

A Favor 361

Chapter 361

“You know, I think you actually want me to kiss you.” Heat rushed to my cheeks as he smiled.

“No way. That’s not what I want...”

Before I could finish, his hands cupped my cheeks and his mouth found mine, stealing the rest of my words. My heart flipped as warmth surged through me.

At first, the kiss was soft and tentative, as if he were giving me every chance to pull away. When I didn’t, he leaned in with more certainty, deepening the moment. It took me a breath or two to realize I was kissing him back, lost in the softness and the spark.

My eyes slowly fluttered closed as I melted into him, feeling his arms tighten around my waist, pulling me so close I could feel the steady beat of his heart. I couldn’t find the words to describe it, but one thing was perfectly clear.

I was falling in love with him—completely and without hesitation.

Daniel’s POV:

Lately, every time I thought about the past few days with Sophia, I found myself grinning like an idiot. Things between us had changed in the best way possible.

After the board meeting ended this morning, I glanced at my watch. Since I had nothing scheduled until eleven, I realized I had time to call Sophia. It was nine on the dot—she was probably still curled up in bed. I picked up my phone, already imagining her sleepy voice.

To my surprise, she answered immediately.

“Good morning, Mr. Kelle... uh, I mean, Mr. Husband.”

Her quick correction made me laugh. She’d promised she would stop using my last name, or even my first, and stick to “Mr. Husband” from now on.

“Good morning, my love.”

“How is my favorite Mr. Husband today?”

Every time she said it, I couldn’t help smiling even more.

“I hope you enjoyed the breakfast I left you.”

“I actually haven’t tried it yet, but I brought it to the studio. I was planning to eat it right now.”

“You’re already at the studio?” I asked, lifting my brows in surprise. “Isn’t that a little early? I thought your meeting wasn’t until ten.”

“Yes, it was supposed to be at ten, but one of the clients called and moved it up to nine.” She sighed. I could picture the small frown she always wore when plans changed.

“And you just accepted it? They should give you more notice...”

“It’s fine, really. Their big competition is next week, so they’re ramping up rehearsals. Besides, I still have two more classes this afternoon.”

“Two more sessions? Sophia, don’t you think you’re pushing yourself too hard?” The worry slipped into my voice.

“I’m used to it. That’s part of being a dance instructor.”

“All right, then.” A sigh escaped me as I leaned back in my chair. “I’ll come pick you up later.”

“You don’t have to. I can—” she started, but I was already decided.

"I want to pick you up. Be ready at four. I'll be there."

She sounded almost shy. "Okay..."

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For a moment, neither of us said anything. Then I said her name, unable to keep the smile out of my voice.

"Sophia."

"Just..." My mind went blank for a second. I rubbed my forehead, letting out a soft laugh. "Be careful today, okay? Watch where you step in class."

"Don't worry. I'll be careful." There was a pause on her end. "Anything else you want to tell me, Mr. Husband?"

"That's all for now. I'll see you at four."

"I'll be waiting."

A comfortable silence settled over the call. Neither of us wanted to hang up.

She finally broke it. “Aren’t you going to hang up?”

“Why don’t you do it first?” I teased.

She didn’t hesitate. “No way. You hang up first.”

“Sophia, come on. Hang up—” Before I could finish, the call cut off abruptly, and I heard a dull thud from her side. I stared at the screen, a smile spreading across my face.

When had it become so impossible to be the first one to say goodbye?

Andrew’s voice startled me so badly I almost dropped my phone. I hadn’t even realized he’d stepped into my office.

I shot him a glare. “What are you doing, Andrew?”

“What’s the problem now? I haven’t even done anything... yet.” He grinned back, full of mischief. “You know you’re supposed to knock before walking in here, right?”

He shrugged and adopted a falsely formal tone. “Sir, just a reminder: I’m your personal assistant. Literally, my job is to interrupt you.”

I narrowed my eyes and let the silence answer for me.

“Relax, sir. I’m just kidding. Marketing wanted these on your desk as soon as possible,” he said, dropping three blue folders onto my desk. He tried his best to hide a laugh, biting his lip as he stepped back.

“Seriously, Andrew, do you even know what knocking is?” I muttered, adjusting my tie as I finally slid my phone into my pocket.

He looked offended for half a second, then burst out laughing. “For your information, I knocked at least five times. Since nobody answered, I assumed you were busy... or taking a nap.”

He flopped into the chair across from me, still grinning.

“You were pretty absorbed with your dear wife a moment ago,” Andrew teased, dragging out the words like he was savoring them.

“I was just making sure she was okay.” Pretending to focus, I grabbed the first folder and began flipping through the pages, though I wasn’t reading a thing.

“Oh, just making sure, huh?” he repeated with a smug smile. “You know, I heard you even made her breakfast this morning. That’s serious romance.”

He wasn't asking. He already knew.

"Yes," I admitted, hoping he'd drop it. He didn't.

"Imagine that. The CEO himself making breakfast for his wife. That's huge news! You're showing all the signs, my friend."

I glanced at him from the corner of my eye, brow raised. "Signs of what, exactly?"

"You're totally in love. That's what. You're hopelessly in love with your wife." Andrew could barely contain his excitement.

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For a second, I couldn't find anything to say. I just sat there, searching for a comeback that wouldn't sound ridiculous.

"Come on, Andrew. Don't start with that."

He clicked his tongue, unconvinced. "Look at you now! There was a time when you couldn't stand the idea of calling her, or even hearing her name, and now look—love turned you into a whole new man."

“Enough. Shut up, Andrew. Stop talking nonsense,” I said, shaking my head, unable to hide a half-smile.

“Sure, deny it all you want, but it’s pretty obvious what’s going on with you!”

“You have no idea, so why don’t you go find something to do?”

Andrew finally stood, still smiling and shaking his head. For a moment, I thought he’d take the hint and leave. Instead, he planted both hands on my desk, leaned in, and stared straight at me.

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe I have no idea what I’m talking about. But you do.”

He mimed a finger-gun and then burst into laughter, nearly doubling over as he clutched his stomach.

“Andrew, I swear, if you don’t go back to work, I might strangle you myself,” I groaned, my patience thinning. He’d dragged this out long enough.

“Ouch. Guess you beat me to it. Have a good day, boss.” With an exaggerated bow, he walked out of my office.

As he headed down the hall, he couldn’t resist singing at the top of his lungs: “That thing called love, I just can’t handle it... That thing called love, I gotta get a grip... I ain’t ready, that little thing called love.”

A sigh escaped me when the door finally closed and he left me in peace.

Sophia's POV:

A pause settled between us, and I couldn't help teasing, "So... are you going to just sit there, or are you going to hang up?" A small smile curved on my lips. Neither of us really wanted to end the call.

"You first."

"No way. You hang up first," I shot back, holding my ground.

"Sophia, just hang up already—" His voice cut off when I ended the call, smiling at how stubborn we both were.

A soft cough broke the silence, drawing my attention to Craig as he stepped into my office right after I hung up. He didn't waste time—he raised an eyebrow and looked at me like he'd heard every secret in the world.

"So, you finally swallowed your pride?"

I made a face, unimpressed by his choice of words.

“Wow. I mean, have you had breakfast yet?” he switched gears instantly, a teasing smile tugging at his lips as he set a bouquet of fresh tulips into the vase on my desk.

“That’s not what you wanted to ask.”

“What, me?” He blinked innocently. “I don’t remember saying anything out of line.”

“Craig,” I warned, narrowing my eyes at him.

With a dramatic sigh, he flopped onto the couch. “Fine. You want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?” I replied, feigning confusion.

“Don’t play shy, Sophia.” He lifted both hands. “Are you in love or not?”

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My gaze slid away, landing on the tulips—suddenly fascinated by their petals.

“Are you falling for your husband?”

A deep breath left me as I closed my eyes, determined to hold onto my denial. “No.”

“Liar.” Craig’s stare bored straight through my flimsy answer.

I swallowed, my voice dropping. “I’m not falling for him. The truth is... I already did.”

He went quiet, eyes wide, speechless for a beat.

“Seriously, Sophia? Remember what I told you? Sometimes it’s better to bite your tongue than to swallow your own words.”

All I could do was bite my lip, unsure what to say next.

“I don’t even know how it happened, Craig. One day I just—” I exhaled shakily. “I woke up and realized I loved him. It doesn’t make sense, and I can’t explain how or why.”

“Why bother trying to explain it? Some things aren’t for the mind. Only the heart can understand them.”

I let out another long sigh and sank deeper into the couch. “Love is impossible to define, isn’t it? It’s in a look, a touch, a moment. And suddenly nothing makes sense except what your heart is screaming.”

“Except the reality is... we can’t be together.”

He stared at me like I’d started speaking another language.

“What do you mean you can’t be together? Sophia, you’re already married to him!”

“You know what this is. Our marriage is a contract—just one year on paper. I don’t even know if he could ever love me. We’re complete opposites, Craig. We barely make sense on our own, let alone together.” I shook my head.

“Oh, come on. Haven’t you ever heard opposites attract?”

He clicked his tongue, disbelief all over his face. “And are you blind? Do you really think he doesn’t love you? Girl, open your eyes.”

“I’m just telling you what I see, Craig.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. You keep saying you can’t be together, but look at how he treats you. Don’t you feel it when he holds you? He’s just as lost as you are.”

I blinked a few times, then burst out laughing, unable to stop myself.

"There's no way that could happen," I said, still laughing, unable to take him seriously.

"Oh, yeah? Because that sounds exactly like what you said before you ended up falling for your supposedly cold, arrogant husband."

I went quiet, biting my lip as I looked away, unable to argue.

"Why don't you just be honest with him?"

"I'm not telling him anything!" My eyes widened, a mix of shock and frustration flashing through me.

"What's stopping you? It wouldn't hurt to admit you love him first." Craig shrugged.

"It's not even about that, Craig!"

"Then what is it about?"

"I already told you. We just can't be together."

“Come on, Sophia. You married him. You even had a wedding. There’s no point pretending.”

“You don’t understand.”

“What am I missing? Because as far as I know, nothing in your contract says you’re not allowed to fall in love.”

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“What am I supposed to do with everything that happened before? And where does Joseph fit into all this? What if Daniel finds out the truth about my past?”

“Sophia Ysabelle Del Mundo, listen to yourself. You can’t undo what already happened. The past is the past, and nothing you do now will change it. Stop letting old wounds keep you from chasing happiness. Have you ever thought that maybe everything happening now is just the result of all the choices you made back then?”

He set a comforting hand on my shoulder.

“Stop clinging to old memories. And if you ask me, you should start by having an honest conversation with your mother.”

I looked at him, remembering Daniel had told me almost the exact same thing not long ago.

“Hello, beautiful.”

“Hello...” My words died as he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine.

“Ahh,” was all I managed when he finally pulled back.

Only a handful of students lingering around the rehearsal room noticed what happened—Craig included.

“So, how’s your day going?” he asked, smiling as he brushed his thumb over my lips.

“We have an audience,” I whispered, noticing Craig watching from across the room.

“Let them watch. Who knows how long this show will last?”

His words left me bewildered. He must have seen it on my face, because he reached out and gently pinched my nose before kissing my forehead.

“That’s not what I meant, silly,” he said, laughing with a warmth that softened everything.

I found myself smiling, letting go of the unease that had been lingering inside me.

He wrapped an arm around my waist and whispered, “Come on, my love.”

In that moment, everything around me sharpened—brighter, clearer. For the first time, I knew I was fully awake. This was real, and he was no longer the man he used to be. All I could do was hope his feelings for me ran as deep as mine.

We headed toward his car, and the sound of his humming caught me off guard. Without a word, I listened, frowning slightly until we got inside and he turned the key in the ignition.

“Do you know what song that is?”

He turned to me, eyes widening as if he’d only just realized he’d been humming.

“That song? Honestly, I’m not sure. Andrew was humming it earlier, and I guess it got stuck in my head.”

“So it’s on a loop now, huh?” I teased, smiling when he rubbed the back of his neck shyly. That little gesture always made me smile.

“I can’t help it. The melody just won’t leave,” he said with a half-shrug.

“Then sing a bit for me.”

“You know that’s a bad idea. I’ll never sound as good as you.”

“Don’t be shy. Let me hear you—just a few lines.”

“Fine,” he groaned, bracing himself. “But you’d better not laugh if I mess up!”

“You have my word. Not a single giggle,” I promised, raising my right hand as if swearing an oath.

After a few exaggerated sighs, he finally gathered the courage and sang a small snippet—something about that “crazy little thing called love.”

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“You know, you really do have a great voice, my dear husband,” I murmured, leaning closer once his voice faded.

His lips curved into a smile, and I smiled back as warmth settled between us. Then the title clicked in my head: “Crazy Little Thing Called Love.”

A second later, I picked up where he'd left off, and before long, we were singing together as the car carried us home.

Sophia's Point of View

Lunch at a luxury restaurant near Downtown Mall was supposed to be peaceful, but a woman in an immaculate white dress appeared directly in front of our table, shattering the calm.

For a moment, I assumed she worked there — perhaps another server coming to refill our glasses. Then Daniel looked up at her, and when I finally raised my eyes, my heart nearly stopped. It was my mother.

“Darling...”

I clenched my jaw and dropped my spoon onto the plate with more force than I intended.

“My love,” Daniel murmured beside me.

Without a word being said, I knew he had already figured out who the woman standing before us truly was.

“Belle, can we talk for a minute, sweetheart? Just the two of us.”

“Absolutely not,” I cut her off, pushing my chair back and refusing to meet her eyes.

“Sweetheart, can you give me five minutes? That’s all I’m asking.”

“I said no!” This time I looked directly at her, forcing myself to ignore the pain and remorse swirling in her eyes. Keeping my composure with great effort, I continued, “We have nothing to talk about, and even if we did, you are about sixteen years too late, Mother.”

The shock that crossed her face at that last word was unmistakable. I turned away and walked without looking back.

“Let’s leave,” I said to Daniel. I picked up my bag and headed for the exit without a second glance.

What happened behind me, I missed entirely. Daniel’s eyes had softened when he heard the way I spoke to him, but I didn’t see him gently reach out to stop my mother as she moved to follow me.

“Please let me speak to her, Mrs. Del Mundo.” He placed his business card in her palm. “I’m Daniel Kelley — her husband.”

Though visibly surprised, she managed a warm, grateful smile.

“If you ever need someone to listen, please don’t hesitate to call me,” he added, and my mother’s eyes filled with tears.

“Thank you, son,” she said, wiping them away.

“Of course. I really must catch up with her now, Mrs. Del Mundo.” He was halfway to the door when her voice stopped him once more.

“Thank you for loving her.” He turned to find her smiling through trembling lips. “Thank you for loving my daughter, Daniel.”

His only response was a warm nod and a reassuring smile before he hurried after me to the car. The moment the door closed, his voice broke the silence.

“Didn’t you say you were going to talk to her?” he asked.

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“I tried, Daniel, but I couldn’t go through with it.” I felt his hand settle gently on my knee — a quiet gesture of support — before he let out a long, tired sigh and turned the key in the ignition.

“You barely ate. Would you like to stop for pizza instead?”

“That’s kind of you, but I’m not hungry.”

“Are you sure you’re all right? You hardly touched half your lunch.”

“I’m fine, truly.” I gave him a reassuring smile, hoping to lighten the mood.

Just when I thought the day had finally settled, fate had other plans. As we stopped at a red light, my eyes landed on a woman crossing the street — a face from my past.

“Layla Angeles!”

The name escaped before I could stop myself. Daniel shot me a puzzled look. My gaze stayed fixed on the woman as our car rolled slowly forward.

“Who is Layla...?”

“Daniel, stop the car!” I was already fumbling with my seatbelt.

“What’s wrong? Why do you want me to—?”

“Please, Daniel, just stop the car!” I pleaded, my voice tight with urgency. This time, he listened without hesitation and pulled over to the side of the road.

“What’s going on? Why did you need me to stop?” I barely heard him as I wrestled with my stubborn seatbelt, too distracted to answer.

The moment it clicked free, I shoved the door open and ran across the street, moving as fast as my legs would carry me toward the spot where I had seen Layla. “Hey, Sophia! Where are you going?”

Daniel’s voice followed me, but I didn’t stop or look back. Several bodyguards, including him, ran after me, but nothing could shake my determination to reach her. By the time I arrived, she was gone.

“Where did you go?” I whispered to myself. A hand closed around my arm, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Who exactly is Layla Angeles?” Daniel asked. “Why were you running after her?” His eyes searched mine for an answer.

I was about to respond when a movement behind him caught my attention.

Tears stung the corners of my eyes as I finally reached Layla and touched her arm gently. She turned toward me with a puzzled expression, but before she could speak, I said:

“Layla. Layla Angeles — do you remember me?”

For a brief moment, hope flickered inside me, until she shook her head and said apologetically, “I’m sorry, miss, but I don’t know who you are.” She pulled her arm free from my grip.

“It’s me — Belle, Sophia Ysabelle!”

“I’m sorry, but you have the wrong person. I don’t know you,” she said, turning away.

“Wait — no, please don’t go. You do know me. I’m Belle Del Mundo, the former fiancée of Félix De Luca. He was your employer six years ago. You were there, Layla. You saw everything he did to me.”

Those words stopped her cold. When she turned back, something flickered behind her eyes. I moved toward her quickly, too focused to notice Daniel closing in behind me.

“What is it you want from me? What do you expect me to do?”

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I forced a small, uneasy smile as I took her hands in mine. She still hadn’t said my name, but the recognition in her eyes was now unmistakable.

“I need your help, Layla. You were the only person who witnessed what Félix did to me six years ago. You’re the only one who can confirm it.”

“Belle... it’s been such a long time. I’m so sorry, but I can’t help you.”

She pulled her hands away, but I took them again immediately, refusing to let go.

“Layla, please. I’ve spent six years trying to find you, since that very day.”

“Belle, that was so long ago. I barely remember what happened. I’m sorry, but I can’t help you.”

“Wait!” I called after her, quickly pulling a business card from my bag and pressing it into her hand.

“I’m begging you, Layla. I’ll do whatever it takes — I just need your statement. Félix made sure every last piece of evidence disappeared; he erased every security recording. You are the only person left who knows the truth. You are all I have.”

Tears blurred everything around me, but I blinked them back, refusing to give up hope. “Write down my address and phone number. If you ever change your mind, you’ll know how to find me.”

She accepted the card with a silent nod, saying nothing as she walked away, leaving me behind a second time.

Once she disappeared into the crowd, the tears I had been holding back finally broke free. For years I had searched for Layla, clinging to the belief that when I finally found her, she would help me find closure — and justice.

Félix had never actually violated me, but the scars of that night — the fear, the shame — had never entirely faded. Even now, I still carried them with me. And beyond all of that, the consequences had nearly cost me my father's love.

Standing there on the street, I sobbed, watching the space where Layla had been, until a hand slipped into mine and drew me gently into a comforting embrace. I didn't need to look up to know it was Daniel. I held on to him and let myself cry against his chest. We stayed like that for a long time.

When I came back to myself, I was already in the car. Daniel had buckled my seatbelt and turned to me with a question I had heard from him before.

"Who was that woman, Sophia? Who is Layla Angeles?" he asked, once the seatbelt was fastened.

I stayed quiet, too shaken to respond.

He tried again.

"What were you two talking about? Why were you crying and pleading with her like that?"

“She’s just someone I used to know,” I replied softly, my gaze fixed on the city drifting past the window.

“That’s all she is? An old friend?”

“That’s right. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?”

The edge in his voice made me close my eyes for a moment.

“How strange — I could have sworn I heard you mention Félix De Luca.”

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At that name, I turned my head toward him. The words lodged in my throat when I saw how tightly he gripped the steering wheel, his knuckles nearly white. Before I could find my voice, he pressed on.

“Let’s try this one more time, Sophia. Who exactly is Félix De Luca?”

I parted my lips, caught off guard by the sharpness of his tone. He had asked me before, but this time his words carried a different weight — one that sent my heart racing.

“So what is he — an old flame or something more serious?” he continued. “Was he your boyfriend or your fiancé?”

“He means nothing now.”

“Don’t tell me it doesn’t matter, Sophia! I know you’re lying!” Daniel’s patience finally broke; he struck the steering wheel with a dull, heavy thud. “I’ve seen you have nightmares about him. So stop deflecting. Tell me the truth — who is this man?”

“He was my former fiancé.” I steadied my voice, willing it not to waver.

“I knew it!”

“It’s not like that, Daniel.” I reached out and placed my hand on his arm. He stared straight ahead, jaw set and unyielding.

“Oh, really? Then tell me — what exactly am I supposed to think?”

Rather than answer, I studied his tense profile. “Are you actually jealous right now?”

He said nothing, but the intensity in his eyes was enough to make me sink further into my seat. Part of me wondered whether I was seeing the old Daniel Kelley again — the one I thought we had left in the past.

A lump rose in my throat when he gave my hand a brief, quiet pat. With nothing more to say, I turned back to the window and buried everything I wanted to tell him somewhere deep inside.

Outside, the city hummed with life. People crowded the sidewalks — some handing out flyers for businesses I didn't recognize, others waiting, perhaps for friends, perhaps for love, or perhaps, like me, for answers. I watched it all, waiting for some sign from Daniel, and I couldn't help wondering whether he was jealous or whether I still mattered to him as much as I hoped.

It seemed fate had been intent on testing me today. In just a few hours, I had been forced to face my mother again, stumbled upon Layla after years of searching, and yet that reunion had brought me nothing but disappointment. She claimed to have forgotten everything — or perhaps she simply didn't want to get involved. I could no longer tell which it was.

But what weighed on me most was Daniel's sudden anger. I genuinely wanted to tell him everything, yet the risk felt too great. What if the truth shattered the fragile peace between us? What if it drove him away for good?

There was one thing I had completely missed in all the chaos. The card I had pressed into Layla's hand wasn't mine. Somehow, I had given her Daniel's business card — the one printed with his office address and his phone number.

Three days had passed since that argument at the restaurant, and now he was acting as though we were strangers again — just like those uncomfortable early months of our marriage.

Every night, he stayed on his side of the bed, putting as much distance between us as the mattress would allow. This morning, when I opened my eyes, he was already gone, and the house felt emptier than ever.

Lately, I had made a habit of coming home early just to cook for him, hoping that small gesture might coax things back to normal. But every night he returned so late that I either fell asleep before he walked through the door, or he would pass by and tell me in an exhausted voice that he had already eaten.

Tonight, I sat in the living room and refused to let sleep win. I had every intention of finally talking to him about Layla and Félix. But when he came in — stumbling through the door hours past midnight, smelling of alcohol and fatigue — I could already feel the conversation slipping away from me.

“Can we sit down and talk for a moment?” I asked, raising my voice as he started up the stairs, his gaze fixed on anything but me.

“It’s late, Sophia. We’ll talk tomorrow,” he answered, not breaking his stride.

“How are we supposed to fix anything if you keep avoiding me?”

“I’m not avoiding you. Work has just been overwhelming.”

“That’s not true,” I said, stepping into his path before he could disappear upstairs. “Why are you treating me this way?”

“I’m not doing anything, Sophia.” The distance in his voice tightened something in my throat.

“That’s exactly the problem. You keep insisting you’re not doing anything, Daniel, and that is precisely what’s tearing us apart. Instead of turning your back on me, why won’t you just talk to me?” I reached out my hand, hoping he would meet me halfway — but he slipped his into his pocket so quickly that all I could do was stand there and watch.

Then, without warning, he let out a short, humorless laugh.

“And when I ask you about Félix and Layla, do you ever give me a real answer?”

The air left my lungs as I forced myself to hold his cold, unreadable gaze.

“You see? You can’t even answer something that simple,” he said, shaking his head and turning toward his room.

“Then ask me right now!” I called after him, refusing to let his back be the last thing I saw.

He stopped mid-step and slowly turned to face me, wearing that same distant expression that pressed so heavily against my chest.

My heart ached as I stood there waiting — waiting for whatever it was he believed he needed to ask that night.

“Do you still have feelings for him?”

The question hit me harder than I expected, knocking the breath from me.

“Do you still love him, Sophia?” he repeated, louder this time.

“No! How could you even think that—?”

“No?”

“No. I never loved him.”