

A Favor 311

Chapter 311

She sat down across from us, and her face was one I would recognize anywhere.

It was Chloe.

Sophia's POV:

"Chloe!"

She looked at me with steady confidence.

Why did she feel so familiar?

The thought lingered as I took in her outfit: a shimmering metallic-blue dress with a plunging neckline that dipped nearly to her waist. For a teenager's birthday party, it was bold—almost defiant. I couldn't help shaking my head. That dress belonged in a nightclub, not here.

It wasn't appropriate for the occasion.

“H-Hello!” she said with a radiant smile as she stepped forward and extended her hand.

“I’m Chloe. Daniel’s girlfriend.”

I shot Daniel a sharp look, watching his expression shift—first surprise, then a flicker of irritation. He stepped behind me as I accepted her hand.

And then it clicked. I’d seen her before—the woman Daniel had kissed in the mall parking lot.

Taking a slow breath, I put on a sweet, composed smile.

“So you’re his girlfriend?” I asked, making sure the edge in my voice carried.

“Yes. Daniel and I have been together for two years.”

“Chloe!” Daniel’s voice came out sharper than usual, a warning in his tone.

I only gripped his jacket a little tighter, resisting the urge to laugh at the mess unfolding right in front of us.

“How wonderful, sweetheart.” Daniel gave me a look, but I answered it with a calm smile. “Don’t worry. Everything is perfectly fine.”

Before he could say a word, I turned back to Chloe with a polite nod.

“Oh, and I’m Sophia Ysabelle Kelley—Daniel’s wife. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Chloe.”

I shook her hand, making sure the word “wife” landed a little harder.

Chloe’s jaw nearly dropped at my last name and my relationship to Daniel.

Daniel’s hand settled on my waist then—gentle, but possessive.

“Let me talk to her for a minute,” he whispered, leaning in so his breath brushed my ear.

“Of course. I’ll wait right here, sweetheart.” I shrugged and tipped my chin up so he had to look at me.

I don’t know what came over me, but I pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his lips.

He froze, staring at my mouth, and his grip on my waist tightened suddenly.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back,” he murmured, low enough that only I could hear, before taking Chloe by the hand and leading her away.

My heart raced as I sank into my chair.

What the hell had I just done? Why did I do that?

I closed my eyes and let out a long breath, trying to clear my head and swallow the embarrassment.

Why did I kiss him like that?

“Well, well... Who’s the lucky one you just kissed? And why do you look so guilty about it?”

Huh?

I snapped my eyes open. A man stood in front of me, holding a glass of wine, amusement curling on his lips.

Had I said that out loud?

I blinked, startled. He smiled, showing perfect white teeth, a dimple appearing in his left cheek.

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“Why is that kiss bothering you so much?”

“Oh, that?” I forced an awkward smile. “No, not at all. I was just... humming.”

“Liar,” he said with a playful tilt of his head, though his tone wasn’t serious. “Anyway, I’m Felix.” He offered his hand.

My smile vanished the moment he said his name.

“Are you kidding me?” I asked, giving him a long, measured look.

“Not at all. Felix Michael Saavedra.”

“Ah.” A small groan slipped out of me, embarrassed by my reaction.

“I’m Sophia,” I said, standing to shake his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Sophia,” he murmured, holding my gaze for a moment. “It’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you,” I replied, pulling my hand back quickly.

“You can call me JM if you want. It’s simpler.”

I only nodded. I had no interest in using nicknames with strangers.

“You know, you look very familiar, Sophia.”

I lifted a brow, curious where he was going with this.

“Wait—have you ever been in a TV commercial? Or maybe auditioned for one?”

This time, my smile was genuine. “Actually, I competed in a dance contest recently.”

His face lit up with recognition. “That’s it! I saw you in the international dance competition!”

Before I could answer, the room filled with Mrs. Peterson's voice as she stepped onto the stage—the birthday boy's mother.

"Good evening, everyone! Thank you so much for joining us to celebrate our son's birthday! Let's all gather to sing 'Happy Birthday' while he makes a wish and blows out the candles!"

JM gestured for me to join the crowd. "Come on. Let's go sing."

"Of course," I replied, walking beside him, though I didn't take his outstretched hand.

As we moved toward the cake, my eyes kept sweeping the crowd.

"Looking for someone?" he asked, clearly noticing how restless I was.

"Yes. I'm looking for my husband," I answered without hesitation.

His brows rose in surprise as I lifted my hand and showed him my wedding ring.

"You're married?"

“She’s my wife. Is there a problem, Saavedra?”

JM and I turned at Daniel’s voice. He was there, expression severe, walking toward us.

Daniel stepped in and wrapped an arm around my waist—an unmistakable claim. The look he shot JM could have frozen the air between them.

“Kelley,” JM said, his voice forced, tension crackling as their eyes met.

JM’s gaze flicked to me. “I didn’t know she was your wife.”

“Now you do. So keep your distance.” Daniel took a deliberate step forward, his expression a clear warning.

I had no idea what history there was between them, but it was obvious they were far from friends.

JM tried to lighten the moment with a laugh. “Relax, Kelley. I was just talking.”

Daniel narrowed his eyes. “There’s a thin line between talking and flirting, Saavedra. You might want to remember that.”

His grip on my waist tightened, sending a shiver down my spine.

“Daniel, it was just a conversation, really.” I placed my hand lightly on his chest, hoping to calm him.

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He didn’t respond right away. He only watched me in silence before guiding me away from the crowd. He didn’t stop until we were alone in the hallway near the restrooms.

“I told you to wait at the table, Sophia. What is wrong with you? I leave you alone for five minutes and you’re already flirting with the first guy who comes up to you.” His voice stayed low, but I could feel the anger boiling beneath it. He raked a hand through his hair, frustration written all over his face.

“I already told you, we were just talking. We weren’t flirting,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady even as Daniel’s stare sharpened.

“Damn it. Are you really that oblivious?”

My mouth fell open at the insult.

“It was obvious what he was doing, Sophia.” He let out a small, bitter laugh. “Did you let him hit on you because you wanted to encourage him?”

“Excuse me, Mr. Kelley, but you weren’t even there when he started talking to me. Don’t blame me for something I didn’t do.” I crossed my arms, the next words spilling out with heat. “And let’s not forget who disappeared with his so-called girlfriend for a private little talk.”

All I wanted was to end this nonsense. Daniel and his ego didn’t stand a chance against me.

And then, out of nowhere, he started laughing. It was loud, real laughter.

“What’s so funny?”

He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, still smiling. “I had no idea you could get jealous, sweetheart.”

My eyes widened. “Me? Jealous? Not even close!”

I was about to snap back when he cut in. “For the record, Chloe isn’t my girlfriend.”

“If she is or isn’t,” I started, but Daniel waved a hand, interrupting me again.

“She’s my ex. We broke up two years ago.”

His explanation only made me let out a short laugh.

“Honestly, you don’t have to clarify anything for me. Girlfriend, ex, whatever. I don’t care. And just so we’re clear, jealousy isn’t part of my system.”

“Are you serious?” A sly smile spread across his face.

“Absolutely.” I nodded, keeping my composure. “Besides, we were in the middle of talking about JM and his ridiculous assumptions—”

“Seriously? You’re going to bring up that guy again?” His smile vanished in an instant, and his eyes darkened.

Why did he always cut in at the worst possible moment? What was it with this man and interrupting?

“Fine. What is it, really, between you and JM? Why do you get defensive every time his name comes up?” I arched my brows, challenging him. “And while we’re at it, let’s talk about jealousy.” I planted my hands on my hips and met his gaze boldly. “You think I’m jealous? Look at me, Daniel. Now maybe you should look at yourself. Who’s the jealous one here, really?”

I’d barely taken a step back toward the party when Daniel caught my wrist and spun me around.

In the next heartbeat, he pinned me to the wall and claimed my mouth with a fierce, hungry kiss.

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My thoughts scattered into nothing. All I could do was get lost in the way his lips moved against mine, the relentless pressure, the provocative graze of his teeth like he was daring me to kiss him back.

I clutched his arms, my heart pounding so wildly I couldn't tell if the beat I felt belonged to him or to me. Nothing in my life had ever made me feel this alive, this unsteady, this completely undone.

By the time he pulled away, I was gasping for air, dizzy and breathless.

"I've been dying to do that all night, sweetheart. But I was a little worried about what the security team would think if we were caught on camera." He tipped his head toward the lens in the corner, his eyes glittering with mischief.

Heat climbed up my neck, and I felt my face flush.

"For the love of God, Daniel Kelley," I hissed, half-scolding, half-breathless as I glared at him.

For the first time, he let out a deep, genuine laugh, so real and unguarded it caught me off balance.

I stood there, utterly speechless, while he drew me gently into his arms and pressed a long kiss to my forehead.

“Come on. Let’s go back inside.”

He laced his fingers through mine, and together we headed back toward the noise and lights of the party.

“Don’t wander off again, Sophia.” His voice was low, almost playful. I stared at him, surprised, but stayed quiet. “And do me a favor. Avoid talking to that pain in the ass, Saavedra.”

I bit my lip, barely holding back a laugh at how serious he sounded.

“So tell me,” I teased, smiling at him, “who’s the jealous one here, really?”

He smiled back, and I forgot how to breathe for a second when his thumb brushed the corner of my mouth.

“You haven’t seen me jealous, sweetheart,” he murmured, his eyes fixed on my lips. “If you wander too far, I might kiss you in front of everyone, just to make it clear you’re mine.”

My mouth fell open, startled, and I didn’t miss the way his jaw tightened at my reaction.

“You’d better close your mouth unless you want me to start kissing you right here.” His gaze burned into me.

I snapped my mouth shut and looked away, my cheeks on fire.

Every shift in his mood left me more confused than the last, and my own reaction made even less sense. I couldn’t understand him. One moment he was warm, the next he was possessive. What bothered me most was that I couldn’t understand myself either. I didn’t know why I let him act like that, or why a part of me wanted him to.

I had barely set foot in the Kelley Mansion driveway when Andrew approached. I gave him a quick smile as he made his way across the lot.

“Wow, look at that car! Don’t tell me you have a secret obsession with purple?” Andrew laughed and shook his head.

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t. If you’re curious about the car, talk to your friend, not me.”

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I left him there, still trying to figure out what to say as I walked away.

Inside, I saw Rian and Alex entering the house. Rian was crouched beside Dino, laughing as the little boy clutched his favorite toy. Alex followed, his palm resting gently on Rian’s rounded belly.

"Aunt Belle!" Dino spotted me and ran straight to me, grinning from ear to ear. He wrapped his small arms tightly around my waist.

"Hi. Did you miss your favorite aunt?" I bent down and kissed both his cheeks.

"Of course I did, Aunt Belle!" He giggled, took my hand, and led me over to his parents.

"Hi, Belle. Why did you come alone? Where's my brother?" Rian asked, pulling me into a warm hug.

"Probably still locked up in his office," I replied, my smile turning a little awkward.

Lately, I'd noticed a change in Daniel. His words had softened, the usual harshness fading. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't remember the last time he'd yelled at me or let his temper take over.

"How is everyone doing?"

All heads turned as my in-laws walked in, drawing the family's attention. We greeted them warmly, shared laughter, and congratulated them on so many years together.

“Thank you, my dears. We owe much of our happiness to all of you.” My mother-in-law beamed, hugging each of us. “By the way, where is Daniel? The party is about to start and I don’t see him anywhere.”

Her gaze landed on me, but before I could answer, Andrew’s voice rang out from behind.

“Aunt Sonia, Daniel is still busy in a meeting with the new partners.”

“Oh, for the love of God,” my mother-in-law complained, exchanging a look with her husband. “Why does that boy always put work ahead of family? What if his wife suddenly gets pregnant?”

My eyes widened at the assumption, caught off guard by the abrupt turn.

“And if the two of them want a child, well, how is he supposed to—”

She murmured on, but thankfully she never finished the sentence. Behind me, Andrew choked on his drink and bent over, coughing.

“Oh, excuse me,” he sputtered, looking around as he tried to cover it up.

“What is it, Andrew? Are you worried my son will get Sophia pregnant?”

My cheeks burned as every gaze turned to me, and I wished the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

“Of course not, Aunt Sonia. Honestly, I can’t wait for you to name me godfather when the time comes!”

If there had ever been a moment to disappear, it was that one.

The conversation grew stranger by the second, but soon the opening music signaled that it was time for the celebration to begin. My mother-in-law had hired Craig and Gavin to entertain the event, and their lively banter quickly echoed through the hall.

I sat beside my in-laws, and the seat next to me remained empty for Daniel, who was still absent.

“Tonight you look especially lovely, dear.”

“Thank you, Mom,” I returned her kindness with a soft smile.

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“And how are things between you and Daniel? I hope he treats you well.”

I hesitated, biting my lip before nodding. If she'd asked me a week ago, my answer would have been very different. But lately, Daniel's words had softened, his anger replaced by something almost tender.

"Yes, he's been good to me," I said, and for the first time, I could say it honestly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting."

My heart jolted at the sound of his voice behind me. Under the table, my hands curled into fists as a wave of nervousness swept through my chest.

When had his voice started affecting me like this?

I took a deep breath, determined not to show it.

Daniel greeted his parents with familiar warmth, and I kept my eyes on my phone, pretending to read messages, refusing to look at him.

He took the empty seat beside me, but I kept my gaze fixed elsewhere, doing my best to act as if he hadn't arrived—until he leaned over and plucked the phone from my hands.

"What are you—" I didn't get to finish. His mouth found mine in an unexpected, searing kiss that made my pulse race.

Around the table, a chorus of surprised sighs went up. I tried to pull away, but he only cupped my face and pressed his lips to mine even more deeply.

“Hey, Daniel! There are kids at the table, remember?” Rian shouted, dramatically covering Dino’s eyes.

When he finally let me go, I glared at him—only to be met with an infuriatingly gentle smile.

“Well, well, son. Looks like you’ve finally fallen for your wife.” A low chuckle came from the far end of the table—his father.

Those teasing words dropped like a stone into my stomach, freezing me in place. I held my breath, waiting for Daniel to say something—anything—but silence stretched between us.

Trying to hide the sting of disappointment, I lifted my wineglass and swirled the liquid as I forced myself to steady my expression.

Why are you even upset, Sophia? It shouldn’t matter whether he answers or not. Pull yourself together. Don’t fall for him, not now.

And just as that thought crossed my mind, Craig’s bright voice rang out over the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please give a warm welcome to the lovely lady seated near our guests of honor—Sophia! Tonight, she’ll be singing the couple’s song for us!”

My eyes widened, and I nearly choked on my wine, spraying a small mouthful across the table.

Oh, no. When did I agree to sing tonight?

Daniel leaned in quickly, dabbing my mouth with a napkin. “Are you okay?”

I barely registered his concern as I saw Alex and Rian grinning at me like they’d just won the lottery.

“Come on, Belle,” they urged in unison, eyebrows raised with expectation.

“You can do it, Aunt Belle!” Dino chimed in, clapping enthusiastically.

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That child’s smile was the only thing that pushed me forward as I stood and headed to the stage. Honestly, I could have strangled two scheming best friends and one pregnant accomplice right then.

Gavin and Craig greeted me with conspiratorial smiles, each kissing my cheek before placing the microphone in my hand and whispering a quick, “Good luck.”

I shot them a murderous look, promising myself I'd get revenge after the party.

"Every year, you stood by my side and never let me down.

My world changed for the better because of you.

Every beautiful moment I've lived, I've experienced with you.

Not once did I feel afraid, because I loved the life we built together.

And I'm grateful I chose to stay by your side all this time."

When I finished, the crowd erupted into applause. I had barely started to step down when a man in a sharp navy-blue suit hurried over and offered me his hand.

"Allow me, Miss Sophia."

I stared at him, confused and not quite sure what to do. For a moment, I just looked at his outstretched hand.

“Thank you...”

“She doesn’t need your help, cousin.”

I frowned as Daniel appeared at the edge of the stage. Cousin? I looked back at the man offering his hand, then to my husband, who looked unusually serious.

“It’s fine, cousin. I like being a gentleman to charming women like her,” the man replied, forcing a smile.

I couldn’t help arching a brow and clicking my tongue.

“You really can’t help yourself, can you?”

“You’re right, she’s wonderful, but believe me, Mike, she doesn’t need your help.” Daniel gave his cousin a smug smile and added, “After all, taking care of my wife is something I’m more than capable of doing myself.”

The man ignored the warning as if he hadn’t heard it and let out a laugh.

“Come on. You can’t call her your wife when there’s no marriage to speak of.”

My breath caught as Daniel's eyes flashed with anger, and the crowd fell quiet, waiting to see what he would do.

Without hesitation, he crossed the distance in two firm steps, took my face in his hands, and kissed me.

The kiss was fierce—pulsing with jealousy and a declaration he clearly wanted everyone to understand.

"Well, cousin," he asked, keeping his gaze locked on Mike as he finally pulled away, "do you believe me now when I say she's my wife?"

"Um... are you two okay?"

My shoulders sagged slightly as my parents approached us.

"We're fine, Mom," Daniel answered, offering her a warm smile before turning back to his cousin. "He didn't believe I was married yet, so I clarified it." He pulled me into his arms to underline his point.

"Everyone is staring, so you'd better return to your seats." My father stepped in, studying both Daniel and Mike with a sharp gaze.

“Sorry, Dad,” I said with an awkward smile, biting my lower lip as a nervous apology slipped out.

My father only chuckled and patted my shoulder warmly. “What are you apologizing for, Sophia? You look beautiful tonight. Your husband is just jealous.” He even added a quick wink.

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“Dad,” Daniel snapped.

“What? I’m only saying what I see,” my father replied with a shrug, as if it were simple.

“Bah,” Daniel muttered under his breath as he guided me back to our seats, hand in mine.

Once we sat down, I leaned closer to him. “Can I have my phone back now?”

“No,” he said, frowning.

I let out a slow sigh, because I already knew I wouldn’t win this immediately.

“Please, my beloved?” I asked, resting a hand on his chest and giving him the sweetest smile I could manage.

His eyes widened as if I'd caught him off guard, and he sat up a little straighter.

"So you really want your phone?"

I nodded without a word.

"Then give me a kiss." He tapped the corner of his mouth with a finger, and I pulled my hand back with a quiet huff.

"Ha. That's not happening!" I exclaimed, crossing my arms tightly over my chest.

He laughed loudly enough to draw curious looks, though neither of us bothered to acknowledge them.

"Fine," he said after a moment, shrugging. "No kiss, no phone."

I rolled my eyes.

"Whatever. You'll give it back later anyway. I'm not expecting any important calls tonight, so I'll survive."

Sophia's POV:

As soon as the church bells rang, Gelo and his friends took their places and filled the air with music.

Rian and Alex had asked me to sing at their wedding, and I couldn't have been happier to be part of such a special day for them both.

The moment I spotted my husband, who was serving as best man, I knew it was time to walk toward the altar. That was our cue for the music to begin.

"Today, I make a promise that will last forever. Today, I give you my heart. We are together, just like I always dreamed, so please don't stop looking at me the way you do today..."

The final note faded just as Alex and Rian reached the altar, and the melody carried through the church.

Throughout the ceremony, I could feel Daniel's eyes on me. Even so, I kept my gaze forward, pretending to be busy with anything but him.

Part of me knew it was awkward, but I didn't have a better solution, so I focused only on the ceremony unfolding at the altar.

Once the vows were spoken and applause erupted, we followed the newlyweds outside into the sunlight.

Craig and Gavin walked on either side of me, and I was still catching their carefree laughter when someone took my hand from behind. When I turned, I found Daniel smiling at me with that look I'd come to recognize.

He laced his fingers through mine as we headed for the church doors. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Craig and Gavin murmuring to each other, and I shot them an inquisitive look.

"Darling," they teased in unison, then burst into laughter.

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I let out a slow sigh and decided it was better not to give them any attention.

"Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Smith!"

Cheers and laughter echoed as Alex and Rian made their way to the car waiting for them. Alex stepped toward the door, but Rian paused and looked back, scanning the crowd as if she were searching for something—or someone.

She found me among the sea of faces, and her smile widened when our eyes met. With Alex still holding her hand, she crossed the space between us and stopped in front of me. Without a word, Rian placed her bouquet in my hands.

I blinked, unsure what to do with it. “Rian?”

She only smiled wider as Alex moved to Daniel and gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. Daniel looked as surprised as I felt.

“To my dear sister and best friend, I pass the crown to you.”

I froze—not only because she’d said it in Italian, but because I understood every syllable.

Daniel spoke before I could. “What did you just say?” he asked, frowning.

“To my adorable sister and friend, I’m passing the crown to you.” Rian repeated the same words in Portuguese, rolling her eyes at her brother.

I hugged them both before Alex finally guided Rian toward the car.

Maybe if things were different, I would have thanked her for handing me the bouquet. But gratitude didn’t come easily—not while I was still trapped in an arrangement that didn’t allow me to hope, or want more than what I was permitted.

Real life rarely offered fairy tales, and truth was rarely kind.

There were things I had to hold on to, things no agreement could touch. I reminded myself why I'd gotten married in the first place: to find Layla and leave my old life behind once and for all.

The mood shifted in an instant when Rian suddenly doubled over and her water broke, cutting off any plans for a reception before they could even begin.

Alex reacted without thinking. He scooped Rian into his arms and sprinted toward the hospital, all of us rushing after them.

"Looks like their little one already knows how to start some drama," my father-in-law murmured, earning a round of laughter from everyone in the waiting room.

For nearly two hours, we sat restlessly outside the delivery room, not knowing what was happening inside. I couldn't sit still anymore, so I nudged Craig.

"Come on. Let's go get something to eat."

But just as we stepped into the hallway, Daniel's voice caught up with us.

"Where are you two sneaking off to?"

Craig and I exchanged a look before I turned back. “We’re just going to grab a quick snack.”

“I’ll go with you.” Daniel slipped his hand into mine, pulling it away from Craig’s.

“But they need you here,” I insisted, trying to free my hand. He only tightened his grip.

“My family is here, and so is Alex’s. Their friends have things under control. I’d rather be with you right now.”

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Then, in a voice meant only for me, he added, “Come on—unless you want me to kiss you in front of everyone.”

I snapped my mouth shut, cheeks burning, and looked down. His hold didn’t loosen as we slipped out through the hospital doors.

“So where are we buying those snacks?” he asked, glancing at me.

“Somewhere at the edge of the universe.” I gave him a mischievous smile.

He stopped so abruptly that I had to stop, too. A smile spread across his face.

“Excellent answer, love. I hope you keep surprising me.”

I rolled my eyes in exaggerated disbelief and sighed loudly, which made him laugh—and made me laugh, too.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked.

My laughter lingered as I shook my head. Honestly, I hadn’t expected him to tease like that.

After a brief pause, he looked at me again. “Why don’t we take the car?”

“Why bother? There’s a store right across the street.”

Four bodyguards followed us as we crossed, and their presence was impossible to ignore. I was just about to reach the store when someone on the corner caught my attention—a woman whose face I would recognize anywhere.

“Layla?” I whispered, my heart pounding as I recognized her.

I yanked my hand free from Daniel's grip and ran toward where I'd seen her. Daniel's voice thundered behind me, calling my name, but I barely heard him as I pushed forward, desperate to find her in the crowd.

"I can't lose her again. Please, not this time. Please—just let me find her."

I kept whispering the words under my breath, begging for help.

I scanned every face on the crowded street, my pulse quickening with every second that passed without her appearing. Frustration swelled inside me, blurring my vision with tears.

Someone grabbed my arm, but I tore free and cried out in anguish. "No! Where did you go?"

"Who are you chasing? Why did you run off all of a sudden?"

Daniel tried to steady me, but I resisted his hold, too lost in panic to answer. He asked again, louder this time.

"Where is she? Who are you looking for?"

Tears slid down my cheeks as I bit my lip hard, trying to hold back the sobs threatening to break free. I closed my eyes and let myself cry, unable to do anything else.

“She got away again.” My words came out low, but the pain was impossible to hide. “I lost her.”

“Are you talking about your mother?”

The question startled me. I looked up at him, shocked that he’d actually heard my confession. I quickly wiped my cheeks and turned toward the bright lights of the convenience store.

“Wait. You’re dodging my question.” He caught my arm before I could escape. “Who is she? Why were you chasing her?”

I lowered my head, refusing to meet his gaze.

“It’s nothing. Just someone from another life. Let’s get what we came for,” I said, walking away and leaving him on the sidewalk, baffled.