

A Favor 191

Chapter 191

“Thank you, Mom. That means a lot to me.” I kissed her cheek and said goodbye one last time.

I walked toward the driveway with my keys in hand, but stopped when I saw someone waiting for me. Daniel was leaning against my driver’s door.

How did he get here before me?

“Mr. Daniel Kelley. Did you stop by in hopes of stealing a goodnight kiss?” I asked with a teasing smile as I searched for my keys in my purse.

He stayed silent as he walked toward me, every step slow and unhurried. My breath caught when he stopped close enough that I could feel his presence around me.

“What’s the real reason you agreed to all of this?” he asked. His voice was steady, and his eyes held none of the playful air he always wore. His gaze was sharp. Direct.

“Huh? Now you want to know? I thought you were convinced I only said yes because of your money.”

“I asked you a question. I want your answer.”

“You already know the reason, so why are you asking again? What does it matter if you hear it out loud? It won’t change anything.”

He didn’t answer. He slid his hands into his pockets and looked away for a moment. When he finally spoke again, his voice had lost all warmth.

“Let me make something clear, Mrs. Sophia. Once we’re married, don’t expect anything from me. I won’t play the role of a loving husband. I won’t pretend there’s anything real between us. As soon as the contract with our European investors is secured, I’ll begin the divorce process.”

He delivered the words like a prepared statement—clean and final. And in that moment, everything became obvious. He didn’t want me. He didn’t want this marriage. He didn’t even want his last name tied to mine. The truth hurt more than I expected, but I held my ground.

People often judged without knowing the story beneath the surface, and he was no different. I needed him. I needed his last name. And if swallowing every harsh word meant I could finally fight for justice, then I would endure it.

A week after that dinner at the Kelleys’, my days had filled with calls and messages from the wedding planner. We were still finalizing the last details of the ceremony. Mrs. Kelley and I had stopped asking Daniel for his opinion. She simply gave me a list of what he wanted and left the rest to me.

I was sitting in my office, watching a video my former students had sent me after making it to an international competition. Their performance flooded the room with loud music and vibrant energy. I was smiling at their choreography when a knock sounded at the door.

“Sophia.”

I looked up, and my shoulders relaxed the moment I saw Craig standing there.

“Craig.” I noticed two people behind him. I opened my mouth to ask who they were, but the woman stepped forward.

“Belle?”

That old nickname hit me so suddenly I lost my breath. I stared at her, stunned.

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“Rian?” I blurted as I rose from my chair, and she hurried across the office.

“Oh my God! Belle, is it really you?”

“Rian!”

We squealed with joy like we’d been thrown back to our college years and wrapped each other in the tightest hug. After so long, she clung to me like she didn’t want to let go.

“How have you been, Rian? You look even more beautiful than I remember,” I said, studying her closely. She’d been my closest friend in college. I was two years older, but we connected quickly and treated each other like sisters. “I missed you so much, Belle.”

“I missed you too. Tell me everything,” she replied. I kept studying her face, still trying to process that she was standing in my office. Back then, she’d been the only person I trusted enough to tell my whole story.

“Well, I’m married now,” she said, lifting her hand to show off a wedding ring she clearly adored.

“Wow! Congratulations!” My voice rose with the excitement I felt. Only then did I notice the man beside her.

“Oh, no. He’s not my husband. He’s just my best friend. This is Gavin.”

“I see. Hi, Gavin.” I extended my hand, still a little confused. He shook it firmly, then leaned in and gave me a polite kiss on the cheek.

“I’m a little lost,” Craig said. “How do you two know each other? And Rian, why do you call her Belle? I thought her name was Sophia.”

I laughed and gestured for them to sit. “Belle comes from my middle name. I’m Sophia Ysabelle. Rian started calling me that in college.”

“And she wasn’t just my friend. She was my mentor in college. She’s the one who pushed me toward music and helped me join my band,” Rian added proudly.

“Wait a second. If you were her singing mentor, how did you end up teaching dance?” Gavin asked.

They both looked at me with identical confusion.

“Well... in college, I did a bit of everything. I gave Rian singing lessons as a part-time job, just like she said. But after I graduated, things changed for me. I realized I felt more alive dancing than singing. My mother had enrolled me in different dance classes when I was young, and I guess that part of me never left. So I went back to a dance academy, stuck with it, and later opened my own studio.”

“So you focus completely on dance now? No instruments?” Rian asked, leaning forward with interest.

“Mmm. I still play guitar or sit at the piano when I feel like it.”

“That’s incredible,” Gavin said, eyes wide.

“Speaking of music... Rian, are you still with your band?” I asked, remembering the energy she used to bring to the stage.

“Yes, but not as much as before. We did a show three months ago.”

“That’s great! What brings you here today?”

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“We’re looking for the best dance instructor in the city. We signed up for a contest, and the performance is in the second week of next month. My cousin Rolly told us about you. He said you could help us polish our routine for the show.”

“Wait, do you mean Rolly Sarmiento?”

“Yes, that one.”

“I had no idea he was your cousin. He’s a good friend of mine,” I said, a warm spark of surprise flickering through me.

“It’s not a big competition. It’s part of our company’s Thanksgiving event. But Rolly insisted you were one of the best coaches in the city and that you could help us pull it off.”

“Of course I can help. But you know how Rolly is. He only says that because we’re friends.” I brushed off the compliment with a laugh, still not used to hearing people talk about me that way.

“Belle, don’t start. People don’t get far in this business unless they have talent and determination. I haven’t even seen you dance yet, and I’m already convinced you’re the best,” Rian said, leaning over the desk and tapping my hand.

“Ah, Rian, you never change,” I said, shaking my head. “All right. Tell me what style you want to do.”

They explained their routine, and I offered a few ideas of my own. After tossing around different options, we agreed that a modern acrobatic number would suit them best. I warned them it would require clean acrobatic movements, then suggested adding simple aerial tricks to give the performance something fresh and daring.

Rian’s eyes lit up as she talked about her group and, eventually, her marriage. She shared pieces of her love story with a glow that warmed me from the inside. I was amazed she was already married, but she sounded so full of joy that I couldn’t help feeling happy for her, too.

We exchanged numbers and followed each other on social media. I thought about telling her I was getting married in three weeks, but I held back. It didn’t feel like the right moment. I figured I’d tell her after the wedding.

“How are you feeling today?”

When I turned, Craig was in the doorway with a lazy smile, leaning against the frame as if he’d been watching me for a while. It was the day of the engagement party, and it would start at three in the afternoon. The clock had quietly slipped past one, and I was still sitting in front of the mirror.

I wasn't calm or composed. I was a complete mess. Craig walked in with a soft laugh and dropped onto the edge of my bed.

"Why are you acting like this? It's not even a real engagement."

"It may not be real for us, but the engagement is still happening. And I'm not afraid of the event. I'm afraid Daniel Kelley will decide to insult me in front of everyone."

"That's what I want to hear. Don't let your dear fiancé get under your skin. If I didn't have work this afternoon, I'd go with you."

"I wish you could," I replied, pouting to tease him.

"So, is he coming to pick you up, or are you going alone?"

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"Mrs. Kelley's driver will be here at two. And don't even think Daniel will come to meet me. Even if I begged every saint in heaven, that man would never do something so thoughtful."

"All right, all right. I believe you. But guess what? I saw his photo in a magazine. Apparently, he's one of the ten most desirable men in California. Sophia, your husband is unbelievably handsome. And sexy, too. And those eyes? My God."

I rolled my eyes so hard they almost hurt. “Sexy and seductive, sure. But do you know what he’s like in real life? Rude. Arrogant. Insufferable.”

Craig let out a dramatic sigh and crossed his arms. “Well, fine. I hope the universe gives you strength, friend. Because once the wedding happens, you’ll be living with that rude—yet somehow irritatingly attractive—man every day.” He finished with a wink, and I lightly smacked his arm.

“I’m not interested,” I said with a shrug. “As long as he keeps his distance, I’ll survive just fine.”

“And what if you fall in love with him?”

“What?” I snapped, whipping my head toward him. “That is never going to happen.” I shot him a murderous look, but Craig only burst into loud, unfiltered laughter.

“All right. Like I always say, good luck.”

Daniel’s POV:

The party was about to start in twenty minutes, and my supposed fiancée still hadn’t shown up. I checked the time again, watching each minute pass without her appearing.

“Waiting for your beautiful girlfriend?” Andrew asked, handing me a glass of red wine. His smug smile made it clear he already knew the answer. “Relax. She’ll show up.”

"Relax?" I ground out. "I've been standing here for almost half an hour, and she still isn't here. The party starts in twenty minutes, and she's nowhere in sight."

"Ohhh... did I hear that right? So you've been waiting for her all this time, huh?"

"I told you the party starts in twenty minutes." I didn't look at him, but I could still see the satisfied curve of his mouth.

"If it bothered you that much, you should've picked her up yourself. Then you wouldn't be pacing around like a madman."

"I'm not pacing. And I'm not worried. She's not my real fiancée. I'm not wasting my time chasing her."

"You're not worried," he said with a soft laugh. "Sure. I can see how calm you are." He narrowed his eyes at me. "And what if she doesn't show up?"

I met his gaze with a slow, deliberate smile.

"Then I'll handle it myself. I'll go and drag her straight into this party in front of all the journalists and cameras in the room. She hates crowds, noise, and the press. But if she thinks she can back out now, I'll make sure she regrets it." My grip tightened around the wineglass until the stem pressed into my fingers.

“But if you drag her in, you’ll have to introduce her to everyone. The whole world will know you’re already married.”

“I don’t care. Once the European investors sign the deal, the divorce papers will be ready.”

“All right,” Andrew said with a shrug. “In that case, can I have her?”

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I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

“I like her. Honestly, Daniel, I like her a lot.”

The wineglass wobbled in my hand as heat rushed up my neck. His words hit harder than I expected.

“So after the divorce, maybe I’ll ask her out. You won’t mind then, right?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but my mother’s voice came from behind us, cutting off my anger in an instant.

“Daniel, your fiancée is already on her way. Don’t you want to greet her outside and come in together?” She gave me a wink and a wide smile, as if she were plotting something obvious.

“Mom, please,” I groaned as I walked toward her. “Don’t start playing matchmaker. That’s not going to happen.”

“I’m not playing matchmaker. I just want you to bring her inside so your coworkers don’t think this whole event is a sham.”

I shook my head, more irritated than amused. “Mom, you’re not a very convincing actress.”

“Doesn’t matter. At least I’m the best mother you and your sister could’ve had.”

“That’s true,” I said before giving her a quick kiss on the cheek. Then I left the room to wait for the woman everyone kept calling my fiancée.

I headed toward the front door, but the sound of an engine made me stop. My mother’s car pulled into the garage, and I knew she had sent the driver to pick up Sophia. I walked straight to the garage entrance, and what I saw hit me harder than I expected.

She had her back to me, phone pressed to her ear, her voice low and steady as she finished the call she was on. I didn’t interrupt. I stayed a few steps behind her, waiting until she ended it.

“Finally, you’re here.”

She turned, and the moment her face came into view, the air lodged in my lungs. Everything around us seemed to fade into the background. The lighting, the silence, the garage itself... it all dimmed beside her.

“Am I looking at an angel?”

Sophia’s POV:

“You’re late.”

The sound of his voice made me turn before I could think. If his eyes hadn’t been so cold, I might’ve admired the view of him. Craig wasn’t lying—Daniel was handsome enough to make anyone stare, and he wore it with a confidence he didn’t bother to hide. Still, I would never tell him that. If I did, it would only make him feel like a king, some superior being. His ego was already inflated enough, and I had no intention of feeding it.

“Last I checked, the party starts at three,” I replied, glancing at the time. “And it’s not three yet. In fact, I arrived ten minutes early.” I gave him a bright smile, even though something twisted in my stomach.

“You really made a point of those ten minutes,” he said, his eyes sliding downward.

“Because I actually arrived early. And for the record, my eyes are up here,” I replied, lifting a hand to point at my face. “Staring at my chest won’t do you any good.”

He blinked, surprised for the briefest moment, and I was glad. If he wanted to judge me, then he needed to see I wouldn’t shrink or soften myself for him. He wasn’t the only one who deserved to be understood. He would have to learn how to deal with me, too.

I walked past him toward the entrance, but he caught my arm before I could reach the door.

“Where are you going?” he asked, irritation in his tone.

I rolled my eyes. “Use your head, Daniel. I’m going inside. That’s where the party is, isn’t it?”

“Next time, show up at least thirty minutes early. My time is too valuable to waste waiting for you.” Before I could snap back, he took my hand. My mouth fell open when he lifted it and carefully placed it on his arm.

“And who told you to wait for me, Mr. Kelley? I never asked you to spend a single second on me.”

We walked in silence, but he stopped short halfway. I halted too and turned to look at him, unsure what had made him stop.

“You have no idea what that sweet, clever mouth of yours could do to me, Sophia.”

Wow. My name rolled off his tongue in a way that made my stomach flip. I meant to keep my thoughts to myself, but the question slipped out before I could stop it.

“And what exactly do you plan to do with this sweet, clever mouth, Daniel? Were you hoping to kiss me?”

He looked surprised for a fraction of a second—long enough for me to know he hadn’t expected my words.

A slow, knowing smile curved his mouth, and his gaze fixed on my lips. He lifted a hand, his fingers brushing the side of my face with a warmth that stole my breath.

“I didn’t know you could read minds, my dear.”

The way he said those last two words left me breathless. He began to lean in, closing the small space between us until his face hovered inches from mine.

“And if I kissed you right now, would you stop me?” he murmured, his voice lower than before.

My heart pounded so hard it drowned out everything else. The rush in my chest made my ears ring, and the world blurred at the edges. I didn’t even notice the people near the entrance.

He leaned closer, slow enough that I felt every inch of the distance shrinking. And just before his lips could brush mine—just before I could lose my first kiss to a man I barely understood—a voice came from the doorway.

“I hate to interrupt this sweet moment, dears, but the party is about to begin. Don’t worry—you two can continue whatever you were doing inside,” Mrs. Kelley said with a playful wink.

I held my breath as reality slammed back into place. Were we really about to kiss?

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Heat climbed up my neck and spread across my cheeks. I’d been so absorbed in the moment that I hadn’t seen Andrew standing beside Mrs. Kelley. They both wore identical smiles—wide and amused.

“Come on,” Daniel ordered, taking my hand and placing it firmly back on his arm.

I stayed silent and let him guide me into the enormous hall.

He began by introducing me to a circle of his business partners, wearing a polished smile so sweet it could’ve made ants faint. I kept my expression calm and greeted each person he introduced me to, pretending not to notice how rehearsed his charm seemed. But when we approached one of his friends, everything changed. The smile vanished, his voice cooled, and he barely spared me a glance.

A man who looked to be in his thirties stepped forward with a friendly smile and offered his hand. "Jack. Nice to meet you."

"Sophia," I replied, shaking his hand.

He turned, took a glass of wine from a passing server, then offered it to me. "Excuse Daniel's attitude. He's been dealing with a lot at the company."

I smiled as I accepted the glass. "Stressed? I don't think so. I'm sure even without those problems, he'd act the same. He'd still be cold, arrogant, and rude."

Jack shook his head and smiled, his eyes showing how much he enjoyed talking to me.

"I like you," he blurted before it seemed he could stop himself.

I immediately turned toward him. "What did you say?"

"I mean... I liked how you handled him."

"You mean how you managed to throw bold comments at him and call him arrogant and rude?" He chuckled under his breath. "Exactly. And I liked that you acted in a way none of the other women ever dared to with him."

“Did it look like I was flirting?” I asked, shaking my head.

“You were seducing him.”

When that word reached my ears, I let out a laugh—while more than fifty people looked our way.

“I would never do that, Jack. Even if he were the last man on Earth, I’d rather die than try to seduce him.”

“Ahh. I really do like you, Sophia. You’re not like the others.”

We were laughing without a care when I spotted Daniel near the entrance with Andrew. His gaze looked sharp enough to cut steel, though I couldn’t tell whether it was aimed at me or his best friend. I chose to pretend I hadn’t seen him and kept my focus on Jack. Because of that, I never noticed Daniel step away from Andrew and leave the hall.

“And how long have you two been friends?”

“Daniel and I?” I asked. “We’ve known each other since college.”

“I see. And that’s why you ended up best friends?”

“Yes. Actually, there were four of us—me, Daniel, Rian, and Alex. You’ll meet them later, because I’m sure they won’t miss Daniel’s event.”

“Even if all this is a sham?”

He met my eyes without blinking.

“Even if it’s a sham,” I replied, and left it at that.

“And you? What were you doing—working or studying?” Jack asked me.

“Working. I was a dance instructor.”

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“That’s great. So you were Professor Sophia?”

“Some students called me that, but most just called me Miss Sophia.”

“Could I visit your studio someday?”

“Of course. You can stop by anytime.”

“Would you give me a free lesson?”

“No problem.”

I felt completely at ease with him, which was the opposite of the tension and discomfort I always felt when Daniel was nearby.

Daniel’s POV:

That woman really knew how to test my patience. She stood there smiling and flirting with my best friend like she’d practiced it.

I walked away with my fists clenched at my sides. I needed air before my anger made me drag one of them out of the party.

Right then, a black sports car pulled up in front of me. As soon as my sister stepped out, I forced the fury off my face and shaped my lips into a smile.

“Hey, little sister,” I said, as casually as I could manage.

Her eyes widened the second she saw me. “Oh! Hi, brother. I missed you.” She ran straight into my arms and hugged me as tight as she could.

“I missed you too. Thanks for coming.”

I kissed her forehead and hugged her again. I missed her far more than I liked to admit. I still couldn’t ask her to live with me, no matter how much I wanted her close again. Even so, I was relieved she and Alex had finally stopped hiding what they felt for each other. They’d been married for four years and still lived in separate houses.

“Alex, man,” I called, turning to him with a grin.

“Daniel!”

We hugged—the kind of hug only lifelong friends share.

“Congratulations, man. Finally settling down.” Alex gave me a firm slap on the shoulder.

“Mmm. As if it’s that easy.” I shook my head with a short huff, refusing to give any weight to the quiet look the two of them exchanged.

“Uh... Dani, why were you out here? It’s your engagement party. You’re supposed to be inside with your girlfriend.”

“Girlfriend?” I stared at my sister, and the disapproval on my face said more than any words could.

“Ah, I mean fiancée. Sorry!” She smiled and slid her hand into mine.

That word scraped at my mind, and the image of Sophia laughing and flirting with Jack flashed through my eyes.

“You don’t look happy, Dani.”

“Who would be? She only cares about my money.” That was one more reason I could never feel close to her.

“Dani, you’re already judging her.”

“You don’t know her, Rian. Go inside and meet her yourself. We’ll talk later.” My tone made it clear I didn’t want to continue.

“Wow, Daniel. Aren’t you even going to introduce us?” she asked, like she planned to scold me.

If I didn’t know my sister so well, I would’ve let her walk in alone and introduce herself to my supposed fiancée. Unfortunately, she’d always been more stubborn than I was.

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“Fine. I’ll go with you.” I rolled my eyes and gestured for them to follow.

We entered the mansion in completely different moods. They walked in with bright, eager faces, excited to meet the woman they believed would become part of our family. I walked in silent, hoping she wasn’t still chatting with Jack. If she was, I might be the one to drag her away from him myself.

“Oh! Honey, our daughter and son-in-law are here. I’m so happy!” my mother exclaimed from a corner of the hall, and Rian smiled.

“Yes, me too!” my father added as he stepped beside her. His arm rested over my mother’s shoulder, and he held a glass of wine in his other hand.

“Mom! Dad!” My sister ran to them and hugged them tightly, and Alex followed with the same excitement.

They offered my parents warm congratulations and launched into cheerful chatter about married life. I stood a step back, listening as their voices overlapped with laughter and jokes.

“Now that you two are married, I hope a grandchild comes soon,” my father muttered as he gave Alex a firm slap on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry, sir. We’re already working on it,” Alex replied with an easy smile.

“Good. Seems my son still has a lot of work to do before he manages to give us one.”

Irritation sharpened in my chest at the comment. I hated when he talked about me like that. Part of me wanted to cut the conversation short and say something like that would never happen, but I held back. Even my sister had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing.

After they finally pulled away from my parents, they started toward the center of the hall.

“What’s your fiancée’s name, Dani?” I heard my sister ask.

“Sophia,” I replied, scanning the room again. I looked from group to group, but didn’t see her anywhere.

“Are you looking for her?” she asked again.

“Yes.” The word had barely left my mouth when her irritated voice rose behind me.

“Could you at least form a complete sentence, Dani? Those flat answers of yours are painful to listen to. You’re unbearable tonight.”

“And how did you expect me to respond? Her name is Sophia. Yes, I’m trying to find her. Is that satisfactory enough?” I snapped.

She chuckled, and I turned toward her.

“There you go. That’s what I wanted from the beginning. Thanks for finally talking to me like a human being.”

“Mmm.” I let out a long, tired sigh and kept my eyes on the crowd.

They laughed at my mood, but I barely registered it. I kept scanning the room, determined to find Sophia and Jack before my frustration exploded. The tension in my jaw sharpened when I finally spotted her—and this time Andrew was beside her.

“There. I found her,” I said, pointing toward the center of the hall. She had her back to us, but I recognized her silhouette. Aside from my mother, she was the only woman wearing a purple dress.

As we drew closer, I noticed the crease forming in Rian's forehead, deepening with each step.

"Oh my God."

I froze and looked at her. She covered her mouth as if she'd seen something shocking.

"Are you sure? Daniel... are you absolutely sure that's your fiancée?"

"Yes, she is. Why?" I asked, frowning as a knot of unease formed inside me. None of her behavior made sense.

Rian didn't answer. Instead, she hurried forward, weaving through the guests until she reached the woman in the purple dress. Alex and I followed without hesitation.

"Belle?" she exclaimed.

Sophia's POV:

When Andrew joined our conversation, I instinctively glanced toward where he'd come from, searching for Daniel without thinking.

“He left,” Andrew answered the question I was about to ask.

“I wasn’t asking about Daniel.” My tone came out sharper than I intended.

“Really? Your eyes said otherwise. But relax—I wasn’t talking about him either.” He winked. Jack stood in front of me, waiting for my reaction, but I didn’t give him one.

“I like your dress, Sophia. You looked beautiful tonight,” Andrew said after a moment.

“Thank you, Andrew. You looked great too.”

“And I’m not handsome?” Jack asked, and I rolled my eyes. “I’m kidding.”

We kept talking while Andrew steered the conversation toward his favorite topic—music. That caught my attention immediately. Jack and I listened as he told stories and cracked one bad joke after another. Jack joined in, saying he loved music too, though he admitted the feeling wasn’t mutual. He said music had never loved him back. Andrew, meanwhile, pulled out his phone and showed us photos of the instruments he kept at home.

I stayed quiet. I didn’t mention anything about the job I’d had in college.

“I’ve played a lot of instruments, but guitar has always been my favorite. My father taught me. I quit dance school when I was ten, around the time my mother left us, so I gave myself over to what my dad wanted for me. One afternoon, he came home with a guitar in his hands and taught me how to play. That’s where it all started for me.”

Back then, I’d loved dancing. I had no choice but to leave it behind because I wanted my father to feel happy even though my mother was gone. I did everything he asked. Over time, I saw it as a blessing in disguise, because it later became the part-time job that helped me survive in college.

Andrew was still talking about his guitar when I heard a woman behind me say a name I hadn’t heard in years.

“Belle?”

I swallowed and turned slowly. Rian was only a few steps away. I blinked several times, my mouth falling open as I realized it really was her.

“Rian?”

Our eyes met. We froze, shocked. The moment didn’t feel real. We moved toward each other and hugged tightly.

“What are you doing here?” we asked at the same time.