

A Favor 211

Chapter 211

I couldn't go back to the time when I should have been happy, with a complete family. If things had been different, I wouldn't have been standing there, marrying a man just to have a chance at justice for what was done to me. That man knew nothing but judging me and insulting me for agreeing to marry him.

Tears of pain slipped down my cheeks, and in that last moment, my mind and heart wavered. I wondered—again and again—if I should go through with this. I counted the last steps in my head until I felt Craig's hand settle gently on my arm. I looked at him.

He offered a reassuring smile, then nodded and whispered, "Don't waste your last chance, Sophia. God has always had a good plan for everything happening to you right now."

I drew a deep breath, nodded, and tried to smile back.

Then the moment of truth arrived. We finally reached the altar. Craig and my future mother-in-law guided me the rest of the way before giving me one last hug. They placed my hand into the hand I was meant to take. Daniel stood there with a stern look as he accepted it. I gave him a small smile anyway.

He said nothing, and he didn't bother returning the smile. I sighed quietly and walked with him toward the priest. When the music stopped, I glanced toward the church choir, where Rian stood. She gave me an affectionate smile and whispered, "Don't worry. I'm always here, Belle. I'll help you along the way."

"Welcome to the wedding ceremony of Daniel and Sophia Ysabelle. Today we gather to celebrate the most intimate bond between two people. Each of you has been invited not only to witness this ceremony, but to stand as meaningful witnesses to the love Daniel and Sophia Ysabelle share."

I bit my lip and closed my eyes. An intimate bond. Love. I almost laughed, because we felt none of that. I exhaled and looked back at Daniel, and this time he was watching me closely. I refused to look away, even when I felt my resolve soften inside me. It was the first time in a long while that I met his gaze without hearing him speak. And then I noticed the color of his eyes—hazel-brown, threaded with soft swirls of gold, brown, and green.

Wow.

The surprise hit so fast I didn't even realize I'd been smiling at him. I came back to reality when his handsome face turned somber again and he shifted to listen to the priest.

What an idiot. Couldn't he smile—couldn't he even return one? It felt rude.

I was still wondering how I was holding myself back from rolling my eyes.

"Forgive me, dear God," I murmured, forcing myself to focus on the ceremony.

"May your journey as husband and wife be filled with love. May it bring you joy, peace, and a spirit of strength and wisdom. May these blessings remain with you always. You may kiss."

My heart raced the moment the priest finished.

The church erupted into applause, everyone waiting for us to seal the ceremony with a kiss.

Chapter 212

I swallowed as Daniel lifted my veil. I closed my eyes when he leaned toward me. I waited. And waited again. My heart pounded, nerves prickling, butterflies spiraling in my stomach, anticipation stealing every breath. I kept waiting for his lips to meet mine, but nothing happened.

I had just started to open my eyes when I finally felt a kiss on my forehead.

My breath caught with a quiet disappointment. I wanted to keep my eyes closed, but when I opened them, I froze at the smug smile pulling at his mouth.

Seriously? On the forehead? What was I—his grandmother?

Then an idea came to me. I lifted my brows, dampened my lip, and bit it lightly while keeping my gaze locked on him.

And there it was. His hazel eyes darkened, turning into a deeper brown. I saw his chest rise and fall faster, and his lips part.

Aha. Well played, my dear husband. Yes, I was still a virgin, but I wasn't stupid.

I gave him the sweetest smile I could manage before turning to the guests, who were still clapping.

“Congratulations to the newlyweds! Mr. and Mrs. Kelley!” Rian shouted with so much excitement that some guests laughed and clapped even harder. His parents joined in with proud smiles.

My in-laws wrapped their arms around us as if nothing in the world made them happier.

“Welcome to the family, dear,” my mother-in-law said, kissing my cheek with gentle affection.

“Thank you, Mother,” I replied, smiling at her.

“Son, take care of Sophia.” His father’s voice dropped as he leaned in. “I know this marriage was arranged, but respect her and treat her well.” He set a hand on Daniel’s shoulder as if to make sure the message sank in.

I acted as though I hadn’t heard anything and smiled when Daniel leaned close to me.

“Sophia, thank you. Now it’s time to keep our promise,” he murmured in a low voice as he pulled me into a gentle embrace.

“Thank you, Father,” he added.

After the photographer finished taking pictures in front of the altar, Daniel took my hand and we walked out of the church together. But the moment we reached his car, he released my hand as if it burned him.

I let out a quiet sigh and chose to stay silent. I settled into the seat and turned my face toward the window, counting the trees that blurred past the car, as if that could steady my thoughts.

My new journey had begun the moment I agreed to all of this. I knew it would never be simple. I would spend years beside a man who saw me as nothing more than a means to an end. I would play the role of partner and trophy wife for someone cold and proud.

Still, Craig's words in the church echoed in my mind. I clung to them because I needed something to keep me steady. I reminded myself that God had His reasons for setting me on this path. I understood that—and I decided to trust Him with everything I had left.

Three days before the wedding.

Chapter 213

It was ten o'clock on a Thursday morning when Craig and I were sprawled on the couch, without a worry in the world. My head rested in his lap while some random TV show filled the room. He kept cracking jokes, hoping my nerves wouldn't tighten every time I thought about the wedding.

We were talking louder than we realized, and the television drowned out everything else. We never noticed the car that pulled up outside or the man who kept knocking at the door. By the time we realized someone was trying to come in, it was too late. The door swung wide open, and my fiancé

appeared in the doorway with a stare sharp enough to cut stone. He slammed it so hard I nearly slid off Craig's lap.

I shot to my feet as Daniel strode toward us with a look so razor-edged it could have torn the room apart.

"What is going on here, Sophia?" he snapped, his voice ringing as if he expected the walls to answer. His eyes stayed locked on Craig, even though he was questioning me.

I refused to give him the reaction he wanted, so I met his anger with a calm voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Don't answer my question with another question. What is going on here? Who is he, and why were you lying in his lap?"

I lifted a brow at him, then rolled my eyes with obvious irritation. "That's none of your business, Mr. Kelley. And you should remember you're in my house, so you don't get to barge in and yell at anyone."

The look he gave me sent a chill through my body, but I kept my feet planted. I saw the tension in his face as he stepped closer, and I braced myself.

"Maybe it isn't my business, but we're getting married, and you won't be flirting with anyone. You'll carry my last name, and that means you need boundaries," he said, low and tight.

"I wasn't flirting with him," I replied, trying not to let this turn ridiculous.

"Oh, yeah? Then tell me why you were lying in his lap."

His gaze never settled on me. Instead, it stayed fixed on Craig, and the sight of his clenched fists made me step forward until I stood between them.

"He's my best friend. He's my assistant. He's my roommate. Now that you understand, you can stop looking at him like you want to start a fight. Just tell me why you came here."

He finally looked at me, his face slipping back into that cold, unreadable mask he seemed to prefer.

"Pack your things. You're moving in with me."

"What?" I blurted.

"You heard me. Pack your things. We're leaving."

"Can we at least wait until after the wedding?"

“No. You can pack, or you can leave with nothing.”

I stared at him, stunned, before a frustrated sigh escaped me.

“Fine. Craig, come help me pack.” I took Craig’s arm and started up the stairs, but Daniel stepped in and yanked my hand away with a sharp tug.

“No. Stay here. I’ll handle it.”

Chapter 214

“What?” The word slipped out before I could stop it. And when I saw Craig’s raised brows and that little smirk, I knew he already had his own theory about Daniel’s sudden behavior.

“I don’t need your help, Mr. Kelley.” Craig and I both knew what had to be done, but Daniel didn’t even let me finish. He seized my wrist and dragged me toward the stairs before I could say another word.

“We’re leaving, Sophia. Stop stalling and move.”

“I can pack on my own, and I already told you Craig was helping me.”

“I said no.” He turned to me, fury burning in his eyes. I let out a harsh groan because nothing about him made sense.

When we finally loaded my suitcase into his car, I turned and headed back toward the house. His voice stopped me before I reached the steps.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m saying goodbye to Craig!” I shouted over my shoulder as I walked to the door.

Unbelievable. Cold, arrogant, rude—and clearly bipolar. My hands curled into fists as I clenched my teeth.

Craig looked up with a grin when I opened the door. “Why are you back?”

I frowned. “You know what I just realized? He’s bipolar.”

Craig burst into loud laughter that filled the room. “He’s jealous, you know.”

“Oh, come on, Craig. You know that’s not true. It’s impossible.”

“All right, if you say so,” he replied with a shrug, though he struggled to hide his laughter.

“Anyway, can you watch my cat for a while? I’ll come pick her up after the wedding.”

“Ah, but it’s your husband who should be watching your cat, dear.”

“Craig!” I stared at him, horrified.

“I’m kidding. I’ll take care of her even if you forget to ask.”

“Thanks, Craig.” I hugged him. “Don’t be late on my wedding day. You’re the one walking me down the aisle.”

“I wouldn’t miss it.” He hugged me back, then guided me to the door.

Not knowing where to sit, I opened the back door of Daniel’s car. He was already in the driver’s seat, watching me in the mirror until I slid into the seat behind him.

“What are you doing?” he asked with a frown, glancing back.

“I’m sitting,” I replied simply.

“My God, I know that.”

“Then why ask?” I rolled my eyes. What a useless question.

“Incredible woman,” he muttered, dragging a hand through his hair.

What was his problem now?

“I’m not your driver. Get up here and sit next to me.”

I stared at him for a second as his handsome face tightened with irritation. A laugh escaped me as I shook my head.

What difference does it make if I sit in the front or the back? Either way, you’re still the one driving.”

He closed his eyes and took a slow breath. “Sweetheart, if you don’t move out of that seat right now, I swear I’ll carry you myself and put you where you belong.”

I went still, blinking fast. “Fine. All right,” I muttered. I opened the door again and slid into the passenger seat.

Chapter 215

Even though we'd been on the road for more than twenty minutes, neither of us said a word. My sighs filled the silence, along with the steady rush of wind against the windshield. The long stretch of highway was nearly empty, and the quiet settled over the car like a heavy blanket.

"Can I turn on the radio?" I finally asked, because the silence was unbearable.

He flicked a quick look at me, frowning, then returned his eyes to the road without a word.

"Wonderful answer. Very helpful," I replied with a bright, sarcastic smile.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and opened YouTube to find a song. I remembered too late that my earbuds were in my purse, which was in the trunk, so I had to play it out loud.

I leaned back, set my phone in my lap, and hummed along to the gentle melody of "On the Wings of Love." I closed my eyes and ignored him completely, waiting for him to complain, but I heard nothing.

A few minutes later, sleep overtook me, and I didn't even realize I'd drifted off. When I woke up, the car was parked in front of a large house. It wasn't as huge as his parents' mansion, but it was still bigger than anywhere I'd ever lived.

"Get your things from the trunk."

I stared at him. "Aren't you going to help me?" I asked the moment I realized he wasn't getting out of the car.

"You can ask someone inside to help you. I have a meeting."

"Wonderful. You're such a gentleman. Thanks, honey." I climbed out and slammed the door hard enough to rattle the frame. If you ever need my help, I hope you fall flat on your face. I'll laugh before I even consider helping you, I promised myself as I dragged my suitcases out of the trunk. When I was done, I took a deep breath, counted to three, and shut the trunk with a loud bang that echoed up the driveway.

"Done," I whispered, wearing a small, satisfied smile.

I barely had time to grab my suitcase before he came marching toward me.

"What did you just do?" he demanded, like I'd set the car on fire.

I bit my lip to keep from smiling. "Nothing." I shrugged.

"You slammed the trunk too hard!"

“Did I?” I widened my eyes in playful surprise. “Oh no. I’m so, so sorry, my love.”

I hummed the tune I’d been listening to in the car as I walked toward the front door. The moment I stepped inside, a woman in her fifties hurried over to me. Her smile was warm and wide, the kind that made any place feel welcoming.

“There you are. Good morning, Anak,” she said, pulling me into a surprisingly strong hug.

“I’m sorry... what did you call me?”

“Anak,” a familiar voice said behind me. I turned and found Daniel standing there as if he’d never left. “It means ‘daughter’ if you’re a woman, or ‘son’ if you’re a man.”

“I see.” I lifted a brow at him. “And why are you still here? I thought you had a meeting.”

“I left some documents in my study. I’ll drop you off here before I head back.”

Chapter 216

“Hi, I’m Emily—Daniel’s nanny!” the woman said, stepping beside me with an even brighter smile.

I blinked. “So... a nanny? Isn’t he a little old for that?”

She laughed softly. "Yes, he's far too old for that now, but I mean I took care of him and his siblings when they were children," she explained, gesturing for me to come farther in.

"Oh." I nodded, offering an awkward smile that barely felt like one.

"You can call me Nanay Emily, or just Nanay. Emmy, if you want something shorter." She noticed the confusion on my face and softened her voice. "Nanay means 'mother.'"

"Oh, now I understand," I said with another small nod. "Nanay Emmy."

"I hope that doesn't confuse you."

"No, it's fine. I like it."

She smiled warmly. "I'm from the Philippines. And you? Are you American?"

"No, Nanay Emmy. I'm half Italian and half American."

"My goodness. With that mix, your daughters will be beautiful. And the boys will be handsome too," she said with sudden excitement.

“Uh...?” My mouth fell open before I could stop it.

“Just joking, Anak.” She gave my arm a gentle tap and smiled. “Don’t worry. I know this marriage wasn’t something you chose, so make yourself comfortable in this house. You can talk to me about anything you need.”

“Thank you, Nanay.” Relief spread through me like warm sunlight. At least I wouldn’t have to pretend every second that I wanted to be here.

“Come upstairs. I’ll show you your room.”

I nodded, then looked at my suitcases by the door. She waved a hand like it was nothing. “Leave them there, Anak. Berto will bring them up later.”

“Berto? Who is he?”

Her smile widened as she slipped her hand into mine and led me toward the stairs. “He’s my husband.”

“Really? That’s lovely. You’re both here, taking care of Daniel.”

“Yes. We never had children, so Daniel and his sister became ours.”

“They were lucky to have both of you.”

“We were lucky too. They gave us the chance to know what it felt like to be parents.”

We shared a soft smile. The truth settled in silence. They grew up with people who loved them like their own children. I couldn’t imagine what that felt like. I had parents, but our lives were never truly connected. We split into separate stories, and neither one of them ever intertwined with mine the way I once wished they would.

The morning after the wedding, golden light slipped through the window and woke me. When I checked the clock, it was already eight.

I got out of bed and headed for the bathroom, and that was when the memory of what happened when we arrived at our wedding reception came rushing back.

Flashback.

“I wish you both a life full of joy as you begin this new journey together,” one of Daniel’s business associates said, standing in front of us.

“Thank you, Mr. Montero,” Daniel replied as he shook the man’s hand.

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“Thank you,” I said with a smile as I shook his hand as well. My face had gone stiff from smiling since we’d stepped out of the car.

“Ladies and gentlemen, please raise your glasses to the newlyweds. May they enjoy good health and lasting happiness, and may the good Lord guide them through every situation they face. Cheers!” everyone responded.

I lifted my glass and drank the white wine my husband had handed me earlier. When I swallowed the last drop, the sound of glasses clinking reached us, followed by the guests’ cheers—including his parents’.

“Kiss! Kiss!” they chanted.

I struggled to catch my breath when I saw my husband smiling at me.

“I think we have to grant their request, sweetheart,” he said, then pulled me closer and kissed me. It wasn’t a quick peck—it was deeper and more commanding, leaving me frozen for several seconds.

I closed my eyes as the force of his kiss swept through me, and I felt completely trapped in the moment.

I was still dizzy when he finally pulled away. He rested his forehead against mine and brushed my lips with his thumb. We heard a soft sound, and we both turned to see Rian standing there with Alex, both wearing wide smiles.

Daniel stepped away from me immediately.

"Congratulations, brother." Alex gave Daniel a firm pat on the shoulder while Rian took my hand and gently led me aside.

"Congratulations." She was grinning ear to ear, her joy for me shining in her face. "You know what? You two actually fit together really well."

I rolled my eyes. "Rian, remember this is just a sham."

"I know, but can you blame me for hoping it might become real someday?"

"That's not going to happen," I replied.

"Okay," she said with a shrug. "But I'll keep praying it does. I'll be the first to celebrate if it happens," she added with a playful wink.

What a fool, I thought.

“Sophia.”

I had just reached my bedroom door when Daniel called my name. We’d only recently returned from the reception, and every part of my body felt heavy with exhaustion.

“What do you want?” I asked, my eyes drifting down the hallway as sleep crept in.

“I hope you understand your role in this arrangement,” he said.

I exhaled slowly and met his eyes.

“I understand. You don’t need to repeat it.”

“Good. There’s something else. I know my mother already spoke with you, but I want to add something.”

I straightened slightly because I knew something unpleasant was coming. “What is it?” I asked.

“We’re married on paper only. Nothing more, nothing less. We’re not friends, and we’re nothing beyond that. The only thing binding us is the document we signed. You won’t ask about my personal life, and I won’t ask about yours. You’re free to do whatever you want—I don’t care.”

He stepped closer until I had no choice but to look him in the eyes. “If you plan to date or flirt with anyone, then you’ll keep it private. I don’t want to be involved in any scandal.”

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I waited for him to say more, but he stayed silent long enough for a slow wave of impatience to rise in me. I figured it was my turn to speak.

“Are you done?” I asked firmly as I crossed my arms over my chest. His gaze followed the simple movement, and a brief spark of desire flashed in his eyes before he snuffed it out.

“My dear husband, I understand what this agreement requires. I know my place and what’s expected of me. I won’t interfere in your life, and I won’t expect anything from you. I have my own path and my own problems. And as for what’s between us, you don’t have to worry. I remember every word you said. In this house, we’re nothing but strangers. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to sleep.”

I walked away without waiting for a reaction. I opened my bedroom door and left him alone in the hallway. The moment I saw the bed, I forgot about changing. I kicked off my shoes and fell face-first onto the soft, welcoming mattress.

End flashback.

I was drying my hair with a towel when my phone rang on the nightstand. A smile formed the moment Craig's name and photo lit up the screen.

"Craig," I greeted, genuinely happy.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sophia Ysabelle Kelley. Such a charming name."

I rolled my eyes. "Craig, please don't tell me you called this early just to annoy me."

"Well... maybe just a little." He laughed, then continued, "So, how was your first night of married life?" He stretched those last four words with a teasing tone.

"Exhausting," I replied, leaving the rest unsaid.

"Huh? Wait. Oh my God. Did you actually go that far?"

"What? Of course not. Why would you even think that?" I asked, my eyes widening.

"But you said it was exhausting."

“Oh my God, Craig. You have such a dirty mind.”

My comment only encouraged him because his laughter grew louder. “I’m messing with you. I knew you two wouldn’t do anything like that. Even if you spend your nights imagining your husband’s body.”

“For God’s sake, Craig, I would never think like that.”

He kept laughing, his voice breaking through the speaker. “Okay, okay. I called because we have to start training for next month’s international competition. We only have three weeks to learn the choreography.”

“All right. Three weeks is more than enough to learn every step.”

“Perfect. So what are you doing today? Are you staying home, or are you coming to the studio?”

“Of course I’m going to the studio. Why would I stay here instead of going?”

“Because you’re on your honeymoon.”

My face twisted in disgust at that word.

“Oh my God, Craig. Can you stop teasing me like that?”

“I’ll try, I promise. What time will you be at the studio?”

“I just need to change, and then I’m going.”

“All right. See you later.”

“See you. Bye.”

Chapter 219

When I hung up, I pulled on a pair of black sweatpants, a gray tank top, and white sneakers. I threw a cotton hoodie over it all and felt ready to leave the house. The competition was only a few weeks away, and I wanted to give every last drop of energy I had. Craig and I had already planned to donate half the prize to the typhoon victims in Amador City if we won, and the thought gave me an extra push.

Nanay Emily was waiting in the living room when I headed for the door. Her warm smile greeted me the moment our eyes met.

“Good morning, anak. Did you sleep well?”

“Good morning, Nanay. Yes, I slept really well. I even overslept for work today.”

“Where do you work?”

“At a dance studio. I actually owned it and taught there as an instructor,” I replied with a small smile.

“I’m so happy to hear that. I made breakfast in the kitchen in case you wanted to eat something.”

“Nanay, thank you, but I really have to go.”

“If you wait a moment, I can pack you something to take with you. That way you can eat when you get hungry.”

Her offer touched me in a way I hadn’t expected. I stepped forward and hugged her without thinking.

“Thank you, Nanay Emily,” I said with a smile.

As I walked toward the door, a quiet thought settled in my chest. I had never known what it felt like to have someone fuss over me. No one had ever reminded me to eat before leaving or checked whether I’d slept well. No one had cared enough to tidy my things or send me off with a warm smile.

The thought drew a sad curve to my lips.

“And your mother?” she asked softly.

I shook my head. “She left when I was ten, and I never saw her again.”

Nanay Emily reached out and held my hands between hers, warm and steady.

“From now on, you have me, anak. You can think of me as your mother—with or without a contract between you and Daniel. Even if one day you both go your separate ways, I’ll still be here. Don’t be afraid to tell me what you need, and don’t hide how you feel.”

She wiped away the tears that had started to fall.

“I don’t know what’s causing you that pain, but I’m here, and I’ll listen whenever you want to talk.” She pulled me into her arms and hugged me tightly, and I let myself sink into that comfort.

I tried to stop the tears, but they kept coming as she held me. Somewhere deep inside, a part of me wished she had been my mother. The woman who walked out of my life when I was ten left a hole that never fully healed. I still wondered what she looked like now, whether she’d changed, whether she ever thought of me, or if she would even recognize me if we stood face-to-face.

“Shhh. It’s okay.” She rubbed my back in slow circles, her voice steady and warm.

When I finally pulled away, I gave her a small, grateful smile, even though my cheeks were still wet. “I’m sorry I broke down like that, Nanay.”

“It’s okay, anak. Stay here a moment. I’ll pack you something.”

I smiled and nodded.

Chapter 220

She returned a little later with two lunch boxes stacked on top of each other. “Wow! Nanay, that’s a lot of food!” I exclaimed, eyes wide as she placed them in my hands.

“It’s okay. You can share it with your friends or your students.”

“Thank you, Nanay Emily.” I leaned in and kissed her cheek before turning toward the door.

“You’re welcome. Take care, anak.”

“I will, Nanay.”

I grabbed the doorknob, ready to leave, when she called me again.

“Oh, anak, I forgot something.”

I turned back, and she reached into her pocket.

“Your husband asked me to give you this.” She lifted my left hand and placed a sleek black credit card in my palm.

“What... what is this supposed to be?” I asked, frowning. “What does he expect me to do with it?”

She shrugged with a small gesture. “He wants you to use it whenever you need something.”

“But I don’t need it. I’m not rich like him, but I can take care of myself, Nanay.” I took her hand and pressed the card back into her palm. “Please give it back to him. If he asks about it, tell him I don’t need it.”

“But, ma’am—”

“Thank you, Nanay. I really have to go,” I cut in gently before she could finish. I opened the door and stepped out, letting the last part of my sentence trail behind me as I hurried toward the garage.

My breath caught when I saw the long line of luxury cars again. I glanced at my Mini Cooper parked at the back, its metallic purple paint standing out among the glossy black and red cars. It wasn't worth anywhere near what his sports cars cost, but I loved my little car. I bought it after winning my first international dance competition in the United States, and it felt like a reminder of every step I'd taken on my own.

I set the lunch boxes on the hood of the Mini Cooper and dug through my bag for my keys. When I bent to pick the food back up, a man in a white uniform appeared in front of me without warning.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sophia," he said in a loud, cheerful voice. His sudden greeting startled me so badly that my keys slipped from my hand and clattered to the floor.

A sharp jolt ran through me. "You scared me. Who are you?" I asked, pressing a hand to my chest to steady my breathing.

He picked up the keys and placed them carefully in my hand.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sophia. I'm Ricky, your personal driver," he said with a bright smile.

"What?" The surprise hit so fast my eyes widened on their own. "You have to be joking." I let out a laugh because the whole thing sounded ridiculous.

"I'm afraid I'm not joking, ma'am. I've been assigned as your driver starting today."

My laughter faded the moment I realized he was serious.

“Ricky, that’s my car. It’s very small. You’d barely fit inside. How am I supposed to have a driver who takes up more space than my car?” I asked.