

A Favor 231

Chapter 231

“Sure, Mom,” Daniel answered, though his gaze never left me for a second.

“Sophia, you looked incredibly sensual while you were dancing.”

All eyes turned toward him the instant the words left his mouth.

“Are you planning to compete in some kind of contest?”

“They were rehearsing that popular song, ‘Señorita.’ Isn’t that right, Belle?” she added, raising an eyebrow in subtle challenge.

“Yes,” I replied, keeping my answer simple.

Craig explained, “She teaches dance classes, and they’re creating new choreography for her students.”

“That’s amazing. Can I stop by your studio sometime? I just want to... ow!” Andrew yelped when Daniel shoved a glass of apple juice directly into his mouth.

We all stood stunned by how abrupt the movement was.

"Here's your juice. Go ahead, drink it," Daniel offered, his tone flat and firm.

"But I wasn't..."

"You said you were thirsty, didn't you?"

Andrew's expression twisted with confusion, but he took the glass anyway.

"Daniel, what the hell was that?" his mother asked, looking at him as if she couldn't believe what she'd just seen.

"I just handed him a glass of juice, Mom."

Then he turned to Andrew, who had already recovered his smile.

"Finish that and come help me sort through last month's files in my office."

He didn't even pause to hear a response before walking straight toward the kitchen door.

“What’s wrong with him?” Mrs. Kelley and Craig asked at the same time.

“He’s jealous,” Rian and Andrew answered in unison.

“That can’t be. Why would he be jealous?” I said as I approached the table and poured apple juice into the first empty glass I saw.

I focused on the pitcher and missed the knowing looks Mom and Rian exchanged. When I lifted the glass to take another sip, both of them were watching me with identical suspicious smiles.

“What’s with those faces?” I asked, completely confused as I finished the last sip of juice.

“Well, that’s your husband’s glass,” Rian murmured, smiling as if she’d been waiting to drop that line.

A wave of embarrassment hit me so fast I nearly choked. I wanted to spit out the juice, but there was nothing left. I’d swallowed it all, down to the last drop.

Even though the thought made my skin feel warm, as if we’d shared an indirect kiss, I kept my expression calm. After all, it was just a glass.

“Anyway, are you going to do the choreography again?” Rian asked.

I pretended not to hear her and shifted my attention to Craig.

“I think we’ve practiced enough for today. What do you think, Craig?”

“I think so too. I’m actually starting to get hungry.”

“All right, then let’s go eat.”

Once we finished cleaning up the mess around the pool, we grabbed our things and headed toward the kitchen door. As soon as we stepped inside, I leaned toward Craig and told him to come with me. I mentioned he could change his shirt in my room on the way.

Chapter 232

We were halfway to the bedroom when the office door swung open. Daniel and Andrew came out, but it wasn’t the two of them who caught my attention. It was seeing my cat curled up comfortably in Daniel’s arms.

I nudged Craig, and he followed my line of sight. The moment he saw her, I heard him catch his breath.

Both men were scratching her head casually, and she seemed perfectly content. For a cat who didn't tolerate almost anyone, that alone was surprising.

I walked over to them with Craig behind me.

"Wow! My Cuchita really likes you guys!" I blurted out without thinking.

"What?" Daniel said, frowning as Andrew froze with wide eyes.

"Oh! I meant my cat Cuchita likes all of you," I said, trying to fix the mess I'd caused.

I forced a small smile as I moved a little closer to Daniel. His gaze felt almost too intense, and Craig's old joke echoed in my head. He'd once teased, "Of all the names you could've picked, you really chose Cuchita?"

"So she's yours?" Daniel asked, and I nodded immediately.

"Yes, she's my cat."

"And remind me, what was her name again?" Andrew asked, doing his best to seem calm even though he was struggling to contain a grin.

“Her name is Cuchita.”

“Oh my God. You really named your cat Cuchita?”

His composure crumbled and he burst out laughing.

I watched him, unsure whether he found the name ridiculous or simply enjoyed saying it out loud.

Daniel seemed to be enjoying himself more than ever, and the gleam in his eyes made that very clear. The moment he noticed me watching, he wiped the amusement from his face and replaced it with his usual stiff, unreadable expression.

“Hey, little one, where were you?” I said as I lifted my kitten from his arms.

My breath caught for a moment, and I swallowed hard when my chest brushed against his hand as I tried to reach her.

I pushed aside the sudden shiver that ran down my spine and hugged my Cuchita as I walked toward the stairs.

I’d just set foot on the first step when Daniel called out to me.

“Where are you going?” he asked, and his frown made me turn around.

“To my room. Where else?” I replied without hesitation.

“And what are you planning to do there?”

His question made me raise my eyebrows.

“I’m going to change my clothes. What’s the problem?”

He kept repeating the same question, and his deepening frown showed exactly what he thought about it.

“With him in the same room?”

“Yes, and what’s the problem? He needs to change his shirt too.”

“Are you serious? He’s going to change inside your room?”

I blinked several times, surprised by how close he suddenly was, and he looked at me as if I'd grown another head.

"Of course. He's my best friend."

"Even so, he's still a man."

"No. He's gay."

That answer stopped him cold.

My eyes caught the shift in his expression, full of astonishment as he looked at Craig standing behind me.

"Come on, Craig. Let's go."

Chapter 233

I didn't give Daniel a chance to say a single word. Instead, I grabbed Craig's hand and pulled him along as we ran up the stairs.

“Wow. I still can’t wrap my head around the fact that your husband was jealous of me. Can you imagine?”

I looked at him and saw a huge smile spread across his face.

“No, he wasn’t,” I replied, but he opened the bedroom door before I could add anything else.

“Then tell me what that reaction was all about.”

“Nothing. He just got upset because he thought I was bringing another man to my room.”

“That sounds like jealousy to me!” Craig shouted.

I rolled my eyes as impatience crept into my voice.

“Girl, what if he’s finally starting to like you?”

“Oh my God, Craig. Can we please drop this subject? Let’s focus on our competition instead of talking about him.”

I faced him with my hands on my hips.

“Fine,” he replied with a shrug, though his amused smile refused to disappear.

Sophia’s Point of View:

“Belle, I really hope you can give Dani a chance,” Rian blurted as we stepped out of the elevator. She’d stopped by the studio earlier, and now we were walking through the parking lot toward her car.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, not bothering to hide my confusion.

“Just try to get to know him better. At least be his friend. My brother keeps everything to himself. He doesn’t say what he feels, but you can tell he’s trying in his own way.”

“Rian, why do you keep pushing the same thing? We’ve already talked about this.”

“Then tell him about your past.”

“No. I already told you I’m not digging that up. What happened stays there, and no one is going to tell him anything.”

“But, Belle—”

“I don’t need his pity, Rian.” My voice softened, but my resolve didn’t. “He and I will never be a couple. The moment I find Layla, I’m leaving, and I’ll figure out who I am again. So it’s better if things stay exactly as they are. We’re not friends. We don’t owe each other anything, no matter how this turns out.” I shrugged.

I was about to ask if her husband was on his way when a brand-new Lamborghini rolled to a stop a few yards from where we stood.

“Wow. A Lamborghini Veneno Roadster.” Admiration slipped out before I could stop it. “Do you have any idea how many of those exist?”

She looked at me with genuine curiosity. “No. Should I?”

“There are only nine in the whole world. Eight of them were sold the moment they were released, and the last one stayed with the manufacturer. At least, that’s what everyone thought.” My words faded when I saw Alex step out of the passenger seat.

“That’s your husband?”

“Who are you talking about? My husband?”

“He bought the last unit,” I replied as the driver got out too, confirming what I already suspected.

Chapter 234

“Oh. I had no idea,” she said, turning toward the car. A soft smile formed on her lips the moment she saw her husband walking straight to her.

I watched the tenderness between them as Alex wrapped an arm around her and kissed her gently.

“Hi, Belle,” he greeted after they parted.

“Hi, Alex.” I smiled back without thinking.

Pretending I didn’t want that kind of love would have been a lie. I wanted someone who valued me, who understood me, who stayed by my side no matter what came our way.

“How have you been, Belle?” he asked after kissing Rian’s forehead. “Rian mentioned you’ll be in an international competition in the United States. Is that true?”

“Yes. My assistant and I signed up, and we leave the day after tomorrow.”

“Wow. That’s a big event. Congratulations in advance. You’re made for something like that.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“By the way, does your husband know about it?”

“No. I didn’t mention it to him, and I don’t think he needs an update.” They exchanged a look, but I just shrugged.

“You know what my mom said, baby?” Rian asked, pressing a hand to her chest. “She told me she’s planning to fly to the United States with them to cheer you on.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“Can we go with them too? I want to see you perform live.”

“Okay. I’ll check my schedule, baby.”

“Thank you, my love.”

I smiled when Rian shot me a playful wink.

“Don’t worry, Belle. Dani won’t find out from us.”

I returned her smile with a small nod.

“Anyway, we should go home. It’s getting late, sweetheart.”

“Yes, I agree,” I said, glancing at my wristwatch. “I still have to pack everything for the trip.”

“Okay. Good night, Belle.”

“Good night, everyone.”

“Is my brother picking you up tonight?” Rian asked, then burst out laughing.

“The sky would split in two before that happens,” I muttered, forcing a laugh as I frowned.

After saying goodbye, I crossed the parking lot toward my car.

Daniel’s Point of View:

“Man, do you have any family competing in a dance contest in the United States?”

I shot Andrew a confused look. He was stretched out on the couch in my office with his laptop balanced on his legs. It was supposed to be his lunch break, but he’d decided to camp out here and watch new episodes of The Walking Dead.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, pausing my typing. “Weren’t you going to watch your show? Why are you suddenly asking me about a dance contest?”

“Yeah, I was, but I heard something about that competition and got curious. That’s why I’m asking if someone in your family is involved in that international thing in the States.”

“No. Why?”

“Really?” he asked again, like he still didn’t believe me. “If that’s true, then who is this Sophia Kelley the host just called up to the stage?”

“Are you messing with me right now?” Irritation slipped into my voice because, honestly, I couldn’t tell if he was joking.

Chapter 235

“I’m not kidding. The host said her name. He called Sophia Kelley to perform.”

“Andrew, go to hell. That’s my wife’s name.” I stared at him.

He frowned as realization hit. “Oh. I can’t believe I forgot your wife’s name,” he muttered, scratching the back of his neck.

Before I could say anything, his eyes went wide, and he practically shouted as he jabbed a finger at the screen. “Man, you have to see this!”

He sprang off the couch, rushed over, and dropped his laptop onto my desk.

“What is this, Andrew?” I asked, barely interested.

“Your wife is in an international competition, man!”

“What the hell are you—” I didn’t finish. The words froze in my throat the moment Sophia and Craig appeared on the screen.

She was wearing a yellow dress that showed nearly every inch of her skin, paired with a black belt and a black bracelet that matched Craig’s all-black outfit.

Her movements caught my attention immediately.

I heard Andrew talking, but my focus was locked on the screen—especially the moment Craig lifted her cleanly off the floor. One hand held her by the backside, the other supported her at the elbow.

“Wow. Look at the way he lifts her. That’s incredibly sexy,” Andrew remarked.

My jaw tightened, though I made sure he didn’t notice.

“I love it when you call me ‘Señorita’—I wish I could pretend I didn’t need you.” He started singing the lyrics right in front of me, and I picked up the pen on my desk just to keep my hands busy. “‘Señorita’... wasn’t that the routine they practiced all week?” he asked.

“Yes,” I replied, never taking my eyes off the screen.

“And you had no idea?”

“She didn’t tell me,” I snapped.

“Ah. She didn’t tell you,” he mocked, wearing a smug little grin.

We kept watching, and every time Craig lifted her again, I clenched my fists under the desk.

“Get back to work, Andrew. It’s already one in the afternoon.”

“What?” He blinked at me, eyebrows raised. “They’re not finished yet.”

“I told you to get back to work,” I repeated, leaving no room for argument this time.

“Yes, sir.” He gathered his laptop, scratching the back of his neck.

“Andrew,” I stopped him before he reached the door. “Clear my afternoon.”

He frowned slightly, but didn’t ask questions. He only nodded and left.

The second he was gone, I opened the competition’s website as fast as I could. My attention never wavered from the screen. They were calling names for the finals, and I was so absorbed I didn’t even notice Andrew walking back into my office, grinning from ear to ear.

“They made it to the semifinals and they’ll be dancing again for a spot in the finals,” he announced.

I nearly jumped in my chair when he spoke right beside me. He burst out laughing at my reaction. "So that's why you cleared your whole schedule, huh?"

Chapter 236

I narrowed my eyes at him, but stayed silent as I walked past him. Grabbing my phone, I dialed my mother's number.

"You're calling her?" he asked as he wandered toward the sofa.

"No. I'm calling my mother."

"Ah. Let me guess. You're going to ask why your wife never told you she signed up for an international competition."

"Can you shut the hell up for once, Andrew?" I shot him a glare sharp enough to finally silence him. He still didn't take any of it seriously, though. Instead, he just let out a laugh.

"Fine. I'll shut up and let you talk to your mom," Andrew said. He gave me a half-smile and looked away, acting like nothing I said mattered.

All I could do was sigh and wonder what the hell I'd been thinking when I hired a friend as my assistant. Next time, I was definitely hiring someone who wasn't part of my personal life.

On the third ring, my mother finally answered.

"Hello, my love."

"Mom, where are you?" I asked, frowning as a lot of background noise bled into the call.

"Oh, I'm at Sydney Harman Hall right now."

"In Washington?"

"That's right! Your sister is here too. Alex came with us."

"Then what's going on over there?"

"Well, we're all here to watch your wife perform with Craig."

Hearing it like this felt like a sting. No one had told me anything. They'd all just gone along with it and hadn't bothered to keep me in the loop. Wasn't I, her husband, supposed to get at least an invitation?

"Oh, sweetheart, that wasn't up to me. I didn't plan it."

So she'd decided to leave me out. I gritted my teeth and asked, "Is Dad with you?"

"No, your father is spending the day with Greg. They planned to play mini golf. By the way, were you calling for any particular reason? Did you get a chance to watch your wife's performance?"

"Sorry, Mom, I have to go."

"Wait—you still haven't told me if you saw it."

"Yes, I did. I watched the livestream. Still, it would've been a nice touch if someone had told me you'd all be there in person."

"We just thought you wouldn't care much, so it didn't occur to anyone to mention it."

"She's my wife, Mom. She has my last name."

"That's right—and it's my last name too." I squeezed my eyes shut as her laughter echoed in my ear. "It's good to hear you talk about her as your wife," she said. "I hope you let that mean something, sooner or later."

“You’re dodging my question, Mom. Anyway, are you coming home after the show, or are you staying at a hotel tonight?”

“We flew in on Alex’s jet, so there’s no reason to stay. We’re just waiting for the event to end so the finalists can leave.”

“All right, then. I’ll go to the airport and bring her home myself.”

“That’s very sweet of you, but it’s not necessary. My driver is already on the way to pick me up.”

Chapter 237

“Then I’ll go meet Sophia when she lands.”

“That’s perfect, honey. She’ll appreciate it. But I have to go—they’re starting to let people backstage.”

“All right. Talk soon, Mom.”

As soon as the call ended, Andrew cleared his throat and cut in. “Any chance I can tag along when you go pick up Sophia?”

“Do you want me to end you right now?” I narrowed my eyes, my voice low and tightly controlled.

“Wow. You really are acting like a jealous husband.” He leaned back with a crooked smile.

“Why are you still here? I told you to get back to work.”

“Relax. I’ll handle it, boss... right after you sign these documents,” he said, flashing a sideways grin as he dropped a stack of papers on my desk.

“Go back to your office. I’ll call you when I’m done.”

“Understood, sir.”

I let out a breath the moment he disappeared from view.

Point of View: Sophia

“Mom, please tell me it’s not just my imagination.”

Rian’s gasp pulled me from my thoughts the moment we stepped off the plane.

“Is that Daniel over there?”

My eyes followed where she was pointing, and for a split second, I thought I was hallucinating. Daniel really was standing beside his black Bentley, hands in his pockets, looking as handsome as ever. Alex and Mom’s driver were there too, waiting by their cars.

“It’s no one, sweetheart. It’s your brother.”

But why would he show up here? Had he known about Belle’s competition from the beginning?

“He actually called me earlier and said he was coming to pick up his wife.”

I narrowed my eyes but kept my thoughts to myself, choosing not to involve myself in their exchange.

“You have to admit, Belle, tonight is kind of more entertaining,” Rian said, nudging me with a grin.

I only rolled my eyes and pressed my lips together, determined not to encourage her with a response.

“Hi, sweetheart. How long have you been here?” Mom rushed to hug Daniel and kissed his cheek.

"I got here about fifteen minutes ago, Mom. How was the trip?"

"The flight exhausted me, but it was worth every minute. Your wife made it to the semifinals!" Mom's voice practically danced with excitement.

Daniel looked at me without saying a word.

"My brother!" Rian exclaimed as Alex gave Daniel a friendly pat on the back. "So what brings you here tonight?"

"What else? I came to pick you and Mom up."

"Are you sure you didn't come for your wife?" She winked, and I did my best to ignore her.

Daniel's attention shifted to me, and he finally spoke. "I came for her too. We have a lot to talk about."

His words were quiet, but his gaze never left mine.

"Like what?"

“It’s private. The kind of thing only a husband and wife can work out.”

Daniel didn’t wait for anyone else to speak. He stepped closer, took my arm, and before I could react, his lips brushed mine—leaving me stunned and speechless.

Chapter 238

Was I hallucinating?

My mind spun as I stood there with my mouth slightly open, watching him take my suitcase and put it in the trunk of his car.

After that, no words came to me. The shock left me frozen, unable to process Daniel’s sudden boldness—especially with his mother and sister watching everything.

“All right, sweetheart, we should go. If you need anything for the competition, just call me, okay?” Mom hugged me warmly.

“Thank you for making the trip with us, Mom.” I managed a smile and kissed her cheek.

“Of course. I wouldn’t have missed it. And congratulations—you deserve to make it to the final rounds. Give it your best.”

“We’ll do our best, Mom.”

“Alex, please take care of my daughter. I should go. Your father won’t rest until I’m home.”

“We all know that, Mom.”

We stood by the curb, watching her drive away before anyone moved.

A tired sigh escaped me as Alex helped Rian into the back seat. I reached for the door without waiting for help—because Daniel was never exactly a gentleman with me.

Sinking into the seat, I tipped my head back and closed my eyes, waiting for him to join me. The world blurred after that, and everything that came next—driving home, arriving, stumbling into bed—vanished from my memory.

This morning, I woke with the weight of yesterday still clinging to me. The endless rehearsals, the nerves before the competition, the rush of emotion during our performance—it had drained me. But what stayed with me the most was the pure shock of Daniel kissing me in front of his entire family.

Still, what truly caught me off guard was waking up in my own room, wearing pajamas, with no idea how I’d gotten there.

“Good morning, Anak.” Nanay Emily’s voice greeted me the moment I walked into the kitchen.

“Good morning, Nanay,” I said, returning her smile. I went straight to the counter and poured myself a cup of fresh coffee.

“Congratulations on making it to the semifinals. I’m proud of you.” She slid a plate of chocolate pancakes toward me.

“Thank you so much, Nanay. Hey, do you remember what time we got home last night? And who brought me upstairs?”

Her eyes crinkled with amusement as she nodded. “It must’ve been around ten. Your husband carried you to your room.”

The news caught me off guard. I almost choked on my coffee and pressed a hand to my chest. “Wait—if he carried me up, does that mean...?”

I didn’t finish, but her laughter said she understood.

“Relax. I’m the one who changed your clothes, not him.”

Relief washed over me, and I couldn’t help laughing.

“Thank you, Nanay,” I said, offering an awkward smile.

“No problem, Anak. Shouldn’t you be getting ready to go to work?”

“Not today. Craig and I agreed to take the day off to rest before rehearsals for the final round begin.”

Chapter 239

“That’s the smartest thing. I watched your performance last night, and I have no doubt you’ll win in the end.”

“I hope you’re right, Nanay. Thank you.”

She gave my arm a reassuring pat and added, “By the way, your husband is home too. He’s locked up in the study.”

I was about to ask why, but my phone vibrated in my pocket.

“Excuse me, Nanay. I have to answer.”

She nodded, so I moved toward the dining table just as my phone started ringing. An unknown number flashed on the screen, but curiosity won. “Hello?”

“How are you, Ysabelle Del Mundo?”

That warm, playful greeting sent a jolt through me.

“Bryan Delgado!” My heart sped up. A smile formed as I pulled out a chair and sat down. “How have you been, Bry?”

Bryan and I had known each other since childhood in Italy. When everyone else doubted me, he was the only one who stayed by my side, urging me to keep going and leave my past behind.

“You changed your number again, huh?” I teased, realizing he was calling from an unfamiliar number.

“I lost my phone last night, so I had to buy a new one. That’s why I changed my number too.”

I couldn’t help rolling my eyes. Every time Bryan called from a new number, he had the same excuse ready.

“All right, if you say so,” I murmured, unable to hide my skepticism. “Anyway, Bry—any news about Layla?”

“That’s exactly why I called today, Belle. Someone from my team saw Layla Alonzo in Santa Dolores.”

“Wait—Santa Dolores, California?” My pulse jumped as I tightened my grip on my coffee cup, spilling some onto my hand.

“Ouch!” I blurted, lifting my hand to my lips, trying to soothe the sting as the heat spread across my skin.

“Don’t stress, Belle. I have my men checking every street in Santa Dolores. We’ll find her soon.”

A rush of emotions hit me as I processed Bryan’s news. Relief rose in my chest, tangled with anxiety and that old pain. I’d spent six years chasing any lead, desperate for justice, desperate to see Félix pay for what he did. Still, part of me feared this hope might lead to another dead end.

“Bryan, I have to tell you something,” I said, biting my lip nervously.

“What is it?”

I took a deep breath and lowered my voice to a whisper. “I got married, Bryan.”

There was silence. Then, out of nowhere, Bryan burst into laughter, the sound booming through the phone. “Oh, come on, Belle! That’s a joke, right? You have to be kidding!”

His reaction stung. I pressed my lips together, wishing I could laugh with him, but I couldn't.

"I wish it were a joke, Bry, but it's not. This marriage wasn't my choice. I was desperate. It was arranged, and I accepted."

His laughter died, replaced by a stream of curses spilling through the phone.

"Ysabelle, what nonsense is this? An arranged marriage? Are you crazy?"

Chapter 240

Whenever Bryan started speaking in Portuguese, I knew his frustration had hit its peak. Still, I owed him the truth. He supported me when no one else did. In many ways, he was the closest thing to a brother I had.

"It's true, Bryan. I..." I tried to explain, but he cut me off.

"Why were you so desperate, Belle? Tell me why you agreed to this."

"I'll explain everything, but not like this. Can we meet at my office? I need to tell you in person."

When the call ended, I glanced over my shoulder, making sure no one else was close enough to overhear our conversation.

A soft sigh slipped from me as I stared at the firmly closed door of the study. He was inside—I had no doubt about that—but I decided not to push him about skipping work today.

Meow.

A wave of joy lit my face the moment I spotted Cuchita sprawled in the living room. I rushed over, scooped her up, and cradled her.

“Cuchita, I’m going swimming. Do you want to come with me to the pool?” My voice turned playful, like I was talking to a little kid. She tilted her head at me, purring as I stroked her silky fur. Then we went upstairs together, and I carried her into my room.

I set her gently on the bed, but she hopped down at once and followed me to the closet.

“You really missed me, didn’t you?” I beamed and pulled my gray swimsuit from the drawer. I grabbed a towel and tossed a new robe over my shoulders, ready to head to the pool.

It took me almost fifteen minutes to gather everything I needed. Finally, I lifted Cuchita again and left the room. When I stepped outside, I saw Nanay Emily and Tatay Berto sitting on the old wooden bench in the garden. She was laughing, and from the sparkle in her eyes and the way she gave her husband a gentle tap on the arm, I knew he’d just told another one of his silly jokes.

Their faces radiated genuine happiness and peace. It was obvious that even without children, they hadn't lost the affection and respect they had for each other; if anything, it seemed to have brought them even closer.

They reminded me that falling in love might not be a choice, but staying in love—day after day—certainly is.

They'd truly found their perfect match, hadn't they? They fit in every way, utterly devoted, always putting each other first.

"Aren't they adorable, Cuchita? That's true love. But don't worry—no matter what happens, you and I will always stay together. I won't let you out of my sight. Never, ever."

Meow.

I smiled and nodded, as if we'd just sealed our pact.

With one last look at the happy couple, I decided to leave them to their laughter and slipped toward the pool, hoping they could enjoy that moment without anyone interrupting. Without me realizing it, someone else was watching the garden scene from the shadowed terrace above.