thirty-one! In two years, you’ll be even older — who would want you then?” Maura had just rejected him for being too old and had placed unreasonable conditions on the table. The irony was not lost on Leo.

He felt utterly resigned. Ever since he turned thirty, his mother had been convinced he was destined to be a confirmed bachelor and had never let the subject rest. He had a youthful appearance, more money than most people could imagine, and sent his mother generous amounts each month — yet still she worried he would end up alone.

Leo glanced toward his father.

Patrick, a man of quieter wisdom than Adalynn, had never truly believed his son would fail to find a wife. He took one last drag of his cigarette and set it down. "Then give yourself two more years," he said finally. "After that, you will listen to your mother."

With Patrick having spoken, Adalynn had no further argument.

As she turned it over in her mind, Adalynn found herself thinking more warmly of Gabriela than she expected. The girl was the most easy-going and considerate young person she had ever met. Marrying someone like her would be a comfort. As for Maura — well. It was a pity, but she would follow her son's wishes this time. In a few days, she would bring an apology gift to the Fowler family and make things right.

Leo felt the weight lift from his shoulders the moment his parents released him. Yet a thread of guilt lingered beneath the relief. Without Gabriela's knowledge or consent, he had used his fondness for her as a shield. If she ever found out, would she think less of him?

He made a quiet resolution: he would introduce Gabriela to more contacts within the industry and see that she was considered first whenever a worthy opportunity arose. It was a small way to repay what he owed her.

With his parents no longer pressing him about marriage, Leo felt genuinely at ease for the first time since arriving home. He no longer needed to invent reasons to leave. That afternoon, in a moment of unhurried calm, he finally found his way to the land where the peach trees grew.

As evening settled in, Stewart sent him a message asking how things had gone.

Leo replied sincerely. "It worked. Thank you for the suggestion."

On the other end, Stewart stared at the reply and slowly loosened his grip on his phone. So the plan had worked.

He leaned back heavily in his chair, closed his eyes, and after a long moment opened them with quiet resolve. Myah had already soured Gabriela's feelings toward Wesley once. If another person were to plant seeds of doubt in Wesley's mind about her — would she forgive him a second time?

Leo was finally free from the pressure of his family's marriage expectations, and after spending two days at home, he left.

He had never spent much time in the village, even as a child. At the age of ten, a teacher had taken him away. Growing up, he had endured constant bullying, and that history left him with little attachment to the place of his birth. No matter how angry or insistent his parents became about his infrequent visits, he remained firm.

As Leo prepared to depart, Patrick walked with him out of Silvermoon Village to the parking spot beyond its edge. Father and son moved in silence.

Patrick and Adalynn held a deep and unwavering attachment to their home, refusing to leave despite their son's success. Though the family barely saw one another throughout the year, Leo remained devoted to them — a quiet testament to the values instilled in him by his mentor.

Leo got into the car and waved goodbye to his father.

Patrick stood in place, watching until the car disappeared from view, his eyes clouded with a sorrow he did not put into words.

Two years. He wondered if he could hold on that long.

When Leo returned to Okburg, Stewart was already on the phone with Gabriela, inviting her to dinner.

The Williams Group had just completed a city square project at the dock — three and a half years from acquisition to completion — and all the celebratory events for the project had been entrusted to Haynes Group. With a clothing brand set to move into the city square the following month, Stewart used this as his reason to meet with Gabriela.

Although she was deeply occupied with her embroidery work, Gabriela never hesitated when company interests were on the line. She set the piece aside and headed promptly to Vista Hotel.

Stewart was already there when she arrived. He rose and pulled out a chair for her like a gentleman.

Gabriela removed her coat and sat down. “Sorry — the traffic was heavier than I expected.”

“It’s alright. I have another friend joining us shortly,” Stewart replied with a polite smile, handing her the menu.

Just as Gabriela finished ordering, a tall figure walked through the entrance.

She looked up, surprised. “Leo?”

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Leo, tired after driving for half the day, was equally startled. Stewart had called him midway through his journey, insisting he join them for dinner. He had not anticipated finding Gabriela here too. One glance at Stewart told him exactly what had been arranged, and he could only meet his friend’s eyes with quiet resignation.

Stewart raised his glass in an easy, self-deprecating toast. “Leo and I are good friends. He mentioned your name before, and I thought it would be a fine opportunity for all of us to meet.”

That Stewart and Leo moved in the same circles was unsurprising — both were prominent figures in their respective fields. What surprised Gabriela was that Leo had mentioned her name to anyone at all. She thought of herself as small in comparison to people like them.

“Gabriela, you look surprised,” Stewart continued. “But you already have a connection with Leo. Two years ago, you took Myah to Silvermoon Village for treatment...”

Through Stewart’s account, Gabriela learned that Leo’s full name was Leo Strickland — the son of Patrick and Adalynn from Silvermoon Village — and that she had held his contact in her WhatsApp for years without knowing it.

“That’s remarkable,” Gabriela said with a generous smile. “I never imagined we would end up meeting through Princess Alvira.”

Leo saw the brightness in her eyes and felt a quiet stir in his chest. “Neither did I,” he replied warmly.

Gabriela turned to him with an easy expression. “May I call you Leo from now on?”

Leo laughed softly. “Of course.” He had adopted the name Leo for his professional life and had grown accustomed to it. Yet hearing Gabriela say it sent a pleasant warmth through him that he had not quite expected.

The two fell into conversation naturally, neither of them noticing that Stewart’s smile beside them had long since gone cold. He watched them, barely concealing the jealousy flickering beneath the surface. Gabriela was completely at ease with Leo — a man she had barely met — while remaining carefully guarded around Stewart, despite their years of acquaintance. He found it quietly infuriating.

Still, friendship required composure, and the three of them enjoyed a pleasant dinner throughout.

By the end of the evening, Gabriela and Stewart had finalized the details for the brand's welcome event at the city square. Leo watched Gabriela navigate the negotiation with effortless precision and found himself deeply impressed. She was gifted in design, possessed a distinct creative vision, and in matters of business, her thinking was methodical and sharp. Leo prided himself on his mastery of clothing design — but sitting across from Gabriela at a negotiating table, he recognized he was outmatched. The more he came to know her, the more drawn to her he became.

After the contract was signed and hands were shaken, Stewart turned to Gabriela as she tucked the documents away. "Have you ever heard of Stephen Freeman?"

Having studied painting since childhood, Gabriela knew the name immediately. Her eyes lit up. "Of course! Why do you ask, Stewart?"

Stewart did not answer at once. He glanced at Leo. "And you?"

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"I've heard of him," Leo replied. Though his work was rooted in fashion design, many of his pieces drew from oil painting, and he had studied the works of domestic artists extensively. Stephen's name was known to anyone who had even lightly touched the world of oil painting — referred to with reverence simply as "the esteemed Mr. Freeman."

"He's hosting an exhibition in Okburg right now," Stewart said. "Today is the last day. Would you like to go?"

Gabriela leaned forward at once. "Where is it being held? I want to go."

Marie had interrupted Gabriela's painting years ago by breaking her hand, and she had never fully returned to the craft after her recovery — but meeting a master like Stephen had always been a quiet dream of hers.

"At the city library. I happen to have tickets. I'll take you."

Stewart drove them to the largest library in the city center, where the second and third floors had been reserved for Stephen's exhibition. Due to the volume of visitors, entry required tickets.

Just as Stewart led them toward the entrance, his phone rang. He answered briefly, then turned to Gabriela and Leo with an apologetic expression. "There's an urgent matter at the company. I'm so sorry — I have to go."

"Please don't worry about it," Gabriela said. "Go. And thank you for the tickets."

Stewart handed them over and left in a hurry.

Once outside, he took a photo and posted it to his social media with a caption: "Brought Gabriela to the exhibition today. Rarely seen her smile so happily."

After posting, he sent a separate photo directly to Wesley — a candid shot of Gabriela's profile, taken just as they had stepped out of the car. She was looking up at the printed paintings displayed across the library's facade, her smile soft and unguarded.

He added a brief message: “Gabriela accompanied me to the exhibition today.”

Wesley saw the photo the moment it arrived. He stared at it — and felt something in his chest give way. He had forgotten how long it had been since Gabriela had smiled like that. The shadow behind his eyes vanished in an instant.

He grabbed his suit jacket and walked out of his office without a word.

Billy hurried after him. “Mr. Moss, the materials for tomorrow morning’s board meeting — would you like to review them before you go?”

“Leave them,” Wesley said, not looking back.

In moments, he was gone.

Billy stood in the corridor, puzzled. Wesley had been so consumed by work lately that it had seemed, for a time, as though he had put matters of the heart entirely behind him. Yet here he was, less than a month later, back in the thick of it.

The old saying held true after all. Even the strongest fell for a beautiful smile.

Billy straightened his tie and followed his boss to the parking lot.

Once in the car, Wesley gave Billy the destination and settled into the back seat, phone in hand. When he pulled up Stewart's social media post and read the caption, his expression tightened.

"Drive faster," he said.

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Wesley did not consider Stewart a genuine threat. The man was simply a schemer — calculating, but ultimately transparent. What unsettled Wesley was the fear that if Stewart pursued Gabriela relentlessly, she might eventually yield. Gabriela was not known for her steadfastness. She had once been fond of Allan, then of him. Who was to say where her affections might land next?

The thought gnawed at him. The tension radiating from Wesley was palpable enough to make Billy's hands tremble on the steering wheel.

It had been quite some time since anyone had seen Wesley this unsettled — not since the night Myah was admitted to Ravenbrook Hospital.

Feeling the pressure, Billy accelerated and ventured carefully, "Mr. Moss, tomorrow's shareholders' meeting is crucial. Perhaps you could review the materials on the way?"

Wesley had promised Roger he would take over Crownridge Group, and tomorrow he was due at the Moss Group headquarters for the shareholders' meeting — his first step into the boardroom. He needed

the support of more than half the members, and without it, establishing himself would be an uphill battle from the start.

Yet at this critical juncture, he was more concerned about an art exhibition.

Billy could not fathom what Wesley intended to accomplish there. He knew, of course, that Wesley was going to see Gabriela — and once he did, there would be no returning to the office today.

“Focus on driving,” Wesley said sharply.

His woman was on the verge of being courted away. What did a shareholders’ meeting matter in comparison? If not for Gabriela’s practical nature, he would not have cared about the family business at all. As long as he managed Apex Group well, it was enough to make Gabriela the most admired woman in Okburg. Crownridge Group, with all its deceit and internal rivalry, held no appeal for him.

Sensing the force of Wesley’s mood, Billy did not dare press further. He drove at full speed until they reached Okburg Library.

It was the largest library in the city, covering a total area of fifty-three thousand square meters — seven floors above ground, one below, and two mezzanines, totaling ten levels. The first, fourth, fifth, and sixth floors housed the book collections, while the seventh served as a reading room. The second and third floors regularly hosted exhibitions and networking events for prominent figures across various fields.

Wesley stepped out of the car and strode inside. Two doormen at the entrance instinctively moved to stop him and request a ticket. Wesley frowned. “Who is the organizer? Bring him here.”

The doormen did not recognize him, but something in his bearing gave them pause. They exchanged a glance and hurried inside.

Inside the exhibition, Gabriela remained unaware that Wesley had arrived and been held at the entrance. She and Leo had already toured the second floor and were making their way to the third.

They stepped onto the escalator. On the wall directly opposite hung a vividly colored oil painting — clearly not a work by Stephen. Gabriela’s gaze was drawn to it immediately, and she pulled Leo over to look.

The painting bore the title “Starry Sky” but offered no artist information. It was evidently an imitation of a world-famous work, its vibrant, flowing colors reminiscent of the Milky Way stretching across a night sky. The visual effect was breathtaking.

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Gabriela could not help herself. “If this painting were used as a pattern for a handbag, it would be extraordinary.” She studied it a moment longer, then added quietly that the complexity far exceeded the flowers and butterflies design — it would take twice the effort to embroider. She resolved to discuss it with Presley when she returned.

Leo watched her in silence.

When she spoke about her work, her eyes were bright — brighter than anything he had seen in a long time. Her voice was full of quiet conviction, and a smile played constantly at the corners of her lips. His gaze lingered on her face, something deep and unspoken turning slowly in his eyes.

Then a small commotion rippled through the previously hushed exhibition space, accompanied by barely audible gasps from the other visitors.

Gabriela's heart gave a sharp lurch. She turned toward the entrance.

Wesley was walking in, accompanied by the exhibition organizer and Billy at his side. He moved with a regal, unhurried authority that made everyone in the room reluctant to meet his gaze, the air around him heavy with command.

Gabriela instinctively stepped a fraction away from Leo.

Leo noticed the subtle shift in her posture and glanced in Wesley's direction.

Wesley's expression was indifferent, but his eyes were fixed without apology on Leo's face, studying him openly — the kind of scrutiny few people had ever directed at Leo. Leo found it quietly interesting. It had been some time since anyone had looked at him quite like that.

When Wesley reached them, Leo turned to Gabriela with an easy smile. "Won't you introduce us?"

Gabriela came back to herself and felt a flicker of confusion at her own behavior. She and Leo were simply attending an exhibition together. Why had she stepped away? Why should it matter that Wesley was here? She had no ties to him. She owed him nothing.

She straightened and introduced them with composure. “This is Wesley — my ex-boyfriend.” Then she turned to Wesley with a calm smile. “Mr. Moss, this is Leo Strickland, founder of SK Elite Boutique. You may call him Leo.”

Wesley had arrived expecting to find Gabriela with Stewart. The sight of this entirely different man — and the word that accompanied the introduction — stopped him cold.

Her ex-boyfriend.

She had introduced him as her ex-boyfriend. To his face.

Though his composure held, something beneath it simmered. He extended his hand to Leo with a polished, if not entirely sincere, smile. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Leo studied him briefly — tall, dark-suited, with striking features and a presence that dominated a room. The exhibition organizer hovering behind him did not dare breathe. But Leo had spent years in the company of powerful people, and he was not easily impressed. He extended his hand in return, his expression perfectly calm. “Mr. Moss. I’ve heard much about you.”

He had wanted to meet this man ever since that first evening in the rain. He had wanted to see for himself what kind of person could win a woman like Gabriela — and then push her away.

Their hands met briefly and parted.

Gabriela stood beside Leo, not shrinking back, but composed and steady. Wesley looked at her and felt his displeasure reach its peak.

Chapter 977

“Gabriela,” he said, his tone carrying the faint edge of a command. “Come here.”

Once, regardless of the occasion, she would have obeyed without question — quietly, compliantly, always within arm’s reach whenever he called. But Gabriela was no longer that girl. She looked at him, brow furrowing only slightly, her feet firmly planted where they were.

“Mr. Moss, is there a particular reason you have come to find me here?”

Under Wesley’s darkening gaze, she straightened her back further. “Leo and I are only halfway through the exhibition. If there’s nothing urgent, please excuse us.” She turned, fully intending to continue.

Wesley reached out instinctively to stop her. “It’s about Truett. Would you consider that a priority?”

Hearing Wesley mention Truett, Gabriela’s brow furrowed slightly — but she conceded. Truett was the most important person in her life, and anything involving him took precedence.

Leo noticed her hesitation and smiled warmly. “If you have something to attend to, go ahead. I’ll finish the remaining paintings and tell you about them next time.” He was already planning to find Stephen and ask permission to take a few photographs to share with her later.

Gabriela nodded gratefully and followed Wesley out of the exhibition.

Wesley had been frowning the entire time. He had abandoned all his work to rush here, expecting to find Stewart fawning over Gabriela while she remained unguarded — a scene he could at least understand and navigate. But Stewart was nowhere in sight. In his place was a stranger, engaged in easy, unhurried conversation with her.

Leo had not been overtly attentive, and yet the way he looked at Gabriela was enough to sharpen Wesley’s sense of crisis. In that brief moment when their eyes met, there had been something almost resonant between them — leaving Wesley, her so-called ex-boyfriend, feeling like an outsider looking in.

His heart burned. He could not reproach Gabriela, and so he said nothing, pressing his lips together and walking ahead in silence. His long strides, fueled by frustration, carried him quickly.

Gabriela, in high heels, kept her own pace and gradually fell behind.

Wesley noticed she had not caught up. He drew a slow breath, turned around, and stepped into her path.

Before he could stop himself, he pressed a hand to her shoulder and leaned in to kiss her.

His cool scent washed over her. His lips, carrying the faint chill of the evening air, met hers — and something in her chest gave a sudden, startled shiver.

The sky was deepening into dusk. The streets around them hummed with pedestrians. Yet in that instant, Gabriela felt as though all the noise had gone silent.

Billy had already moved discreetly toward the parking area, putting distance between himself and the scene.

Sensing that Gabriela had not immediately pulled away, Wesley felt a surge of relief and wrapped an arm around her waist, guiding her behind a large stone pillar until they were hidden entirely from view.

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Her back pressed against the cold stone, and the shock of it jolted her to her senses. She pushed hard against his chest — but Wesley's hold on her waist was firm, and no matter how she tried, she could not break free.

It had been so long since Wesley had allowed himself this. He was reluctant to let go, as though even this closeness was never quite enough to satisfy the ache in him.

It was only a sharp pain at the tip of his tongue — and the taste of blood — that finally made him release her.

Gabriela's brows were drawn tight, her gaze cold and direct. "What has gotten into you?"

Wesley saw it in her eyes — the wariness, the distance, the chill. The woman who had once loved him so completely now looked at him like this.

He pressed his thumb to his lip, tasting blood, and felt something sad and heavy rise inside him.

Then, without a word, he lifted her into his arms and carried her toward the car before she could object.

He had always been measured and reasonable. Seeing him turn so suddenly domineering, Gabriela was startled. She struggled. “What are you doing? Put me down.”

“Don’t move,” Wesley said quietly. “Unless you’d like to give all those people something to talk about.”

The library entrance was busy, and several passersby had already turned to look. Gabriela went still, resigned, and let her face rest against his shoulder. Since no one could see her expression, she chose to pretend none of this was happening.

That small, reluctant gesture lifted something in Wesley. His lips curved, just barely, into a smile.

Billy was waiting by the car and opened the door the moment he saw them. Wesley set Gabriela down inside and then instructed Billy to lock the doors. Finding herself unable to get out, Gabriela settled back and asked evenly, “Wesley, why bring up Truett? What is it you’re actually trying to do?”

Despite everything, they had been managing a fragile peace. Wesley let her live with Truett; she allowed him to visit whenever he wished. Gabriela had believed he would at least preserve that much, out of respect for what they had once been.

“I believe Truett truly needs his father with him,” Wesley said. He had rehearsed the line countless times in his head, yet speaking it still made him uneasy beneath the calm he forced himself to maintain. “Gabriela — let’s get married. Let’s go and register tomorrow.”

Gabriela showed none of the emotion he might have hoped for. No joy, no surprise. Only composure. Her voice was steady. “Wesley, do you remember what you said to me that night at the hotel in Eventide Vale?”

That night — when she had jumped into the cold pool, and he had driven her out into the rain. Wesley did not want to revisit those moments. They shamed him in a way he could not easily face. “Gabriela,” he said with difficulty, “are you settling scores with me?”

She looked at him calmly. “I’m speaking with you quietly and reasonably. Is that what you call settling scores?”

Chapter 979

“Isn’t it?” His eyes fixed on hers. “You said you would do anything for me. You said it yourself.”

If he could have avoided it, he would never have brought that night up again. But now it was the only thread he had left to hold onto. He hated himself for it.

Gabriela spared him the trouble of remembering any further. “You said the proposal was meaningless. Wesley — after everything we have been through, we still could not find a way to be together. Perhaps that means something. Can you not give me some peace?”

“Give you peace?” His grip on her wrist tightened, his eyes reddening at the edges. “Then who gives me peace? Do you know I lie awake every night, convinced it is my own fault that I lost you? My heart has been breaking for months. I cannot let go — not for the rest of my life.”

“There is no point in saying this now.” Gabriela’s voice remained gentle, but each word was precise and final. “Wesley, from the moment you took back that engagement ring — from the moment you agreed to give it to Myah — I let you go. I do not want to get married now, and I will not in the future. Please stop disrupting my life.”

The quiet steadiness of her tone was more devastating than anger would have been. Something in Wesley collapsed under the weight of it. He let out a short, cold laugh. “Disrupting your closeness with other men, you mean.”

The car fell utterly silent.

Billy stopped breathing. He knew with painful clarity that Wesley’s words would only widen the distance between them — but he did not dare speak, and he very much wished he could disappear into the back of his seat.

Gabriela looked at Wesley steadily. Several seconds passed.

Then she let out a soft sigh. “Wesley, you have known me for so long. Do you truly understand me?” She held his gaze. “Did you ever know that I had dreams of my own?”

Wesley was taken aback by Gabriela’s question.

All this time, he had believed the thing she desired most was money. Could it be that she wanted something more?

Seeing his expression, Gabriela understood that he had never truly known her. With a faint smile, she asked, “Wesley, do you really think I am only concerned with making money?”

“Isn’t it true?” he replied, almost instinctively.

He remembered how Gabriela had once lowered her pride to do almost anything for the sake of money — as long as it did not cross a moral line.

“Money is a good thing,” Gabriela said. “When I had nothing, my only priority was putting food on the table. There was no room for anything else. It is only when you have financial stability that you can afford to pursue your dreams.”

Chapter 980

She raised her eyes to his. “Wesley, I no longer worry about basic needs, and my savings are sufficient. I came to see this exhibition to fulfill a childhood dream — and your interference disrupted that.” Her tone became quiet but resolute. “Please stop entangling yourself with me. Will you?”

She reached for the car door. Wesley did not signal Billy to unlock it.

He sat with a brooding tension in his shoulders, lips pressed tight.

Gabriela gave him a sidelong glance. “Are you surprised? I’m sorry to disappoint you. I really am just this practical.” Poverty had a way of forcing people to abandon their dreams and roughen their edges simply to survive. Once stability was found, those lost dreams came rushing back — and a person who had fought that hard would never willingly surrender them again.

Gabriela wished Wesley would understand who she truly was before deciding to pursue her. Without that understanding, even a reconciliation would crumble the moment another Myah came along.

Wesley grasped her hand firmly. “This isn’t fair.”

He had been foolish enough to promise Myah the engagement ring at the worst possible moment — because he had not known her true nature. Gabriela had known the truth all along and said nothing, allowing him to be deceived. And then she had ended things with those simple words: Since you want to give the ring to someone else, let’s end this. It had felt, in hindsight, as though she had been waiting for him to commit an unforgivable mistake — a clean reason to leave.

That was not fair to him.

Gabriela shook her head gently. “It isn’t only about Myah. I was deceived by her too, for a time. She is Allan’s sister — you saw her as family, and being misled was understandable. But the engagement ring

was a symbol of our commitment. Whatever your reasons, the moment you were willing to give it to someone else, you had already left my world in some part of your heart.” She held his gaze steadily. “We are adults, Wesley. We have to be responsible for our choices.” A pause. “Please ask Billy to unlock the door.”

Wesley looked away for a long moment before finally saying, “Unlock it.”

Gabriela stepped out and hailed a taxi back to the villa.

Stewart had watched the entire exchange from a distance, concealed behind a row of greenery. He waited until Gabriela’s taxi pulled away, then turned and walked off without a word.

Wesley remained in the back seat. After a long silence, he said quietly, “Take me to the apartment.”

On the way, he turned over the years in his mind — every moment he had shared with Gabriela, every version of her he thought he had known. As she said, she had been an ordinary woman driven by necessity. And yet that same woman had shown genuine compassion toward Myah, for the small kindness Allan had once offered her. She had not abandoned Myah after being hurt. She had given her chances — multiple chances — to make things right. It was only when Myah’s actions endangered the people Gabriela loved that she had drawn the line and sent her away.

Wesley felt the full weight of his loss settle over him.