

His kiss 981

Chapter 981

He had truly lost a remarkable woman. The question now was how to make her believe him again.

When Gabriela returned to the villa that evening, a message arrived from Leo on WhatsApp. He had sent a collection of photographs, suggesting they might delight her — images of some of the more striking pieces from the exhibition she had not been able to finish. Gabriela smiled at the thoughtfulness of it and typed back simply, “Thank you, Leo.”

On the other end, Leo read her reply and chuckled, picturing the expression she must be wearing. Without adding anything further, he tucked his phone away and said to his assistant, “Let’s go.” They walked toward the airport security checkpoint.

He had intended to stay in Okburg longer, but a baroness in Ewraso had personally requested a gown of his design. Despite his standing, certain patrons were not easily refused. He boarded the plane without sending another reply.

Gabriela did not mind. She understood his position well enough — that he had accompanied her to the exhibition at all had been more than she could have hoped for. Sharing the photographs afterward was a generous gesture. Expecting a reply from someone of his influence would have been presumptuous.

She thought nothing more of it — which made the scene that greeted her the following morning at Presley’s manor all the more startling.

Six paintings had been delivered and arranged in the living room: five oil works and one watercolor, each extraordinary. Presley and Lilian were already standing before them in quiet admiration when Gabriela arrived.

Lilian gestured toward one in particular — Snowfall Over the Northern Hills — and said, “This one alone is worth at least thirty million. And Leo just purchased it without a second thought.” Her voice carried unmistakable admiration. Spent on art, such sums were never wasted. Together, the six works were worth no less than two billion.

Gabriela stared at them in disbelief. “Leo bought all of these?”

Presley nodded. “They were delivered first thing this morning. The courier confirmed the buyer was Leo.”

Gabriela looked around the room. “Where is he?”

“He flew to Ewraso last night,” Presley said. “Don’t let Leo’s role as SK Elite Boutique’s founder mislead you — he is constantly moving between countries. Fame of that kind attracts a very particular kind of patron, and wealthy admirers often seek his personal touch for bespoke pieces. He can decline ordinary clients with ease, but certain patrons, those of real standing, are another matter entirely.” Gabriela nodded slowly. “He must be extraordinarily busy.”

Presley studied Gabriela’s composed expression and added with a knowing smile, “You will face the same one day.”

As Gabriela's reputation grew, she would move into higher circles — and the clients at that level were not ones to be declined lightly. When someone of Alvira's rank made a personal request, it simply had to be honored, regardless of one's schedule.

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Presley herself was a rare exception. Renowned for her ease and independence, free from family obligations, and protected by her longstanding connection to the princess, she had the luxury of choosing her projects entirely on her own terms. Even a request from royalty, if it did not interest her, would be met with a calm and unapologetic claim of being otherwise engaged.

After listening to Presley and Lilian, Gabriela nodded. "I know." She felt no fear — only excitement.

Four years ago, she had had nothing. Mistreated by Marie and her family, her only wish had been to escape her circumstances and reclaim the house and company her mother had left her. In just four years, she now had the chance to make her mark on the world stage. She could have jumped for joy. How could she possibly feel afraid?

Presley felt a deep and genuine gratification watching Gabriela's eager expression. She considered herself fortunate to have found such an apprentice — talented, hardworking, and utterly unafraid of challenges. Once Gabriela's training was complete, when high-profile clients and socialites, or even the wives of the country's most powerful tycoons, came seeking her designs, all Presley would need to do was nod and pass the work along to her brilliant student. Then she could travel the world in perfect peace of mind.

The more Presley thought about it, the more delighted she became. She gave Gabriela an encouraging nod. "You're going places. You truly are my finest apprentice."

After admiring the paintings Leo had sent over, Gabriela found herself quietly marveling at his generosity and ease with wealth. She made a silent vow to work even harder — to one day reach his level and become an international designer who could spend billions without so much as blinking.

With that resolve settled in her chest, Gabriela returned to her studio and resumed work on the flowers and butterflies piece. Barring any unexpected delays, she hoped to complete the embroidery within two weeks, then sew it onto the bag and finish the project entirely.

In those days, Wesley did not come to see her, nor did he linger around the villa as he once had. The space he left behind gave her room to breathe and focus.

As for Leo — he had not initiated any contact, and Gabriela would never presume to disturb someone of his standing. What she did not know was that Leo checked his phone every evening after work. Alongside messages from clients and invitations from friends abroad to various banquets and gatherings, he found nothing from Gabriela. Not a single word.

Disappointed, he set the phone aside.

He thought again of the man he had encountered at the exhibition — calm in bearing, impressive in stature, the heir to Crownridge Group. Leo was candid enough with himself to acknowledge that Wesley was a man of superior standing, and that his own SK Elite Boutique still had some distance to close by comparison. He wondered how the conversation between them had gone that evening. Had Gabriela reconciled with Wesley? If so, Leo might not stand a chance at all.

His assistant, noticing his employer's distant, preoccupied expression, grew quietly curious. In all the time he had worked for Leo, he had rarely seen him troubled by anything. Yet lately, he heard sighs with increasing frequency.

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“Boss, is there something unresolved? Do you need my help with anything?”

“No.” Leo waved the question off with an easy gesture. “You’ve been working hard lately. Go home and rest.”

Once the assistant left, Leo turned to the window and gazed out at the city sprawled beneath the dark night sky. This country, usually so stimulating, felt suddenly tiresome. For the first time in his life, he found himself yearning for a place to call home — somewhere that would put an end to the endless cycle of flights and foreign cities. He wanted, more than anything, to stop wandering.

Then, while still staring out at the lights below, his phone lit up with a message.

It was from Gabriela.

“Leo, the flowers and butterflies piece is complete. I’ve asked the princess for her opinion, and I’m sending you the finished design for your review.”

A photograph followed.

Leo had seen the piece in its unfinished state and knew a photograph could never fully capture its presence. Even so, the finished embroidery was arresting — the use of color masterful, the contrast between light and shadow striking and assured. Even through a screen, the visual impact was

immediate. The butterflies, embroidered in deep, muted tones, seemed somehow alive — as though poised to break free of the fabric and burst into the light.

Leo studied the image for a long time before replying with two words: “Very impressive.”

He meant every syllable. Only someone with Gabriela’s warmth could produce something so full of life.

Gabriela read his reply with quiet satisfaction and put her phone away. After ten days of intense, unrelenting work, exhaustion had settled into her bones. She could barely walk straight. The final touches could wait until morning.

She drove back toward the Haynes family villa, and as she turned into the neighborhood, a black car passed hers going the other direction.

Wesley had taken to lingering outside Rose Community in recent days — never for long, always careful not to overstay and risk becoming a nuisance to her. Tonight had been no different. He had sat parked outside for half an hour before finally pulling away.

He had an important task waiting.

Randall had been confined for over a month. The prolonged isolation had taken a visible toll on his mental state, and he had long since stopped providing anything useful. After consulting with Wesley, Billy had decided it was time to release him.

Wesley descended to the basement where Randall was being held. Randall had spent every one of those days living in quiet terror, turning the same questions over in his mind: who had taken him, and why? He had already revealed everything he knew. Why hadn't they let him go?

Then he heard the masked figure speak. "Randall, you're free to go."

Randall's mind was slow to catch up. Then he moved — quickly, stumbling toward the exit and out into the open air.

The night was dark around him, tree shadows shifting in the periphery. He had no idea where he was.

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As he stood trying to get his bearings, a deep, measured voice reached him from somewhere nearby — emotionless, yet carrying an unmistakable authority.

"Once you are out, find a way to reconnect with Lauren. Obtain evidence of the car accident she orchestrated years ago."

Randall turned toward the voice and nearly fell to his knees.

The heir of Moss Group.

He was not the sort of man Randall would ordinarily encounter. But through his connection to Lauren, Randall had attended enough upscale events over the years to recognize Wesley on sight. He had never imagined, not for a single moment, that the person behind his abduction would be someone of Wesley's stature.

He could not understand why. He knew nothing about how Allan had come to be struck by that car. Why would Wesley personally concern himself with someone as insignificant as Randall?

Then the answer arrived on its own.

Gabriela. The kidnapping. His attempt to ingratiate himself with Lauren. His deliberate approach to Gabriela at that charity gala.

Regret moved through him like cold water. He had been too confident, too certain that his identity was safely buried — that no one had connected the threads over all those years. It was that very charity gala that had drawn Wesley's eye to him.

He was still silently cursing his own arrogance when Billy's voice cut through the night, sharp and direct. "Did you hear him?"

Randall's leg trembled. "Understood," he said quickly.

Billy had Randall taken to a hotel, where he was cleaned up thoroughly, then sent home early the following morning.

Before Randall stepped out of the car, Billy fixed him with a cold, level stare. “In Okburg, my boss could dismantle your life with a single word. Think very carefully about what you say when you encounter Lauren or her people.”

Billy’s bearing carried an echo of Wesley’s authority — enough to make Randall’s knees go weak. He nodded vigorously. “You have my word, sir. From now on, I will follow only Mr. Moss’s orders.”

Of course he would. The Howard family was nothing compared to the Moss family. And with Lauren on the verge of being ousted by the Howards, the McCoy family would become even less significant by association.

Randall had managed to leverage his connection to Allan in order to ingratiate himself with Lauren — proof that he possessed a certain sharp instinct for aligning himself with those in power. That quality, at least, made him useful.

After seeing Randall off, Billy returned at once to report to Wesley.

He hesitated on the way, turning something over in his mind. They had already extracted everything of use from Randall, who was now essentially spent. Why had Wesley insisted on appearing in person?

Even granting that Randall was too intimidated to expose the truth to Lauren, his loyalty to their side remained difficult to guarantee.

Wesley noticed Billy’s reluctance and set down the file in his hands. “Is there something else?”

Billy voiced his doubts.

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Wesley's explanation was measured. "Releasing Randall will certainly disturb things, but keeping him locked away indefinitely isn't realistic." When Randall had been uncertain of who he had crossed, a casual inquiry from Lauren might have loosened his tongue entirely. Now that Wesley had shown his face, Randall understood precisely who he had offended — and would act accordingly.

As for loyalty — Wesley did not need it. He only needed Randall to be cautious and compliant. That was enough.

Billy understood the strategy as soon as it was laid out and moved immediately to the next step.

Just as Wesley had predicted, Randall's sudden reappearance after a month's unexplained absence drew Lauren's attention at once. She was already entangled in a divorce lawsuit with Matthew and could not afford complications. She sent her assistant, Aldred Ford, to probe the situation.

That night, Aldred arrived at Randall's villa.

Randall was still shaken from his ordeal, and the unexpected visit unsettled him further. He led Aldred to the study and asked with careful deference, "What guidance do you have for me, Aldred?"

Aldred came straight to the point. “You haven’t been in Athea recently.”

Randall’s itinerary showed a ticket to Athea, ostensibly for business. It might have satisfied his own household, but it was far too thin a cover to deceive Lauren. Seeing no way around it, Randall told him plainly, “I was kidnapped.”

Aldred’s expression darkened. “What happened? Do you know who took you? Where were you held?”

“I don’t know,” Randall replied. “The one in charge wore sunglasses and a mask, and he didn’t sound like someone from Okburg. When they released me, I was surrounded by barren hills — I had no idea where I’d been.”

“Did they want money, or something else?”

“They seemed to have uncovered something about Gabriela’s kidnapping and drowning years ago. They kept pressing me for details.”

Aldred’s expression hardened further. “Did you tell them?”

“At first, I refused,” Randall said, his voice strained, perspiration visible on his brow. “But they wouldn’t let me sleep or eat. I was cold and starving. Eventually, I couldn’t hold out.” His account wove truth and fabrication together convincingly enough.

Aldred's jaw tightened. "Did you tell them about the lady?"

"No, no!" Randall said quickly. "I only admitted my own involvement in the kidnapping. I told them I had no idea who was behind it." He carefully showed Aldred his wounds. "They were ruthless. These may not look severe, but the pain was unbearable. They made it clear they wouldn't release me until I talked."

Aldred stepped back, his expression one of barely concealed distaste. "Did they ask about anything beyond Gabriela's kidnapping?"

"Nothing else," Randall said, then offered his prepared theory. "Perhaps it was because I approached Gabriela at the charity gala hosted by Miss Howard. She may have recognized me and remembered the incident — enough to prompt an investigation." Gabriela had a close friend with over three hundred loyal associates at her disposal. Quietly abducting someone like Randall would have been a simple matter for them.

Aldred appeared to weigh the story, then spoke in a low, cold tone. "If anyone else comes asking, you know what to do."

"Yes," Randall replied immediately. "No matter who comes for me, I will not let them connect any of this to Mrs. Howard."

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Aldred said nothing more and left.

Randall exhaled slowly and wiped the sweat from his forehead. Every word he had just spoken had been scripted by Billy. He could only hope Aldred had believed it.

He had not.

Even granting that Gabriela had ties to the underworld, Lauren had dealt with her before and knew her methods. Gabriela's instinct was always to involve the police. If she suspected Lauren's hand in the kidnapping, the response would not have been as quiet as abducting Randall. Something else was at play.

Aldred reported back to Lauren, who considered the matter in silence for a moment. Gabriela had just had Myah committed to a psychiatric hospital — and now she appeared to be pulling at threads from a kidnapping that happened years ago. Something was not adding up.

"I need you to visit Ravenbrook Hospital," she told Aldred.

He drove there at first light.

Ravenbrook housed most of Okburg's psychiatric patients. The ward was a world unto itself — unusual behaviors, unpredictable outbursts, a disorienting atmosphere that wore on anyone who spent time within its walls. The doctors and caretakers moved through it with practiced detachment. Myah, in all likelihood, remained the only person there with nothing genuinely wrong with her mind.

But after weeks of living inside those walls, she was beginning to doubt even that.

When Aldred arrived, Myah was in the midst of being tormented by two patients who had decided she was a ghost. They had caught her and pasted a paper charm onto her forehead — one soaked with their own saliva. Myah stared at what they had smeared across her face, felt a wave of nausea rise in her throat, tore the charm away, and fled into a cupboard, pulling the door shut behind her.

Darkness closed in.

She sat there, knees drawn up, breathing in the small enclosed space — and the darkness brought everything back. It felt exactly like her years of blindness.

Fear moved through her quietly, and then, with it, came Gabriela's words, replaying in her memory without mercy: "I dreamt of Allan. He was heartbroken — but he wished you a long life. Eternally trapped in a place without light, repenting day and night."

She thought of how Gabriela had held her during the journey to seek treatment for her eyes, letting her lean against her shoulder, offering comfort without condition. She thought of Wesley. Of Loretta. Of Brenden.

She had once been surrounded by love — by warmth she had not even known to be grateful for.

How had everything collapsed back into darkness so completely?

Was it her fault?

In the pitch-black darkness of the cupboard, Myah whispered to herself.

Chapter 987

“Brother, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was too young and naive back then — but I understand my mistakes now. You always cared for me the most. You won’t blame me, will you?” She paused, voice dropping further. “Could you send Gabriela a dream, telling her you’ve forgiven me, and ask her to take me home? I really don’t want to stay here any longer.”

Before she could finish, the cupboard door swung open without warning.

Two faces loomed over her — wide eyes, exaggerated expressions, the bizarre performance of people who had long since lost touch with ordinary behavior.

“Gotcha!”

Hurled from darkness into harsh light and confronted with those grotesque faces, Myah flinched sharply.

“So you do feel fear! You shouldn’t have stolen the car in the first place!”

The game had shifted again. The “ghost hunters” had transformed, mid-scene, into “policemen” and “victim.” Myah steadied herself. Returning from darkness to light and facing something resembling normal roles, her fear subsided into irritation. She frowned. “Since you’ve caught me, the game should be over.”

She turned to leave. One of them grabbed her hair.

“Stop! You’ve committed theft and show no remorse whatsoever. Get down!” The other, in the role of “victim,” joined in furiously. “Thieves like her deserve to be beaten!”

Myah’s heart lurched. These two had a habit of luring her into their role-playing games and punishing her if she refused to participate. Once she was pulled into the scene, there was no room for protest — they immersed themselves completely, and no argument was recognized.

The blows landed without restraint. Myah was struck repeatedly until she had nothing left to fight back with, her clothes torn and disheveled.

She burned with shame and rage, and every ounce of it was directed at Gabriela. That hypocritical, calculating woman — she had never truly kidnapped Truett and Farley, only used the threat to justify sending her here. How could Gabriela have done this to her? Once she got out, she would make her pay for every single day of this.

While Myah was still being struck, Aldred appeared at the doorway, escorted by a nurse. The nurse quickly pulled the two troublemakers away, and Myah was left alone in the brief, merciful quiet that followed.

She straightened her clothes as best she could and followed Aldred silently to a nearby lounge.

Aldred studied her disheveled state with a flicker of surprise, but no sympathy. Ever since Myah had gone behind her own brother's back to reveal his rare blood type to them, Aldred had regarded her with quiet contempt. So young, and with such a calculating heart beneath the helpless exterior she once wore. Whatever she was enduring now was entirely of her own making.

Myah could read his expression plainly. She asked coldly, "What are you here for?"

Aldred did not waste time. "Why did Gabriela have you locked up in a place like this?"

The question hit a nerve. Myah's anger surged at once. "None of your business! What — even someone like you has the right to come and laugh at me now?"

"When Wesley finds out how I've been treated here, he'll come for me. And then I'll have him deal with you."

Aldred's expression darkened. Had she lost her mind after all this time in here?

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"What kind of face is that? You think Wesley won't come after you on my behalf? If you're smart, leave me alone."

Aldred took a breath and softened his tone deliberately. "Myah, I only came to understand why Gabriela suddenly turned against you. Did she discover what happened back then?"

Myah's expression stilled. The Braille diary surfaced in her thoughts. Gabriela must have known for some time that there was something wrong with the accident — but whether someone as composed and guarded as Gabriela would actually pursue the full truth for her brother's sake was impossible to know. Myah let out a short, bitter laugh. "I tried to harm her. Isn't it natural she'd turn against me?"

The incident in which Gabriela had nearly burned alive was widely known. Aldred was no exception. His expression went flat. There was nothing more to be gained here. He left the facility without another word.

The person tailing Aldred noted the time and called Billy immediately. "He was inside for less than ten minutes, and the meeting itself lasted barely two."

Such a short visit had likely produced very little.

"Understood," Billy replied. "Stay on him."

The tail was about to hang up when he added, "Billy — I see Gabriela arriving."

Billy considered this briefly, unsurprised. "No problem. Keep following Lauren's people." He ended the call and passed the information to Wesley without delay.

Gabriela stepped out of her car. A nurse was waiting at the entrance of the facility and led her inside without a word.

When word reached Myah that Gabriela had arrived, her first instinct was to make herself presentable. She could appear undone before anyone else — but not Gabriela. She refused to give her the satisfaction of seeing her like this.

The nurse, however, gave her no time. She was brought before Gabriela directly.

They met in the same lounge as before.

Gabriela had promised to visit once a month, and she kept that promise. She wanted to see with her own eyes that Myah was alive, conscious, and living with the weight of what she had done.

After more than a month, Myah saw her again.

Gabriela wore a white knitted dress, her hair clean and softly draped. She sat on a plain wooden chair, glancing at her phone with an air of unhurried ease — as though she were passing an afternoon in a café rather than visiting a psychiatric facility. Her face was composed and luminous, utterly unbothered.

The sarcasm in Myah's expression deepened. Yet as she drew closer, she wiped every trace of it away and said quietly, compliantly, "Sister."

Gabriela glanced up, her face unreadable.

Myah sank to her knees and began to cry.

“Sister, I know I was wrong. Please — take me away from here.”

Gabriela put down her phone and regarded her with a calm, steady gaze. “Where did you go wrong?”

Tears spilled freely down Myah’s face. She reached for Gabriela’s hand.

Chapter 989

“When I was little, I shouldn’t have betrayed my brother for a small amount of money. Later, I shouldn’t have let my own greed stand between Gabriela and Wesley. And after that, I shouldn’t have fallen for Wesley’s kindness, loved him, and done everything I could to take him from you.”

Had she stopped at any one of those points, she might still have had people around her who loved her without condition. But she had been blinded by that love — had leaned on her brother’s standing with the Moss family and let herself become reckless, like a child who believed that crying and throwing tantrums was enough to get anything she wanted.

After hearing her out, Gabriela gently withdrew her hand. Her smile was faint and without warmth.

“But Myah,” she said quietly, “you are no longer a child.”

Myah paused, tears still clinging to her lashes — an expression that might have inspired pity in someone else, but in that moment read as almost comical.

Then she snapped back to herself. She sprang to her feet, glaring at Gabriela with undisguised hatred, her voice shaking with fury. “Gabriela, are you mocking me?!”

“Myah, you have always been sharp since childhood.” Gabriela reached out and rested a hand lightly on top of Myah’s head, her expression gentle, her voice unhurried. “It’s a shame about your heart. This place suits you well. Don’t worry — as long as I’m alive, you will always have a home here.”

Myah knocked her hand away with force.

“Who do you think you are? My brother raised me! Wesley is my protector — since when did it become your place to lecture me?”

Gabriela’s hand stilled in the air for a moment, but her composure held, her smile warm and patient and utterly unmoved. “I have no interest in lecturing you. Spending the rest of your life here is already the best punishment I could ask for.”

With that, she turned and walked away.

Myah stared at her retreating figure, a sudden and violent urge rising in her chest. She lunged — only to be caught immediately by the caregivers standing nearby.

“Gabriela, you betrayed my brother’s trust and stole Wesley from me. You will get what you deserve!” The words tore out of her in a wild shriek, indistinguishable from the outbursts that echoed through the facility every day.

Gabriela did not look back. She stepped outside quickly.

Spring was drawing to a close, and the sunlight fell in soft, generous warmth, as if capable of absolving anything. But Gabriela had no such mercy for Myah. Some things were simply beyond forgiving.

Her phone rang as she crossed the grounds. It was Wesley.

“Gabriela, did you visit Myah?”

His voice carried a faint hesitation — likely worried she would read it as surveillance.

“Yes, I’ve seen her.” Her tone was even. “Wesley, there’s something I need to discuss with you. Are you free? Let’s meet at the villa in an hour.”

Wesley sat up straighter at once. Why would Gabriela want to meet him? Was she preparing to say something difficult again? Though she had already said quite enough.

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When he didn't respond immediately, Gabriela continued, "If you don't have time, I can explain over the phone — though it may not come across as clearly."

"I do have time," he said quickly. "I'll head over now."

He arrived at the villa before she did. Truett, who hadn't seen his father in some time, came running the moment he heard Wesley's voice. The two of them fell into a game almost immediately, filling the room with noise and laughter.

When Gabriela returned, she found them both red-faced and breathless, the room warm with the sound of their play. The sharpness that had settled in her eyes after seeing Myah softened, quietly, without her noticing.

Wesley spotted her and wrapped up the game without lingering. He handed Truett a towel to wipe his face. "Dad and Mom need to talk. Go find Grandpa Farley." Truett nodded without argument and ran off.

Gabriela and Wesley went to the study. She set a diary on the table between them.

"This is Myah's Braille diary."

Although Allan's house had been destroyed in the fire, the diary had been hidden within a wall and survived intact.

Wesley picked it up and opened it, but the raised dots meant nothing to him. He looked at her.

“It mentions Allan’s rare blood type,” Gabriela said. “I know you have been investigating the car accident and looking into Randall. The diary records Myah overhearing something at the hospital — a reference to a wealthy heir with a rare blood type matching Allan’s. It appears to have been enough to plant a dark idea in her mind.”

Nothing further was written after that entry. Either Myah had never acted on the thought, or she had — and after Allan’s death, the guilt had silenced her entirely.

“Randall talked eventually, but he gave no information connected to the accident,” Gabriela continued. “Whoever planned this covered their tracks carefully. And after this many years, whatever evidence once existed has likely long since disappeared.” Wesley studied her. “Do you have a suggestion?”

“If this is truly connected to Lauren, the question is — why?” Gabriela held his gaze and let the answer take shape slowly. “Allan’s accident ultimately benefited you.”

The words landed like a blow. Wesley went very still.

“But eight years ago, Lauren had no connection to you,” Gabriela went on. “Why would she take such a risk for something that offered her nothing directly?” She paused. “If you truly want the answer, you don’t need to follow Randall any further. There is a faster way.”

Wesley already sensed where she was heading. His chest tightened. “What way?”

The warmth from playing with Truett still lingered in him, but his face had gone pale. All the lightness of the afternoon had drained out of him at once.

Gabriela saw it. She felt a reluctance she could not quite suppress — but she spoke anyway, each word clear and deliberate.

“Wesley, eight years ago, when you were ill — who in the Moss family wanted you to survive the most?”

His fingers closed around the diary, gripping it tightly. A long silence passed.