

A Favor 251

Chapter 251

When it was time to greet Mrs. Giovanni, I noticed her smile falter as she frowned, as though trying to place me.

“Forgive me, Sophia, but have we met before? There’s something about you that feels very familiar.”

That one question made my heart drop. I felt the air shift as the table’s attention turned toward me. The Giovanni family had lived in Italy, and a small part of me feared she might recognize me from six years ago.

“I’m sorry to intrude, but...” Her voice was gentle, yet insistent. “Are you, by any chance, a dancer?”

I pressed a hand to my chest as relief washed through me at the direction of her question.

“Yes, ma’am,” I answered, managing a smile.

“Wait—did you compete in that dance contest at Sydney Harman Hall in Washington a few years ago?”

The memory made me smile, and I nodded in confirmation.

“Oh my God! Darling, this is the woman I told you about. She was my favorite dancer! Do you remember?” She rose excitedly, gripping her husband’s arm.

“I remember, my dear,” he said, turning to Daniel. “Daniel, you never mentioned your wife was a dancer!”

Daniel only smiled and took my hand beneath the table. I tried to pull away, but he tightened his hold and ignored my silent protest, lacing our fingers together and resting our joined hands on his thigh.

The warmth of his touch made it hard to steady my breathing.

“Sophia, you have no idea how thrilled I am to see you here. I supported you so much in that competition—I was certain you’d win!”

“Thank you, Mrs. Giovanni,” I replied, genuinely grateful for her praise.

“Please, call me Amelia. Or even Aunt Amelia, if you want.” With a playful look, she turned to the men at our table. “Gentlemen, you’ll have to excuse us. Daniel, darling, Sophia and I have so much to talk about. Let the two of you focus on business while we focus on the things we love.”

She winked, then looked at me with a bright smile.

Lunch continued with Amelia and me deep in conversation about upcoming dance competitions while Daniel and Mr. Giovanni discussed corporate matters. But halfway through the meal, I went rigid when Daniel's hand settled on my knee. I shot him a look, hoping he'd read the silent question in my eyes.

"Darling, Mr. Giovanni wants to know when we'll start thinking about having children."

A sudden spark of inspiration hit me. I slid Daniel's hand off my knee and placed it firmly on the table, then leaned over and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. Amelia's stunned look didn't escape me, and a small, satisfied smile formed on my lips.

"Oh, Mr. Giovanni, if you only knew how many times I've begged him to ease up at work. He's always tied to his office and often comes home long after dinner. Sometimes I can barely get a moment with him."

Chapter 252

I made sure I sounded a little wounded, and when I saw Daniel's stunned expression—his mouth slightly open—I nearly had to swallow a laugh. It was clear he hadn't expected that.

"Young man, you really should put your wife first," Mr. Giovanni said.

Lifting my brows dramatically, I shot Daniel a smug look as Mr. and Mrs. Giovanni began offering him unsolicited marriage advice. But before I could enjoy his lecture, Daniel surprised me. He framed my face in his hands and pulled me into a deep, lingering kiss right there at the table.

"I'm sorry, darling. I never realized how much it bothered you," he said, still holding my face. "I promise that from now on, I'll lighten my workload and make sure I spend more time with you."

Then he pressed a soft kiss to my forehead.

I tried to match his sincerity with a small smile. "You mean that?"

"You know I do. There's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

If we hadn't been sitting with his most important client, I would have laughed at how serious he looked.

"Of course, darling," I replied, playing along as he wrapped an arm around me and gave me a quick kiss on the lips.

"You two are far too sweet," Mrs. Giovanni sighed, resting her head on her husband's shoulder.

"Young love is something special," Mr. Giovanni murmured, kissing Amelia's hair.

I smiled softly and felt Daniel's hand slip into mine beneath the table, his fingers threading through mine. Moments later, he kissed the top of my head warmly, and when I turned to look at him, he leaned in and kissed me again, right in front of the Giovannis.

Point of view: Sophia:

After lunch with the Giovannis, we all went our separate ways in different directions. Daniel and I slipped back into our usual routine—acting like an ordinary couple, at least the kind that doesn't meddle in each other's business and doesn't pretend to care too much.

I stayed silent about what had happened between us. Those stolen kisses weren't a topic for discussion. Part of me didn't want to hear whatever blunt thing he might say about them.

Once we said our goodbyes, I walked back into the mall without a second thought. I never imagined Daniel would follow me, so I startled when he grabbed my arm just as I stepped into the men's section. I turned to him and lowered my voice. "What are you doing here?"

"Shouldn't I be the one asking that?" He leaned in, and in a low, almost mocking tone, he said, "What brings you to a men's store, darling?" His fingers tightened slightly, making sure I couldn't pull away.

I held his stare, one brow raised, refusing to back down.

"None of your business, Daniel," I replied, a smile settling on my lips as I tried to free myself. He barely budged.

"Watch your tone, Sophia. What are you buying here?" His voice sounded like a warning.

Instead of answering, I shot back, “Why do you care so much?”

Without another word, Daniel pulled me against him, his arm firm around my waist, making escape impossible.

Chapter 253

“Careful, Sophia. If you keep provoking me, I’ll kiss you right here in front of everyone. Tomorrow’s papers will have a field day.”

For a moment, his words left me stunned, unsure what to say.

“Well? What are you waiting for? Go ahead.” Just as he leaned in, I shoved him and stepped back, lifting my hands in a mock surrender. “Relax. I was kidding!” A playful smile curved on my lips as I retreated another step. “Craig asked me to pick out a new tie for him. Satisfied?”

That made him hesitate. I let out a quiet sigh and tried to move past him, but he was faster. His hand caught my arm and pulled me back against his chest. A breath escaped me—almost a gasp—as I fought not to stumble into him.

“Why does Craig need you to buy him a tie?” he demanded, his face only inches from mine.

I met his gaze and shrugged indifferently. “Why not? I don’t see anything strange about it.”

I tried not to look at his mouth, even as my mind flashed back to our kiss at the restaurant.

“Can’t Craig buy his own clothes?”

I couldn’t help thinking how strange it was to be questioned like this. Weren’t we supposed to stay out of each other’s business? He almost sounded jealous.

“Are you jealous, Daniel?” A slow smile spread across my face as I stepped closer and lightly brushed his cheek. “Don’t worry. I’ll be loyal to the very last second of our agreement.”

“I’m not jealous. Don’t flatter yourself, Sophia. You’re not as irresistible as you think.” He knocked my hand away. “And don’t forget—we’re only together because of this contract. Nothing more.”

His eyes locked on mine, steady and piercing.

“Don’t get any wrong ideas. You mean nothing to me, so don’t act like I’m keeping track of every man who talks to you.”

Honestly, it was too much to take in.

I stood there, stunned and silent, watching him storm out of the store and disappear from sight. I let out a long breath and tried to focus on why I'd walked in there in the first place.

Still, I couldn't help shaking my head. Some people really leave a mark on you—the ones who walk away when life gets hard, the ones who arrive when you least expect it, and the ones who seem determined to make everything even more complicated.

Just as I was about to get into my car, my attention caught on a couple in the parking lot. The woman had her back to me, but the man was Daniel, of course. His eyes met mine, and that irritatingly smug smile spread across his face.

My throat tightened as I yanked my door open, forcing myself to look away. It wasn't my business. We'd agreed to keep our infidelities discreet and not display them in public.

What was that supposed to be? If the roles were reversed and he caught me wrapped around another man in a parking lot, he'd lose his mind.

Chapter 254

"Seriously, Daniel?" My grip tightened on the steering wheel, knuckles whitening with irritation. "You interrogate me over a tie for Craig while you're out here playing the unfaithful husband? You've got a lot of nerve."

Out of sheer exasperation, I clapped once, muttering under my breath as if he could hear me.

Craig cracked the door open. "Sophia, what brings you here?"

It was his apartment... or no, that wasn't entirely true.

I'd walked into what used to be our apartment. I still thought of it as mine, even if now I was only passing through, living with my husband on borrowed time.

"Just let me in, Craig. I'd rather talk inside." He stepped aside, and I dragged my purple suitcase through the doorway without even glancing back.

"Should I get snacks and pour a pitcher of juice before you start talking? You look like you've got a lot to unload."

With a groan, I dropped onto the couch, stretching out like I owned the place.

"Yes. Snacks and something to drink would be perfect."

He turned to go, and I called after him, "Craig, don't make orange juice this time, okay? Anything but that!"

"Look who's suddenly getting picky."

“Come on, Craig. Just this once.”

“Fine. You win.”

I let out a long sigh, stretching my legs across the couch and sinking deeper into the cushions. Five minutes later, Craig returned with a tray piled with bacon-and-cheese pizza and a pitcher of apple juice.

“Pizza? You’re a lifesaver, Craig. Seriously, you know how to get to my heart.” I blew him an exaggerated kiss before devouring the first slice.

He chuckled, poured me a glass, and handed it over.

“Slow down, Sophia!” When I reached for another slice, Craig lightly slapped my hand. “You eat like you haven’t had pizza in years.”

With my mouth full of cheese and bacon, I managed to answer after swallowing. “What can I say, Craig? I’m half Italian. Pizza is my soulmate—especially this flavor.”

He shook his head with mock disbelief and raised his glass.

“Okay, so tell me. How are things between Gavin and you? Are you—”

He didn't even finish. Craig choked, spraying juice all over the table.

"What is wrong with you?" I giggled, grabbing a napkin to wipe up the mess, trying to hide my laughter.

"Sorry. That one's not your fault."

"How is it not my fault?"

He shot me a look of pretend reproach. "You're the one who brought his name up out of nowhere."

Laughing, I grabbed another slice. "What's wrong with mentioning him? I just want the gossip, so tell me—are you dating or not?" I made sure to emphasize the last word.

Craig rolled his eyes. "We're just friends, Sophia. That's it."

I shrugged and gave him a wide smile. "If you say so."

"Okay, enough about me. Do you mind telling me what brings you here with your purple suitcase this time? Don't tell me Daniel kicked you out." Craig didn't let it go for long.

Chapter 255

“Nobody kicked me out,” I snapped, rolling my eyes as I set my glass down. “I just brought a few things so I can stay here again—at least until the competition is over.”

“Wait.” His brows lifted. “What exactly is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I need to be here so we can rehearse regularly and get our act together before the grand finale.”

“So you’re saying we can’t prepare unless you move in?” Craig pressed.

“Not exactly. I mean we’ll have more time to practice if I stay here during the weeks leading up to the grand finale.”

“Is that really the only reason you came back?” He stared at me with exaggerated suspicion, not buying my answer for a second.

“Of course!” I insisted. “It benefits both of us. We can rehearse whenever inspiration hits.”

He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “Please, Sophia Ysabelle Del Mundo—sorry, Sophia Kelley—don’t expect me to swallow that. You’re going to have to come up with something better.”

“But I’m telling the truth.”

“Don’t even try it. I know you too well. Come on. Spill everything.”

I let out a long sigh, surrendering to the inevitable. So I told him what happened with Daniel at the restaurant, the tension in the men’s store, and the absurd scene I witnessed in the parking lot.

Craig listened, but instead of the sympathy I expected, he burst out laughing—so hard he had to clutch his stomach.

“Did I say something funny?” My voice dripped with sarcasm, but he only laughed harder.

“Sophia, seriously? You packed your bags and came back here just because Daniel did that?”

“That’s part of the reason. And I want everything set for our competition.”

“No. You’re jealous. That’s what’s eating you alive. You saw him kissing another woman right after he kissed you at the restaurant. Admit it—you’re jealous.”

His words caught me off guard for a second, but I recovered quickly, letting out a sharp, sarcastic laugh.

“Jealous? Of Daniel?” I pointed at myself in disbelief. “Craig, how many times do I have to say it? I’m not falling for him. He can kiss every woman in the city if he wants. Besides, he made it very clear. He said I’m not special—that I mean nothing to him.”

“Sure, that’s what he said. But what about you, Sophia?”

“Oh, for the love of God, Craig! How many times do I have to say it? I’m not jealous!” I threw my hands up, frustration boiling over. “If he wants to treat me like I’m nothing special, I’ll return the favor. I have no interest in playing some dramatic role in his life.”

I grabbed my suitcase by the handle.

“Wait. Before you disappear for the night...” Craig said.

I stopped and gave him a questioning look, one brow raised.

“Does Daniel know you moved back here again?”

“No, and frankly, it’s none of his business. He should worry about his own life, and I’ll handle mine.”

With that, I grabbed my bag and went into my old room, not noticing the sly, knowing smile that spread across Craig's lips as I walked away.

Chapter 256

Point of view: Daniel:

"Nanay Emily, have you seen Sophia this morning?"

I searched the whole house for nearly five minutes, but I couldn't find her anywhere. Not knowing where she was, I went straight to my housekeeper.

"Didn't she tell you?"

"Tell me what?"

"That she went back to her old apartment."

I frowned. "She moved back? Why?"

"Exactly. She said she needs to stay there to rehearse for the big competition. Apparently, they need all the time they can get before the final."

“But couldn’t she stay—”

“Leave her be, anak. It’s only for a week. Your wife said she’s determined to win because she wants to donate every last cent of the prize money to the victims of the typhoon in the city of Amador.”

“She’s really giving away the entire prize? Why would she do that?” I stared at her, genuinely baffled. Sophia always managed to surprise me.

“Some people just want to help, especially when so many lost everything in the storm.”

For a moment, I couldn’t find any words.

“If you want, you can call her, Daniel. Talk things through properly.”

“It’s fine, Nanay. Just tell her that when she comes back, I’ll need her to sign these papers. That’s all I’m asking.”

I handed Nanay Emily a blue folder stuffed with documents. Inside were the updated contract and all the paperwork for the KI Corporation project with Mr. Giovanni’s company. I still didn’t understand why Mr. Giovanni and his team insisted Sophia sign for the deal to go through. In the end, it wasn’t up to me. I just had to accept it.

“Why don’t you call her or stop by her old apartment so she can sign them for you yourself?”

“I don’t have time for that, Nanay. I have meetings scheduled with our new business partners today.”

“Don’t worry, Daniel. I’ll give her the documents as soon as she comes back.”

I smiled gratefully and kissed her cheek. “Thank you, Nanay.”

Minutes later, I was already behind the wheel, ready to start my day, when my phone buzzed in my pocket.

“And what does she want now?” I muttered, glancing at the screen. It was Chloe—my ex. With zero interest in dealing with her drama, I declined the call and tossed my phone onto the passenger seat. I wasn’t in the mood for her games.

Memories of the previous afternoon surfaced—Sophia seeing Chloe and me in the parking lot. The truth was, I was going to kiss Chloe anyway, but if I’m being honest, I probably would’ve kept it private. Instead, when I saw Sophia heading toward her car, I grabbed Chloe and kissed her right there, making sure Sophia didn’t miss it.

Sophia didn’t react at all, and that frustrated me more than I was willing to admit. The moment she disappeared from view, I let go of Chloe and didn’t look back.

Six days had passed since then. Every one of them had been consumed by endless meetings, tight deadlines, and the stress of pushing the KI Corporation project forward with Mr. Giovanni's team. The work demanded every ounce of my patience—and yet Sophia still managed to take up more space in my thoughts than I wanted to admit.

It had been six days since Sophia packed her things and went back to her old apartment to rehearse. I still couldn't understand why she insisted on moving. My house is only half an hour from her studio—was it really that much trouble for her to drive?

Honestly, the whole thing made me want to tear my hair out. I slammed my fist onto the stack of papers, then sank back in my chair and forced myself to breathe. I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples as a headache started to form behind them.

"Wow... sorry. Everything okay in here?"

I looked up to find Andrew standing at the edge of my desk.

"Another work-induced headache?"

"What else would it be?" I snapped, frowning.

Andrew shrugged and slid a blue folder across my desk. "Is it your wife? Just a hunch," he said, wearing that faint smile.

I rolled my eyes. “Why would you assume she has anything to do with this?”

“Let’s be real—you’ve been unbearable since Sophia went back to her old apartment. Your shouting is so loud I can practically hear you from the office next door.” Andrew flipped through a few pages, grinning.

“My mood has nothing to do with her. It’s the Giovanni project that’s making me yell at everyone.”

“If that helps you sleep at night, sure.” He shrugged lazily again. “But for the record, I don’t buy it.”

I clenched my jaw, refusing to bite. There was no point arguing and giving him more ammunition to tease me. He handed me the folder to sign, then picked it up again.

“Well, good luck with the Giovanni team... and that unbearable headache.”

“Are you trying to make today your last day here?”

That wiped the smile off his face.

“Forget I said anything. I was joking.” He tried to sound casual, but he was already backing toward the door. “I’ll get back to work now. Excuse me.”

“Absolutely delightful,” I thought dryly as Andrew finally left me alone.

The rest of the day felt endless—my head pounding through relentless meetings and the constant pressure of the new project. Still, none of it compared to how strangely empty the house had become without Sophia’s presence.

I’d gotten used to her routine—the way she practiced by the pool every morning, or filled that spare room with music and laughter while she rehearsed. Now the atmosphere felt heavier and quieter than ever.

When I pulled into the driveway that night, I noticed light spilling from the living room onto the front lawn. That was strange. No one ever left the lights on—especially not this late. The dashboard clock read 10:30 when I stepped out, already loosening my tie.

I opened the front door and was halfway out of my coat when something on the couch caught my eye: a woman curled up, lost in sleep.

My breath caught when I realized it was Sophia.

Chapter 258

There she was, fast asleep in the living room, as if she’d never left.

“Anak, you’re home already?”

Nanay Emily’s soft voice behind me startled me. I turned and found her holding a tube of sports gel, her expression calm but worried.

“Nanay, why is Sophia sleeping here? And what’s the gel for?” I asked, nodding toward her hand.

She took a breath, about to answer, but Sophia shifted on the couch right then, her blanket sliding to the floor.

Nanay stepped closer and lowered her voice. “She got home a little while ago. She’s absolutely exhausted. She didn’t even make it to the bedroom before she passed out.”

I crouched to pick up the blanket, but as I knelt beside the couch, something on Sophia’s leg stopped me cold: a dark, ugly bruise spread across her right thigh.

“What happened to her leg? How did she hurt herself?” My eyes swept over her arms and her other leg, finding another bruise on her right arm and two more scattered along her left leg.

“She told me she got hit during rehearsals.”

“Forget those rehearsals, Nanay Emily! She’s not going back to that competition—not if she’s getting hurt like this!” I clenched my fists as anger rose over my concern.

Nanay let out a sigh and patted my arm gently.

“Daniel, you can’t stop her now. She’s poured everything into this. All those hours, all that hard work, just to reach the final.” Nanay sat on the edge of the couch and uncapped the gel, carefully applying it to Sophia’s bruised legs.

“And what if she ends up bruised from head to toe? Is it really worth it?”

“These things happen during rehearsals, anak. Now, why don’t you carry her to the bedroom? I’ll help her change and take care of the rest.”

“I can handle it, Nanay.”

She looked at me, surprised. “You’re going to help her change?”

“No. I mean I’ll handle her bruises myself. You don’t need to worry.”

“All right, if you’re sure you can do it.”

“I am,” I said quietly, carefully lifting Sophia into my arms and carrying her to the bedroom.

For nearly twenty minutes, I sat beside her and applied gel to every bruise I could find. Watching her sleep—so fragile and drained—I knew I needed to talk to her in the morning. I might not feel anything for her, or at least that was what I kept telling myself, but seeing her battered for a dance competition didn't sit right with me.

Was this really the only way she could help the typhoon victims in Amador? Was it worth all this pain?

If that truly was her only reason, I'd rather match the prize money myself and distribute it among the survivors than watch her end up like this.

I checked my watch. It was past eleven. With a heavy sigh, I took the tube of gel and headed quietly toward the door.

That was when her voice broke the silence, barely above a whisper.

Chapter 259

"No. No... please, don't do it. No. Please, don't do this..."

I froze and turned back.

Sophia's head moved from side to side, her face twisted in fear, sweat beading on her forehead. She looked trapped in a nightmare, her whole body tense.

I hurried to her, carefully wiping her forehead with my handkerchief, trying not to startle her awake.

“Help! Someone help me, please!”

Her cries were soft, but her distress was unmistakable. I tried to catch her words, but most of what she said was garbled and desperate. The only thing clear was her constant plea: “No.”

“No, please, don’t do it!”

Her cry tore through the room. She thrashed in her sleep as if she were trapped somewhere far from me. I leaned in, ready to wake her, when she suddenly spoke in Portuguese.

“Não, eu te imploro. Por favor, pare. Não faça isso. Não...”

The sound of her voice turned me cold. I stared at her, my heart pounding. Then she stopped crying and rolled onto her side, leaving me confused and unsettled.

Was she begging someone? What was happening inside that dream? Who was she trying to stop?

I clenched my jaw as I watched her settle back into a calm sleep, as if nothing had happened.

Why would she cry like that? Why would she plead with someone to stop?

I let out a heavy breath and pulled the blanket up to her waist to keep her warm. Once I was sure she was okay, I headed for the door. Before I left, I cast one last look at her and closed it softly behind me.

By the time I reached my room, it was already one in the morning, and I still couldn't sleep. I lay staring at the ceiling, telling myself to relax, but her terrified face was burned into my mind. I kept hearing her voice as she cried and pleaded with someone in her sleep to stop.

Who are you, Sophia? What kind of past are you hiding? Was all of that just a dream?

"Looking for your wife?" Tatay Berto asked with a warm smile when I turned toward him.

"Yes. Have you seen her by any chance, Tatay Berto?"

He smiled and pointed toward the kitchen. "You'll find her with Nanay Emily in there."

"Thank you. I appreciate it." I gave him a grateful smile and headed straight for the kitchen.

Sweat clung to my skin, and my clothes still smelled like it. I hadn't even changed out of my gym clothes before coming to look for her. I had to talk to her about the injuries she'd gotten last night.

"Where did all these bruises come from?" I heard Nanay Emily ask as I reached the kitchen door.

Sophia's voice was light, almost indifferent. "Oh, I got them during rehearsal, Nanay," she replied, showing her bruises. "I just slipped from the harness, that's all."

I was stunned by her casual answer, but she only laughed as if she'd just told a harmless joke.

Chapter 260

None of us had realized the door was unlocked.

"Did you even check whether the door was locked?" I shouted, startling both of them in their chairs.

"Vaniel!" Her eyes widened as she pressed a hand to her chest. "Was it necessary to shout like that?"

I ignored her question and closed the distance between us.

"You fell from a harness and you're standing here laughing?" I asked, grabbing her arm so I could check her injuries.

“And what do you expect me to do, Daniel? Cry over a little bump?” She yanked her arm away and shot me a hard look.

How could she not realize I was the one who had carried her to her room last night, pressing ice to every bruise she was trying to laugh off?

“A little bump, Sophia? If it was nothing, how do you explain these bruises? You could’ve been seriously hurt—or worse!”

“Excuse me, Mr. Kelley, but as far as I know, this is my body. If anyone gets to complain about these bruises, it’s me, not you. Maybe you should worry about your own business for once.”

“We need to talk, Sophia,” I said, refusing to back down as I held her gaze.

“Sorry, Daniel, but there’s nothing to discuss. I don’t have time or interest in that.”

“Believe it or not, there’s a lot we need to talk about—especially your upcoming competition.” I tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear, but she slapped my hand away.

“And why would you care about my competition, Mr. Kelley? Are you suddenly interested in my career?”

Her sarcasm made my teeth clench.

“We’re talking in my study. Now.”

“Of course not! I’m not going anywhere with you, and I refuse to talk about my competition! Why can’t you just leave me alone so I can keep icing my arm?”

“You can ice your arm later. This can’t wait.”

“No, I don’t want to, Daniel. I won’t talk to you!”

Unbelievable. This woman was as stubborn as they came.

“If you’d rather not walk, just say so. I’ll carry you straight to the study,” I replied, locking my gaze on hers.

A small smile almost surfaced when I saw her jaw tighten. Honestly, she looked pretty adorable when she was angry.

“Fine. I’ll talk to you. But why do we have to go to your study? Can’t we stay here?”

“Don’t you ever get tired of asking questions?” I muttered, running a hand over my head.

“Let go of my hand,” she snapped.

“I’ll let go as soon as you agree to come with me,” I said, squeezing gently. Truthfully, I liked how perfectly her hand fit in mine—soft and warm.

Still refusing to give in, she slapped my hand away the moment I leaned down to lift her.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“I warned you I’d carry you if it was necessary.”

“I have legs, Daniel. I can walk just fine.”

“All right, then. Let’s go to the study.” I let out a sigh.