

A Favor 241

Chapter 241

“Stay here, Cuchita. No wild jumps today,” I warned, setting her near the edge of the pool. The idea of warning my cat made me giggle, since I knew she’d never dare touch the water.

Music felt like the perfect company for an afternoon swim, so I checked my phone and put on a romantic playlist before slipping off my robe and diving in. I swam lap after lap until they blurred together, letting the rhythm of the water ease the weight on my shoulders. When my arms grew tired, I rolled onto my back and floated, letting my mind wander too. The world felt far away—so quiet I almost fell asleep.

That bliss shattered the moment a voice—cold as the pool itself—cut through the silence. I didn’t even need to look to know who was standing at the edge; his presence was unmistakable.

“Are you really planning to fall asleep in there?”

Internally, I rolled my eyes before cracking them open, and sure enough, Daniel stood only a few feet from my towel and phone. There was no sign of my cat—she must’ve gone back inside while I relaxed.

“I’m not reckless enough to take a nap here,” I replied, making it clear his question was ridiculous.

“Oh, really?” He arched a brow, a faint smile curving his lips as he slid his hands into his pockets.

“What are you doing here, Daniel?” I looked away, suddenly aware of his eyes on me. Determined not to let it bother me, I began slow, steady kicks, swimming toward the other end of the pool.

“We need to talk.” The teasing edge disappeared from his tone, turning more serious as he started walking along the poolside to follow me.

“We’re talking right now, aren’t we?” I called back, keeping my focus on the gentle movement of my feet in the water.

“Sophia, I’m serious. This is important.”

I let out a long sigh, finally stopping in the middle of the pool. “Fine. Talk, then. I’m all ears.”

“Not like this.”

I shot him an annoyed look.

“I’d rather have this conversation when you’re wearing more than a swimsuit.” That made me laugh, and I raised my brows.

“Oh, is that how it works? So if I put on clothes, suddenly we’ll have a proper conversation? Is that the new rule you just made up? Or do you think your big announcement will disappear along with my swimsuit?”

Daniel's lips curved into a wicked smile. "It's not that, sweetheart. I may not be your biggest fan, but I'm still a man, you know."

The word "man" seemed to echo, making me swallow hard.

"And right now, I'm mainly your husband, and I have blood in my veins, so it's normal for me to lose control a little when you're like this—showing all that skin." My chest tightened at the hungry look in his eyes, the heat and longing as clear as day. "But hey, if you're determined to talk out here, I'm in. Just keep in mind I can't guarantee I'll behave when you're standing in front of me like that."

"You're shameless," I snapped, narrowing my eyes as I climbed out of the water.

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He barely reacted, his gaze sweeping over me from head to toe with a sly smile. "What can I say? I never realized my wife had legs like that—or an ass any woman would envy."

My cheeks burned, turning the color of a boiled shrimp.

"This is unbelievable!" I shouted as I hurried to wrap myself in my robe. "You're a pervert!"

His words left me breathless. I'd never imagined he could be so bold. All this time, I'd seen him as just another cold, buttoned-up businessman. I had no idea a shameless flirt was hiding beneath that polished exterior.

"That's me, sweetheart," he said, grinning, pride written all over his face as he stepped closer, his hands still in his pockets.

A small spark of mischief flared in my mind. I let him come closer, counted silently to three, and then I attacked.

The splash rang out as he hit the water, and his voice rose in disbelief. "Sophia, what the hell!"

I doubled over laughing as he sputtered and cursed from the pool.

"Well played, my dear husband," I whispered, unable to hold back my laughter.

I grabbed my towel and my things, and as I walked away, I called over my shoulder, "I'll be waiting inside, darling. Try not to drown!"

I gave him one last triumphant sway of my hips before strutting back toward the house, leaving him sputtering and cursing in the pool. If looks could kill, I would've dropped dead on the spot.

"You look very pleased with yourself, Anak."

The moment I stepped into the living room, Tatay Berto greeted me with a knowing smile. I returned it without a word, but I caught the look he exchanged with Nanay Emily. Pretending not to notice their silent conversation, I breezed past them and went upstairs, humming “Happy” by Pharrell Williams under my breath.

“Because I’m happy, clap along if you feel like a room without a roof. Because I’m happy, clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth. Because I’m happy, clap along if you know what happiness is to you. Because I’m happy, clap along if you feel like that’s what you wanna do”.

Daniel’s POV:

“Damn it! That woman is shameless!” I punched the water and shouted after her as she vanished from sight. Still seething, I dragged myself out of the pool, water dripping from my clothes, my jaw clenched with rage. She caught me completely off guard—I never imagined she’d dare do something like that.

“Daniel, you’re soaking wet! Did you decide to take a dip fully dressed?” Tatay Berto said when I walked in, staring at my drenched shirt and pants.

“I saw Sophia head to the pool earlier in a swimsuit. Did you go out there and swim with her?” Nanay Emily looked at me, and her question was so sudden I had to force a smile and take a slow breath before answering.

She had been glowing when she came back inside. “Were you two out there together?” Tatay Berto asked again, probably because I hadn’t bothered to answer him the first time.

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I shook my head and let out a frustrated sigh. “She didn’t invite me in. She shoved me straight into the pool. That woman is unbelievable! Just wait—one of these days she’ll see what’s coming. I swear.”

Both Nanay and Tatay Berto stared at me, completely stunned. “She really pushed you into the water?” they asked in unison, their faces full of disbelief.

“Yes, my wife pushed me into the pool,” I muttered, fists tightening as I remembered how she left me there, drenched, enjoying her little prank. Even now, I could hear her laughter. Nanay and Tatay couldn’t hold it in and burst into laughter together.

“And why did she throw you into the pool? Did you provoke her somehow?” Nanay Emily narrowed her eyes.

“I did absolutely nothing! She acts like a spoiled child with no manners,” I snapped, running a hand through my hair. “I need to get out of these clothes.”

I headed for the stairs before either of them could say anything else, already thinking of a way to get back at Sophia.

My mind kept circling the same thought. There was nothing wrong with noticing her figure, was there? She should’ve felt flattered that I took a moment to admire her instead of pushing me into the water.

The image of her in that gray swimsuit replayed over and over, following me all the way to my room. I'm not a saint. I'm just a man, and she'd been standing right in front of me with barely anything on. That swimsuit did nothing to hide her body. If anything, it showed every curve—every inch of soft skin, her long legs, the generous lines of her chest, the sweep of her hips.

"Jesus," I murmured as I hurried into the bathroom. A cold shower was the only thing that might clear my head. I needed to get that memory out of my mind tonight—maybe even for longer.

"I can't keep doing this," I groaned.

Sophia's POV:

I cracked the door open and checked the hallway first, making sure Daniel wasn't standing there waiting for me. Once the coast was clear, I stepped out with Cuchita in my arms and headed toward the kitchen.

I reached the doorway and stopped short. Daniel was the one cooking behind the counter, not Nanay Emily, and the sight of it irritated me all over again.

Maybe throwing him into the pool should become my new hobby.

I started toward the living room, but his voice cut through the air before I could take a single step.
"Where do you think you're going?"

I set Cuchita down gently on the floor and turned to face him, only to find him looking like he could kill me with a glance.

A slow smile curved my lips. "Let's see... I'm thinking of inventing a shortcut to the moon. Want to join me for the trip?" I asked, my tone dripping with mischief.

He only gave me a crooked smile and said nothing. Then he took off his apron and walked toward me, that intense stare locked on my face. I didn't move, not even when he closed the distance until there was barely any space left between us.

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A mocking smile appeared as he gripped my arm, then his fingers slid upward to brush my cheek.

"If you only knew all the things I could do with that pretty little mouth of yours, sweetheart."

His thumb traced over my lips, sending a shiver down my spine, and I had to control my breathing. The light touch almost tickled, making me press my lips together to fight the sensation. He stilled, gaze fixed on my mouth, breathing slowly as if he could barely hold himself back. The warmth in his eyes was gone, replaced by something dark and hungry that made it painfully clear how much I affected him.

Straightening, I met his eyes head-on. "Oh—"

Without warning, he shoved me against the wall and claimed my lips in a kiss that left no room for doubt. Every bit of warmth in his touch melted my resolve, stealing the air from my lungs.

“Wait—”

I saw Nanay Emily only a few steps away, and her presence snapped me back to reality. I pulled free, gasping for breath and trying to calm my racing heart.

“I’m so sorry! I had no idea...” she began.

“It’s okay, Nanay,” I cut in before she could apologize again, forcing a crooked smile that didn’t match the panic rising in my chest. Inside, I thanked her for showing up at the exact moment as I edged away from Daniel as discreetly as I could.

“I’d better go back to the garden so you two can finish... whatever that was,” she said.

“I’ll go with you, Nanay!” I blurted, louder than I meant to.

She stopped mid-step, eyes wide, as I hurried to her side. “Have I ever told you how much I adore flowers? Especially white tulips. They’re my absolute weakness. Let’s go look at them together, okay?”

“You’re not leaving, sweetheart. We still have unfinished business,” Daniel said as his hand closed around mine, yanking me toward him.

“We don’t have any—” I didn’t get to finish protesting because he suddenly hoisted me onto his shoulder, carrying me as if I weighed nothing. My face pressed against his solid back, and I let out a startled scream.

Nanay Emily released a long, weary sigh behind us. She probably didn’t know whether to intervene or pretend she hadn’t seen anything.

“What the hell are you doing?” I shouted, clutching his shirt so I wouldn’t fall. “Put me down right now!”

“Please excuse us, Nanay Emily. I need to speak privately with my wife,” he murmured, unfazed, as he carried me straight to the study.

“Put me down right now, Daniel!” I yelled, landing a few punches on his back. It barely made him flinch. Hitting him felt like punching a concrete wall, so I gave up before I injured my hands.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart? Did my impressive ass leave you speechless?” That made my eyes widen. There he was again, acting like a first-class idiot.

“Your ass isn’t even nice, Daniel Kelley! And your personality is even worse, you jerk!”

“I know that very well, thanks.”

Still carrying me like a sack of potatoes, he marched into the study. To make things even more ridiculous, he dropped me onto the sofa without a second thought.

“Ouch! Was that really necessary?” I growled, rubbing the sore spot as I glared at him.

He didn’t bother to respond. Instead, he walked straight to his desk as if I weren’t even there. His rudeness made my temper flare. I stood, ready to leave, but his voice suddenly rang through the room.

“Where do you think you’re going? Sit down!”

I stared, mouth open, as I slowly turned to look at him.

What the hell? Was he seriously ordering me around like I was his pet?

“I said sit down.”

“Excuse me? I’m not your dog, you idiot!”

He lunged toward me, jaw clenched, eyes dark with irritation. If looks could kill, I’d already be on the floor.

"Here. Sign this."

He shoved a red folder at me, and I took it with a frown.

"What is this for?" I opened it, scanning the contents. When he stayed silent, I lifted my gaze, waiting.
"Seriously, Daniel, what is this?"

"Just sign it. I'll give you the details later."

"No way. I'm not signing anything until you tell me exactly what it is. Who knows if I'd be signing my death sentence?"

"Are you insane?" He stopped right in front of me and barked, nearly shouting. "Why would I want to get rid of you? Do you think I'd bother killing you myself? Don't be an airhead!"

My mouth fell open in shock.

Wait a second. Did he just call me an airhead?

"What is going on in that head of yours, Sophia? Are you on drugs or something? Because there's no other explanation for this level of crazy." He looked me up and down as if searching for further proof that I'd lost my mind.

I closed my eyes for a moment, trying to calm myself.

“On drugs? Not at all!” I said with a bright smile. “This is just me—always thrilled with life, every single day. I don’t need drugs!”

“Are you going to sign it already?” He let out an exasperated growl and raked his hands through his hair.

Ignoring his irritation, I walked to the desk, pulled out the chair, and sat as if I owned the place. His heavy sigh filled the room, but it only made me smile in satisfaction.

Page by page, I reviewed the documents he’d given me. It turned out to be a business agreement between his company and a group of European investors. My name was listed alongside his as proof of our marriage—apparently a condition for sealing the deal.

“How long is this going to take? It’s only ten pages. You’re acting like you’re reading a novel.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw him slumped on the sofa with a pout that would’ve made any small child proud. Instead of scolding him, I settled deeper into the swivel chair and gave him a sweet smile.

“And what if I decide to read every single word and take all day? Do you think you can handle the wait?”

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“For God’s sake, Sophia! I’m not joking!”

“Then let me read in peace, will you? Honestly, I wouldn’t mind if you didn’t say another word all day,” I muttered, shooting him a look that finally shut him up. Blessed silence followed, and I took my time with every second I could.

“You know, you actually look really good when you don’t open your mouth,” I teased, flashing him a bright smile just to annoy him a little more.

After nearly half an hour of tense silence and the occasional staring match, I finally reached the last page and signed at the bottom of the contract.

Just as I was about to leave the office, my hand on the doorknob, he called out, “Tonight we’re having dinner at my parents’ house. They want to see us.”

I didn’t even look back. “Fantastic,” I said, tossing the word over my shoulder with a shrug. Out in the hallway, I let the door close behind me and exhaled in relief.

Only 334 days left. I did the math in my head—it was already one month down, eleven to go. That meant I had 334 days to survive this marriage and finally see Layla. Muttering under my breath, I headed back to the kitchen.

Point of view: Sophia:

“What kind of deal did you get yourself into, Sophia?” Bryan shouted as he burst into my office and slammed his hand on the desk.

I let out another long sigh. I’d already spent most of the morning trying to explain why I accepted Mrs. Kelley’s offer and agreed to marry her son, yet he kept circling back to the same questions.

“I did it because I needed to protect myself.”

“Protect yourself?” He snapped his head toward me. “Sophia, you know I’ve been on your side from day one, right?”

“I know, but I can’t depend on you forever. There will come a time when you meet someone and build a life with that person, and I won’t be your priority anymore. So I have to learn how to stand on my own.”

“So your way of becoming independent was marrying a man you barely know? Do you really think that fixes anything?”

“Bryan...”

“You’re assuming I’d toss you aside the moment I fell in love with someone?” he said, stepping closer to my chair. “Do you realize one of the reasons I founded my company was because I wanted to give you a place where you’d feel safe? We might not share blood, but I’ve always treated you like the sister I never got the chance to watch grow up.”

"I know." I lowered my gaze because I knew exactly what he meant. He'd lost his sister six years ago, and when he found me after I ran from my engagement in Italy, he took me in and treated me like family.

"You understand all that, and you still hid this decision from me!" he shouted again, frustration mounting.

"Bryan, I already explained that—"

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"You couldn't even call to tell me you ran into that man again and rushed into a marriage right after?" he cut in.

I dropped my head as another sigh escaped me, my fingers fidgeting restlessly. I knew hiding my marriage from him had been the wrong choice, but it wasn't deliberate. I held back because I knew he wouldn't accept my reasons or let me move forward.

"So why hide it? Tell me how much they paid you to accept their agreement."

The accusation lodged in my throat, and I lifted my head so fast I nearly collided with him.

“I never took a single cent from them, and I didn’t enter this arrangement for wealth or anything they offered. You know me better than that, Bryan. I would never do this for money.”

For a moment, it felt like I was back in that conversation with Daniel, hearing the same questions echoing from the past.

“So what now? Don’t tell me you said yes because you’ve fallen in love with that man. So what made you accept his mother’s proposal?” he asked, lifting a brow.

The corner of my mouth almost twitched when he slipped into Italian, because he only spoke to me like that when his anger started to fade. Still, I kept my expression serious. I didn’t want him to misunderstand what that near-smile meant.

“Absolutely not, Bryan. His name was the only thing that mattered in this deal. Everyone in Los Angeles knows his family, and even people across California respect their influence. Having their last name meant I’d be safe from Félix, because the Kelleys have more power and wealth than the De Lucas could ever have,” I said.

“And what does he get out of it? You carrying his child to give him an heir? What does he gain?”

“No. Never,” I said, my voice trembling. Just thinking about it made my skin crawl.

The question sent a chill down my spine, and I couldn’t hide how wide my eyes went.

“My only job is to play the devoted wife for one year. They need to impress investors from Europe, and if it works, their company will rise to the top of the American market.”

“And what about his personal life? What about your marriage and your roles as husband and wife?”

“There’s nothing between us. We only pretend so others believe we’re married. We aren’t even friends, Bryan. That’s all.”

“And what do you do when you’re both at home? How do you actually act with each other?”

A small laugh slipped out as I shook my head.

“Honestly, Bryan, we’re like two elements that refuse to mix. Nothing about us fits under the same roof.” I looked at him and let out a tired sigh. He still didn’t know what truly drove me to marry Daniel. “If you’re wondering what I get out of this arrangement, it’s mostly cruel words and criticism that keep me on edge.”

“And you just put up with his cruel behavior?” he asked.

“I can’t blame him for how he acts. He doesn’t know any of this, Bryan.”

“Then tell him everything, Sophia. He deserves to know.”

“I wish I could.” I shook my head. “It’s not possible, Bryan. Only four people know my past, and you’re one of them. I couldn’t tell him the truth and expect him to believe me, because even my own father didn’t. If I told him what really happened, he’d never trust me. I didn’t even get support from my family.”

He moved closer, sat beside me, and took my hands in his—warm and steady.

“Sophia, listen to me. When you opened up to us the first time, we never doubted your story. Not everyone you meet will hurt you. And most importantly, you can’t compare everyone to your father. You owe it to yourself to trust again.”

“I just don’t know if I’m capable of it anymore.”

“Don’t punish yourself for that, Sophia. The world isn’t full of people waiting to judge you.”

A faint, careful smile touched my face before he pulled me into a warm hug.

“Promise me you won’t fall in love with that husband of yours, okay?”

That made me pull back and arch my brows at him.

“There’s no chance, Bryan. Even if he were the only man left on Earth, I would never fall in love with him.”

He glanced at me, then laughed so loudly it echoed through the room.

“Sophia, you really should be careful what you say, or one day you might have to eat your own words.”

“I assure you, Bryan, there’s no way.”

He kept laughing, shaking his head in disbelief at my stubbornness.

“You’d better sweeten your words in case you ever have to take them back. Life is unpredictable. Who knows? Maybe you’ll end up pregnant before this whole arrangement ends.”

“Bryan, what nonsense are you talking about? That will never happen—and as for falling in love with him, I promise you: not now, not ever!”

“Alright, if you say so.”

He only shrugged and offered me a smug little smile. I could only roll my eyes, because I knew myself. There wasn't the slightest chance of that happening.

Point of view: Daniel:

I was about to use the intercom to call my secretary when Andrew burst into my office, breathless.

"Sir, we have visitors. People we weren't expecting," he said in short bursts.

Before I could finish asking what he meant, the door swung wide and Mr. Norman Giovanni—our newest partner from Europe—walked in.

"Mr. Kelley," he greeted, a broad smile spreading across his face.

"Good morning, Mr. Giovanni." I rose from my chair at once and stepped forward to greet him.

"Forgive this unexpected visit, Mr. Kelley."

"It's no problem," I replied, returning his courtesy with a welcoming smile. "Please, have a seat. Would you like something to drink? Wine, whiskey, or anything else?"

“Oh, no need, Mr. Kelley. I didn’t come for business today.”

My brows lifted in curiosity.

“My wife and I would love it if you and your wife joined us for lunch.”

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The invitation caught me off guard. “I appreciate the gesture, but you could have called or asked my assistant. You didn’t need to come all the way here.”

“To be honest, I was hoping to find your wife here so I could invite her myself. But I’m sure you’ll introduce me to her soon, and you won’t refuse my invitation, will you, Mr. Kelley?”

“Of course not, Mr. Giovanni. I’ll call my wife right now and let her know about your invitation,” I said, already reaching for my phone.

“I’m glad to hear that. In any case, I must be going. My wife is waiting in the car. She’s gotten it into her head to do some shopping before we return to Italy. You know how they are.”

He murmured the last part, and I couldn’t help letting out a chuckle when he shot me a conspiratorial look.

"I'll message you later with the restaurant name."

"Thank you, Mr. Giovanni," I replied, shaking his hand.

I walked him to the door, and when he left, I turned to find Andrew smiling as if he knew something I didn't. I narrowed my eyes as I passed him on my way back to my chair.

"So, boss... is this going to be a double date?" he teased, waggling his brows.

"This isn't any kind of date."

"Do you want me to call your wife for you, sir?"

I shot him a sharp look. "And why are you always so eager to talk to my wife, Andrew?"

"I just thought she should know about the lunch plan with the Giovannis." His shrug looked innocent enough, but his grin gave him away.

"I'll inform her myself. Besides, you've seemed far too interested in talking to her lately. As far as I know, we're still married, so have some respect, Andrew."

“Where is that coming from? I’m just trying to be a good assistant.” His smile widened as he laughed.
“Someone’s jealous, Mr. Kelley!”

“I’m not jealous, Andrew. Why don’t you get to work and stop making up nonsense?”

“Yes, boss. If you ever want to talk about what’s bothering you, you know where to find me.”

I didn’t bother replying. I watched him turn to leave, but he paused with his hand on the door.

“You know, sir, jealousy doesn’t suit you, so I suggest you relax.”

“Get out, Andrew!” I shouted, grabbing the nearest pen and tossing it at him. It barely landed near his feet, and he only laughed—just as irritating as always—before finally leaving.

Point of view: Sophia:

The moment I stepped out of the car, I took a deep breath to steady myself. Daniel had called earlier to say his European business partner wanted both of us to join them for a lunch meeting, and apparently they were eager to meet me. Which meant I had to rush home to change before heading to the restaurant.

I was about to cross the entrance when my phone vibrated again. Daniel.

“Where are you?”

He couldn’t even offer a simple greeting. I rolled my eyes, thinking some people never changed.

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“I’m right outside,” I replied, waiting for him to say something else.

But he’d already hung up. Unbelievable.

“Will he ever learn manners?” I muttered, slipping my phone away.

A receptionist in a crisp uniform approached and greeted me with a polite smile.

“Good morning, ma’am.”

“Good morning. Do you have a reservation under Mr. Norman Giovanni?” I asked, returning her smile.

She checked her list, then looked up at me. “Are you Mrs. Sophia Kelley?”

For a moment, I just stared, slightly surprised.

“Yes. I’m Sophia Kelley.” The name still sounded strange every time I said it, and I doubted I would ever get used to it.

“They’ve been expecting you, Mrs. Kelley. Please allow me to escort you to your table.” Her words were soft and professional.

“Thank you,” I said, following her.

With each step, my heart beat faster. Playing Daniel’s wife in front of strangers for the first time made my nerves tighten.

Daniel pushed his chair back the moment he saw me. The other two guests at the table turned their attention to me as I approached.

The look he gave me held a mix of surprise and something gentler, but he didn’t let it linger. He greeted me with a quick embrace, then cupped my cheeks and kissed me right there, in front of everyone.

The kiss left me stiff, unable to react—until he gently bit my lower lip, coaxing a response from me.

A wicked smile curved on his mouth as he brushed his thumb over my lips before releasing me.

“You look incredible in that dress, darling. It’s classic and irresistible,” he murmured into my ear, and I almost choked.

I’d chosen a fitted black dress that fell just above my knees—nothing subtle about it. Heat rushed to my cheeks, and I could practically feel my face turning every shade of red imaginable.

“Sophia, I want you to meet Mr. Norman Giovanni and his wife, Amelia. They’ll be joining us from KI Corporation as our new partners.”

A gentle pressure at the small of my back sent a shiver down my spine as he kept his hand there.

“Mr. and Mrs. Giovanni, I’m proud to introduce my beloved wife, Sophia Kelley.”

Hearing him call me his beloved made my throat tighten, but I managed a polite smile and extended my hand to Mr. Giovanni.

“Well, what an unexpected pleasure. So you’re the woman who stole this young man’s heart.”

Inside, I almost laughed. If only he knew how impossible that would be with Daniel.

“You’re even more charming in person, Sophia,” he added, lifting my hand and pressing a soft kiss to it.

“That’s very kind of you. Truly, the pleasure is all mine. Please, call me Sophia. And thank you for your trust in Daniel and in KI Corporation.”

“I have no doubt this partnership will bring even greater achievements for both companies, and perhaps a brighter future for all of us.”