

A Favor 171

Chapter 171

"Come on, Sophia. I just want to know how much my mother paid you to go along with this."

The way he looked at me made my stomach twist. He stared as if I were beneath him, as if he'd already figured me out.

"And how, exactly, did you meet her? What made her choose you for this setup?"

A sharp, sarcastic laugh escaped me.

"Excuse me, Mr. Kelley? For your information, your mother hasn't offered me a single cent of her precious family fortune," I snapped.

"Then what's your angle? You accepted this arrangement for nothing? Come on, Miss Sophia. I'm a businessman. You can't fool me the way you fooled my mother."

I clenched my fists beneath the table, forcing myself to stay calm. The audacity of this man, talking to me as if he could buy and sell anyone he pleased. Instead of glaring or lashing out, I gave him a cool, steady smile. I wanted him to see I wasn't rattled.

"Is that why you wanted to see me, Mr. Kelley? Just to insult me and make sure I'm after your money?"

“Well, isn’t that why you agreed to this? Go on. Tell me what you want.”

“And then what? You’ll tell me to leave and cancel everything?” I shook my head and let out another dry laugh. “Listen, Mr. Kelley. Not everything in this world has a price. You can’t buy everyone with your fancy credit cards or all that money you love flashing around.”

I leaned toward him, meeting his eyes, and I caught a flicker of surprise on his face.

“For the last time, your mother didn’t offer me a cent. She asked me for a favor: to help her eldest son and pretend to be his wife for a year. I have my own reasons for accepting, but believe me, none of them have anything to do with money. So why don’t you just tell me if you want to reject me? Don’t bother throwing accusations at me. If you have a problem, take it up with your mother. I didn’t chase you down for this marriage.”

I stood, slinging my bag over my shoulder, but I paused when something important crossed my mind. I turned back to him, with no intention of letting him have the last word.

“Um... Daniel Kelley. You know, you’re handsome, you’ve got those broad shoulders, and sure, you look like the perfect husband.” I watched his mouth part and his eyes widen. “But you know what I realized? No matter how good you look, your attitude is the exact opposite. You’re disgusting. You’ll need more than three showers a day if you want to make it through this year.”

He looked so stunned by my words that I almost laughed, but I didn’t give him the chance to respond. I left him there, speechless, and walked with firm steps toward the café entrance.

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I didn't care what he thought of me anymore. If he didn't want me as his fake wife, fine by me. His insults and opinions meant nothing. I'd been called worse by people who mattered even less. I didn't have the strength to sit through something like that again.

When I finally reached my car, I let out a trembling sigh and whispered a quiet prayer just as the rain began to hammer the windshield. Heavy drops streamed down the glass, blurring everything, but I started the engine anyway. I had to drive through the downpour, whether I liked it or not. If I'd known that nearly an hour of waiting would end in this kind of disgust, I never would have come. I never should have agreed to meet him in the first place.

What I told him was the truth. I had accepted the arrangement, but it wasn't for money—not for any kind of payment. I accepted because I needed his family name, plain and simple. When his mother offered me the contract, I didn't truly have a choice.

I remembered the day it all started.

I had just left the mall and was cutting across the parking lot when I felt someone following me. I turned, bracing myself for the worst, only to find myself face-to-face with the last man on earth I wanted to see. Or rather, the man I never wanted to see again.

Félix De Luca—the one who had almost ruined my life.

"Well, look who we have here. I knew I'd find you, sweetheart," he said, smiling in that way I remembered all too well.

“Don’t call me sweetheart, you idiot!” I snapped, chills racing over my arms as I glared at him.

He threw his head back and let out a vile laugh. “You’re still the same as ever. Aggressive and rebellious. How are you, my love?”

“I told you not to call me that, for God’s sake! Bastard!” I spat, taking a step back as he moved closer. My heart pounded in my chest, every muscle tightening.

“Come on. Are you really going to tell me you don’t miss me at all?” he asked, that sly smile still in place.

“I wouldn’t miss your disgusting face for a second—not in this lifetime!”

I turned and bolted for my car. My hands shook as I fumbled for the door, but before I could open it, I felt a rough hand grab me. Suddenly, he shoved me against the side of my car, his lips pressing against my neck.

“Let me go! You’re trash! Don’t you dare touch me!” I screamed, fighting him with everything I had. I shoved hard, but he was stronger, so I yelled for help. “Help! Somebody help me, please!”

With one last burst of strength, I tore myself free and slapped him across the face—hard.

He covered the spot where I hit him, then simply smiled and let out a low, threatening laugh.

Breathless and furious, I watched him laugh at me. I couldn't believe I was seeing him again after all these years—here, of all places. Italy was thousands of miles away. Why did fate have to put this monster right in front of me, here in California?

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"Who would've thought we'd run into each other after all these years, huh?" he said. "Why did you leave Italy? I looked for you everywhere. Didn't you know? Or did you forget?"

He pointed to a thick scar running along his neck, and his smile faded into something far more sinister. That look sent a surge of dread through me.

"That's why I've been hunting you," he said. "I tracked half of Europe trying to find you. Why didn't you tell me you were hiding here in California?"

He stepped closer again, his voice dropping. "Bastard. If you think you can just walk away from what you did to me six years ago, you're insane."

He clicked his tongue and let out a mocking sigh. "Oh, my sweet Ysabelle, you don't have proof of anything, do you? Not a shred of evidence for those accusations."

"Maybe not yet, Félix," I hissed, teeth clenched, "but I swear, the day I finally get what I need, you'll spend the rest of your life rotting in a cell."

He let out a low, taunting laugh. "Six years, Ysabelle. Don't you ever get tired? Why don't you finally give me the gift you denied me all those years ago?"

The very idea turned my stomach. I swallowed hard and glared at him. "Forget it. I'm getting married, so go to hell, Félix."

He narrowed his eyes, ready to say more, but a voice rose behind us before he could.

"What's going on here? Sophia, are you alright?" Mrs. Kelley asked as she approached.

Three security guards in white uniforms hurried toward us.

Félix glanced at them, then slowly returned his gaze to me.

"We're not finished, my love. The next time I find you, I'll take you, and you'll finally be mine," he said, his stare so sharp it raised goosebumps on my skin, before he finally turned and walked away.

I closed my eyes and let out the breath I'd been holding.

"Are you alright, Sophia?" Mrs. Kelley asked gently, touching my shoulder.

I turned to her, tears blurring my vision. "I'm fine, ma'am. Thank you for helping me."

"But I didn't do anything."

"No, ma'am... you helped just by coming. Thank you so much."

"Sophia, if I may ask... who was that man? And what did he say before he left?"

I swallowed. "He said we weren't finished, and that the next time he saw me, he'd make sure to take me and make me completely his."

"My God!" Her eyes widened, shock and horror spreading across her face. "Why would he say something like that? Was he an old boyfriend? But you told me you were single."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm single. And he's not my ex. He's nothing to me. I'd rather die than be with him." I held her gaze, needing her to understand the truth. "He tried to rape me six years ago."

"Oh my God."

She stared at me, stunned, and I gave her a small, exhausted smile because I didn't know what else to do.

"Tell me what happened, Sophia. I promise I'll help you," Mrs. Kelley said with firm determination.

Chapter 174

I managed a bitter smile as I lowered my gaze. We were back at the mall, seated in a quiet restaurant. I had carried this secret for so long that it had become a weight I couldn't shake. No one in California knew. Only Rian, my friend from university, knew the story. Mrs. Kelley's hand rested over mine on the table.

"I can be like a mother to you, Sophia. I know part of your story about your parents, but you've never told me this part. You can tell me anything."

Mrs. Sonia Kelley had been one of my students in the Zumba classes I taught. We met two years earlier, and she became one of my most loyal clients, always sending friends and colleagues to my studio. She filled a space my own mother once held and understood every sacrifice I made for my career. She even helped sponsor us whenever we competed in international dance competitions.

I looked at her and let out a long, exhausted sigh. Then I began to speak about that dark chapter of my life in Bologna, Italy.

"Félix De Luca was my ex-fiancé. I was only eighteen when my father's company fell into a financial crisis, and he had no idea how to recover. Then, one day, he came to me and told me I was already engaged to a man named Félix De Luca. I didn't even know him. I asked why, and he told me it was for my note future."

“And then, one afternoon, I overheard my father speaking with a guest in the living room. They were talking about the money the man had transferred into my father’s account. My father said I needed to start preparing for the wedding, and to make sure his son and I grew closer, they had bought the empty house a few blocks away from ours.”

“When I met Félix, I sensed something off in the way he looked at me. He watched me in a way that gave me goosebumps. I tried to tell my father what I’d noticed, but he ignored me and said Félix was a good man who would be the perfect husband for me. I didn’t believe him, so I asked my cousin to help me investigate Félix. That’s when we discovered he had a degree in computer science, and what shocked me most was learning he had been using and selling drugs.”

“Did you tell your father?” she asked, her face pale with shock.

“Yes. I even showed him everything we found, but he yelled at me and said it was all fake news.”

“Fake news? But it’s not fake if you have proof.”

“Yes, I told him that, but he still wouldn’t listen. He went ahead and signed the contract anyway.”

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“I reached a point where I couldn’t sit still, so I decided to speak to my future husband myself. I wanted to beg him and ask him to end the engagement. His house was only a few blocks away from ours, so I went there and knocked. His maid, Layla, opened the door. I asked where Félix was, and she tilted her head toward the hallway leading to his bedroom. Before I passed her, she took my hand for a moment and told me to be careful. I didn’t know what she meant, but I nodded and kept walking.”

“What I found in that room shook me so badly my legs nearly gave out. Everything I feared about him was right there, out in the open. He was crouched over a sheet of foil, inhaling smoke while two of his friends held a lighter for him. When they realized I was standing in the doorway, a sharp spike of panic tore through me, and I ran for the stairs.”

“It turned into a frantic chase. I ran down the hall, screaming for help. Layla came running from the kitchen, but when Félix glared at her, she turned away and slipped back into the shadows, leaving me alone with him and his friends.”

I blinked hard to keep the tears from spilling, but it didn’t work. They slid down my cheeks before I could wipe them away.

“And the other staff? The guards or anyone else in the house? No one heard you screaming for help?” Mrs. Kelley asked.

“There was no one else there. Just Layla and a guard at the front door. I never understood why the house was so empty.”

“And then what happened?” she asked, her voice tight. “What did he and his friends do to you?”

“They dragged me back to his room. They threw me onto the bed, and he told his friends to leave because he wanted me alone. I kept screaming for help and tried to fight him, but he was too strong. He tore off my blouse, my skirt, and my underwear. I begged him to stop, but he didn’t listen. He kept saying I was his fiancée and I would be his wife, so he had the right to take whatever he wanted from me.”

“But you weren’t even married yet!”

“He didn’t listen to a word I said, not even when I begged him to wait until the wedding night. He kept yanking at my clothes like nothing I said mattered. He was about to force himself on me when a sudden thud sounded from outside the room, and the door flew open right after. His mind was still clouded from the drugs, and he looked too out of it to realize he hadn’t even locked the door. Layla was there, and I watched the color drain from her face.”

“I cried and begged her to help me, but when Félix shouted at her and glared, she looked away. She said my father and Mr. De Luca had just arrived and were waiting for him in the living room. Before she left, she gave me a trembling look, and I knew it was the only way she could warn me without putting herself in danger.”

“Félix turned his attention toward her, and that moment was all I had. I shoved him with whatever strength I had left and kicked him hard in the groin. I tried to strike him with my diamond ring, and even though it only grazed his neck, it left a deep cut.”

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“I ran out of the room and down the stairs as fast as I could. I didn’t care that all I had left was a torn skirt and part of my blouse. My father and Mr. De Luca stared at me in shock when they saw me rushing toward them. My dad hurried to cover me with his jacket, asking over and over what had happened and why I’d been upstairs.”

“I opened my mouth to speak, but Félix’s footsteps thundered behind me. Before I could get out a single word, he stepped forward and told a lie so shameless it knocked the air from my lungs. He claimed I had come onto him for money.”

“My cousin helped me post everything on social media, but the story disappeared after a week. They paid to twist the truth and make Félix look innocent. That was when I decided to run, because I no longer felt like my father cared. Six years later, the man who almost ruined my life found me again and told me he planned to finish what he started.”

I wiped my tears with my hand.

“And your mother?” Mrs. Kelley asked softly. “Where was she when all of this happened?”

“She lived in Seattle. She left my dad and me when I was only ten. I never tried to find her. She built a new life and seemed happy with the family she had now. I couldn’t bring myself to disturb the peace she’d finally found—a peace she never had with my dad.”

“But she’s your mother. She has a right to know what’s happening to you, and what happened to you—especially because that man is in California now.”

“I can handle this on my own, Mrs. Kelley. She never visited after she left. If she’d thought of me as her daughter, she would’ve come back. She would’ve taken me when she left, but she didn’t. I’ve lived without her and without my father, so I don’t think I need her in my life now.”

“I can’t blame you for feeling that way, not after everything you’ve survived. And I’m proud of you, Sophia. You’ve carried all of this on your own. You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever met. And I’m going to help you.”

I looked at her, dragging my hands down my face.

“I’ll help you find Layla. And I’ll make sure Félix pays for what he did.”

“Mrs. Kelley—”

“Marry my son!”

My eyes nearly popped out of my head. Saying I was stunned didn’t even come close to describing it.

“Mrs... Mrs. Kelley?” My tongue couldn’t form a single coherent word.

She took my hands again.

“Marry my son, Sophia. Take his last name, and use all his connections to find her.”

“But...”

“My son needs a wife right now, and you’re the best option for him,” she said, cutting off my attempt to speak.

I blinked several times, trying to piece my thoughts together.

“We don’t even know each other, Mrs. Kelley. And why does he need a wife? Doesn’t he have a girlfriend he wants to marry?”

“No, Sophia. You misunderstood. You’ll marry him for a year, and when that year is over, you can leave and live your life however you want.”

“But why do you want me to marry him? Please tell me the truth, Mrs. Kelley. I feel like you’re hiding something from me.”

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“He needs a wife who can stand by his side for a year to secure the company’s biggest investor. It’s a European investment, and if they get it, it will take him—and the company—straight to the top in California.”

“So that’s why you want me to marry him?”

“Partly, yes. But after hearing what you’ve been through, I want you to marry him even more. Let me help you, Sophia. I know you don’t have much money—”

“Oh, no. No, Mrs. Kelley. If you’re offering me money to marry your son, I’m sorry, but I can’t accept that, and my answer is no.”

“No. If that were what I wanted, I wouldn’t have offered you money in the first place. Just marry him, and I’ll find the only witness who can help you file a case against Félix. And as for my son, you don’t have to worry about him. He’s a good man, Sophia. And if you ever come to love him, I’ll be the happiest mother and mother-in-law in the world.”

A short laugh slipped out at her last words.

“But you said this would be nothing more than a marriage of convenience. That means it has nothing to do with love.”

“Yes, and that was only a hypothetical thought. What’s your decision?”

“I... I don’t know, Mrs. Kelley. This is the kind of decision that could change my entire life.”

“Sophia, it’s only for a year. When that year ends, you can file for divorce and close that chapter.”

“Does he know you’re talking to me about this?”

“No, but I’ll explain everything to him.”

End of flashback.

Daniel's POV:

"Daniel! What did you do to Sophia? What did you say to her?"

I closed my eyes as my mother's voice exploded through the phone, loud enough to serve as my morning alarm.

"I didn't do anything to her, Mom," I answered.

"Then why did she back out of the agreement? She called me first thing this morning and said she doesn't want it anymore!"

"Mom, that's her decision, not mine. If she changed her mind, then let her."

"Daniel Kelley!"

Oh, God. She used my full name again.

“I didn’t raise you to disrespect women or speak to them rudely!”

“Mom, I already told you I didn’t do anything!”

“Then make sure it stays that way. I asked her what happened, but she refused to tell me what went on between you two yesterday. Son, please—Sophia is an exceptional young woman. And she’s the only opportunity you and your father have to secure the investment you both want.”

“I can find my own wife, Mom.” I dragged a hand across my forehead as I sat up in bed.

“Fine! I’ll let you find your own wife, but make sure it isn’t one of your former women!”

I rolled my eyes, frustrated.

“What’s so special about that girl, and why are you so determined that I marry her? She’s not exceptional, Mom. Yes, she’s beautiful, but that’s all. I couldn’t read her at all. She seemed like any other woman.”

“Give her a chance, son. You’ll see she’s nothing like the women you’ve known—or ever will know. She’s special, Daniel.”

I let out a short laugh at her tone. “Mom, since when did you start talking like a poet?”

“Daniel Kelley, I’m serious!”

“Okay, okay,” I said, trying to hold back another laugh. “But at least give me time to find my own wife for this contract.”

“And what happens if you fail and can’t find one?”

“Then I’ll accept your chosen fiancée.”

“All right. I’ll give you a week, so start now!”

“But, Mom, that’s not enough time—”

“No. We only have two and a half weeks until the engagement party. So if a week passes and you still haven’t found anyone, you won’t have a choice but to marry Sophia.”

“Fine. Fine.”

“All right. Goodbye, son. Take care. I love you.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you too.”

I released a long breath and fell back onto the bed. I closed my eyes, and instead of fading, Sophia’s face pushed its way into my thoughts.

I couldn’t stop replaying how we met yesterday. She told me she’d be wearing a violet jacket, and she’d been the only person in violet in the café. I had to admit she was beautiful. When she leaned toward me, her scent filled my lungs. The first thing I noticed was her mouth—her lips looked soft and pink, and I had to force myself to meet her eyes just to block the direction my imagination tried to take.

God. Why was I thinking about her like that?

She was like all the others. She was only here for my money.

I rubbed my temples and got up again. It was Saturday, and I still had to go into the office for an important meeting.

Sophia’s POV:

“No! Please, Félix, don’t do it!” I begged through tears as he yanked at my clothes.

“Stop? Why would I stop?”

He laughed over me, a sound that made my skin crawl. He pinned my hands above my head while his mouth pressed to my neck. I felt his body crush mine—heavy and immovable—and I couldn’t move at all.

“Can’t you wait until we’re married? Can’t you wait until the wedding night?” I cried between shaking breaths.

“But I can’t wait, my love. I need you right now. You smell too good.”

I screamed when his hand closed around my left breast while his mouth kept biting at my neck. I fought beneath him, but his weight held me trapped as he forced his way between my legs.

“No! Please, don’t! I’ll do whatever you want—please, don’t! This is a crime! You’re trying to rape me! Please, don’t! I’ll do anything you want me to do, but please, don’t. This is wrong. This is rape!”

“Oh no, my love. No one will call it rape. You’re my girlfriend, and soon you’ll be my wife.”

“No, no, no! Nooooo!” I screamed with everything I had as my body twisted inside the nightmare.

Chapter 179

I jolted upright, gasping, wiping sweat from my neck and forehead. It was the same nightmare again. It wasn't just a dream—it came from the part of my past I'd tried to bury, and it returned the moment I saw Félix in the mall parking lot a week ago.

"Sophia! Sophia, are you okay?" Craig's voice came from the other side of the door before he stepped in. He was holding my white Persian cat with bright blue eyes. His name was Pussy, and Craig carried him like a prince every time he walked in.

"Hey, I heard you scream. Are you okay?" He sat on the edge of my bed.

"Yeah. It was just a nightmare." I tried to smile, but I lowered my head and shut my eyes to keep the tears from spilling.

"You're having nightmares again?"

I nodded. He knew everything. I'd told him the whole story on a day when I couldn't pretend I was fine anymore. He'd been there, letting me cry until I could breathe again. He worked with me as an assistant dance instructor when I was starting my career, and together we built the dance studio of my dreams two years ago. He became my friend—my brother in every way that mattered.

"Why don't you accept Mrs. Kelley's deal? It's a huge opportunity, Sophia. She's offering you her last name so you can find Layla and put Félix in jail."

“Craig, it’s not that easy to accept that deal. The responsibilities in that marriage are serious. I’d become her son’s wife, and Félix would find me immediately. The Kelley family isn’t ordinary. They’re famous—everyone in Los Angeles knows them.”

“Yeah, and that means they have influence and power. Do you really think that idiot Félix would dare come near you if he found out you’re married to Daniel Kelley—one of the most desired bachelors in Los Angeles? Sophia, think about it for a second.”

I let out a long sigh and covered my face with my hands.

“I don’t know, Craig. The nightmares won’t stop coming back. It feels like it all happened yesterday, even though it’s been six years.”

“Sophia, apologies will always be there, waiting. Opportunities aren’t. Opportunity only knocks once, and since it’s knocking right now, open the door and take it. This could lead you to the justice you’ve wanted for years.”

“But, Craig, her son doesn’t even want me as his wife. I told you—he insulted me. He judged me the second we met.”

“Oh, please. You’ve dealt with worse judgment in your life. Even your own father threw insults at you.”

“Oh, thanks for reminding me.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it like that. I just want you to see things clearly, Sophia. You’ve endured more than most people ever will. And if her son insults you again or judges you, then accept the deal anyway. Let him judge you. He only knows your name, not everything you’ve lived through.”

I pressed my lips together as I scratched the back of my head. I always did that when confusion wrapped around me and I had no idea what to do next.

“Are you going to die if he insults you again? Or if he claims you accepted his mother’s offer for money?” Craig asked.

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I shook my head.

“Then you can survive one day of his criticism. They’re just words, Sophia. What matters is reaching your goal. Your plan is the most important thing. Think about it. His insults won’t help you find Layla, and his words won’t help you get justice for what Félix did to you. Call it a desperate move if you want, but that’s not what matters. What matters is that you know the truth.”

He paused, then took my hands.

“Mrs. Kelley knows the truth too. We’re here for you. Get up and fight. What’s his name again? Say it.”

“Whose name?” I asked.

“Your future husband’s.”

“Daniel. Daniel Kelley,” I said.

“Daniel Kelley. That’s right. Show him who the real Sophia Ysabelle is—the woman who fights and never backs down from anything they throw at her.”

A slow smile formed on my lips as I listened. At least I still had Craig. He treated me like a brother would—steady and protective.

I let out a small breath and looked at my cat, who was still rubbing his head against Craig’s arm.

“Hi, my Cuchita.” I lifted him and settled him in my lap.

Craig laughed and shook his head. “Why did you name him Cuchita of all things in the world?”

“Just for fun.” I shrugged, stroking Cuchita’s fur. “Why not? Isn’t it adorable—Cuchita?”

We both burst into laughter. I was about to stand when my phone rang. Craig and I exchanged a look as the name lit up on the screen. It was Mrs. Kelley.

“Good morning, Mrs. Kelley,” I said, glancing at Craig. The call was on speaker.

“Hello, dear. How are you?”

“I’m fine, Mrs. Kelley.”

“I want to apologize for what my son said during your meeting. But Sophia, if you truly don’t want to accept my proposal, let me help you another way.”

I bit my lip and drew in a steady breath. Craig kept nodding, urging me again and again to accept the agreement.

“I accept the agreement, Mrs. Kelley.”

“Oh, dear. I’m so happy. Thank you, Sophia. I’ll speak with my husband and set the engagement date.” Her voice sounded almost eager.

“But can I ask you for a favor, if possible?”

“Oh, of course. Anything, dear. If you’re free today, we can meet to talk about the agreement and the favor you need.”

“Yes... yes, of course. Just tell me where, Mrs. Kelley.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll pick you up. Is ten o’clock okay?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

“Perfect. Be ready at ten, dear. Goodbye.”

“Goodbye, Mrs. Kelley.”

I ended the call and looked at Craig.

“Come on. Get in the shower while I make breakfast.”

“Thank you, Craig. You’re the best,” I said with a smile, hugging him before I stood.

“Of course,” he replied with a grin and a playful wink.

A warm smile spread across Mrs. Kelley's face. "You can tell me anything you want, Sophia. I'll listen."

I nodded, returning a small smile.