

A Favor 271

Chapter 271

As soon as I hung up, a wave of relief washed through me. I turned to the others, eager to share the news.

“His name is Bryan. He runs a detective agency, and he agreed to help us search for Rian.”

“Weren’t you listening earlier? Alex and I already hired a private investigator. We don’t need anyone else looking for Rian.”

Every eye swung toward Daniel, tension tightening the room. What was wrong with him now?

“Can we even trust that friend of yours?” His hands were clenched into fists, his knuckles pale with strain.

I blinked, startled by his reaction, ready to snap back, but his mother cut in first.

“Daniel, why are you being so difficult? Sophia is right. Her friend could make a difference in finding Rian. We need all the help we can get, no matter where it comes from.”

Daniel let out a low, bitter laugh and muttered, “Sure. That’s just her excuse to call another man,” making sure his words reached me.

He didn't wait for anyone to respond. He stormed out, leaving the rest of us sitting in uncomfortable silence.

His mother waved off the drama with a soft smile and a wink. "Don't mind him, sweetheart. He's just jealous, that's all."

I let out a small laugh, even though I knew jealousy was the last thing on Daniel's mind. There was no point in explaining, so I let it go.

A while later, Gavin arrived with the rest of the group. Their faces were lined with worry, and the tension in the room thickened as everyone gathered. Rian's absence—especially while pregnant—hung over all of us like a weight.

Midnight came and went, and there was still no sign of her.

Suddenly, I remembered that today was Alex's birthday. I remembered how excited Rian had been to plan a surprise celebration before everything fell apart.

"Happy birthday, Alex," I said, giving his shoulder a supportive pat.

"Thanks," he replied, though his heart clearly wasn't in it.

The others joined in, offering their own wishes and even singing a soft version of “Happy Birthday” in the hope of lifting his spirits.

As I watched them sing, it struck me that we hadn’t contacted all the members of Rian’s band.

I quickly dialed each of their numbers, but disappointment sank in when none of them had heard from her either.

“Thanks, Jordan.”

“And who exactly is this Jordan?”

From behind me, Daniel’s hoarse voice cut through the air. I shot him a look, one brow lifting, but I decided not to take the bait.

“Just ignore him, Sophia. He’s trying to get under your skin. Act like he isn’t even there.”

So I did exactly that. I walked past him and dropped onto the couch.

Even then, Daniel wouldn’t let it go.

“What is it with you and that Jordan, huh? Seriously, you’re just making yourself look unstable.”

“Jordan is just a friend—a member of Rian’s band.”

“Did he have any news about her?”

“No, he doesn’t know anything. She’s not with him, but I’ll try Gelo. He and Rian are pretty close.”

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I dialed Gelo, but after a few rings, the call went straight to voicemail.

“He didn’t answer. Maybe he’s busy,” I murmured, dialing Gelo again. The phone rang, then went to voicemail.

“Or maybe he’s just asleep like a rock,” Cari, one of Rian’s closest friends, suggested.

“Yeah, that makes sense,” Gavin agreed as he stood and walked over to where I was sitting.

Before I could react, I felt myself yanked back, a strong arm wrapping around my waist with a firm, unmistakable grip.

Gavin looked at me, startled, but stayed quiet. Around the room, everyone exchanged looks, silently watching Daniel's sudden reaction.

I turned to look at him. His arm was still around me, and there was a storm in his eyes—something intense and unreadable.

In that moment, I couldn't help wondering what was going on with him. Lately, it felt like every time I spoke to another man, he reacted with that strange possessiveness.

Maybe it was jealousy.

Or maybe it was something deeper.

Sophia's POV:

It had only been half an hour since I called Alex to tell him we finally had a lead on Rian. Earlier that morning, Bryan had reached out and confirmed where she was.

The moment I ended the call, a wave of anxiety washed over me, unsettling my thoughts with the nagging feeling that something was wrong.

I took a deep breath, doing my best to shake off the unease. I settled onto the couch and let Madilyn Bailey's music fill the quiet room.

Another thirty minutes passed, but my nerves wouldn't let up. Trying to distract myself, I went into the kitchen to start preparing lunch. Nanay Emily was already there, busy at the counter. I leaned in to see what she was making so skillfully.

"Good morning, Nanay Emily," I greeted her, smiling as the warm aroma of her cooking drifted through the room. "What's on the menu today?"

"I'm making menudo, Anak. Your husband requested it. He said it's his favorite and he'd love to have it for lunch."

"Really?" I raised a brow, a little surprised. "Wasn't he supposed to work today?"

"No. He told me he's staying home to wait for news about Rian."

"Oh." Guilt prickled through me. I still hadn't told him we finally knew where his sister was.

"He's at the gym, if you want to talk to him."

I shook my head gently, still feeling guilty. “I’ll just text him, Nanay. Thank you.”

She laughed, shaking her head. “Really? Why text him when you could just go to the gym and talk to him face-to-face?”

All I could do was offer a small smile and shrug. Deep down, I had no intention of seeing him. I still couldn’t get yesterday out of my head—how he’d acted at Alex’s house, so possessive in front of everyone, as if I belonged to him.

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Ignoring her question, I pulled out my phone and typed a quick message to update him about his sister. I didn’t wait to see if he’d respond. Instead, I put on my earbuds. If I was being honest, I didn’t expect a reply at all.

Next, I went to the refrigerator and took out everything I needed for my favorite fried chicken.

If he was going to eat menudo, I decided I’d treat myself to something I actually wanted.

With “Happy” by Pharrell blasting in my ears, I couldn’t help swaying my hips as I seasoned the chicken, completely lost in my own world. That was when I felt someone watching me.

I turned and found my husband leaning against the doorframe, hands in his pockets, silently following my every move.

I decided to ignore him and kept dancing, humming along while I worked.

“What are you cooking?” His voice made me jump.

I turned, meeting his gaze with one brow raised. Part of me wanted to snap, “Why do you care?” But instead, I decided to play along.

“I’m making fried chicken, Your Royal Highness,” I replied, smiling as I gave an exaggerated bow as if he truly were royalty.

He slid behind the counter, quick as a thief, snatched two golden pieces of my fried chicken, and darted out of my reach. I froze in shock, mouth open. By the time I found my voice to protest, he’d already stuffed both pieces into his mouth and was chewing with obvious enjoyment.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I asked, glaring at him.

“I’m just enjoying my fried chicken,” he replied, a playful spark in his eyes.

“That isn’t yours! I made it for me, not you!”

“Oh, yeah? My mistake, sweetheart. I thought sharing food came with the marriage package.” He flashed another shameless smile.

A frustrated growl slipped out of me before I could stop it. “You have to be kidding.”

His smile vanished, and his tone shifted sharply. “Looks like you still haven’t learned how this works, have you?”

“And what lesson is that, exactly?” I didn’t flinch. I just crossed my arms and faced him head-on.

Without answering, he brushed past me and went straight for the counter, grabbing two more pieces of my chicken.

My patience snapped. “I swear, Daniel Kelley, if you touch one more piece—” I growled, chasing him around the kitchen.

His laughter rang out—not his usual arrogant chuckle, but something genuine and carefree that nearly caught me off guard. If things were different—if we were just friends instead of whatever we were—maybe I would’ve even told him he looked better when he laughed like that.

If you laughed like that more often, you might actually seem charming.

Too bad we’re not friends, so don’t expect me to say anything nice.

“You sound just like Rian. Do you really think I deserve to die over a couple pieces of chicken?”

“Those weren’t for you! I cooked them for me!” My frustration flared as I narrowed my eyes at him, ready to start chasing him again.

Then my phone vibrated in my pocket, stopping me cold.

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An unknown number glowed on the screen. My heart lurched, and anxiety prickled at the back of my neck. Who would be calling me at this hour?

Daniel noticed immediately and slid closer to glance at my screen, but I stepped aside, putting a little distance between us. He simply followed, holding his stolen chicken like a peace offering. I shot him a glare and answered.

“Hello?”

“Good afternoon, ma’am. This is Mich, the head nurse at Good Samaritan Hospital. I’m calling on behalf of Alexander Jonathan Smith. He was brought in twenty minutes ago after a car accident, and he’s currently being treated in the emergency room.”

“What?” I barely managed, my whole body going cold.

“Oh my God.”

Shock numbed my senses, and before I realized it, my hand had found Daniel’s. He didn’t let go. Instead, his grip tightened, his eyes filling with worry and confusion as he searched my face.

“A car accident?”

“What happened? Who called you? What’s going on?” he asked, his voice low and urgent. But I barely registered his words. I focused on every detail the nurse gave me.

“He’s being taken into surgery. May I have your name and your relationship to the patient? The last incoming call on his phone was from this number.”

“I’m his friend. He’s my brother-in-law. I called him earlier to tell him where his wife was.”

“Thank you for letting us know, ma’am. Could you contact his wife and his family? We’ll need consent from a legal guardian before Mr. Smith’s surgery can begin.”

“Yes. I’ll inform them immediately. Thank you for telling me.”

I had barely ended the call when Daniel cupped my face in his hands, worry clouding his eyes.

“Tell me what happened. Who’s hurt?”

“It’s Alex,” I blurted, the words tripping over each other. “He had an accident, and he’s at the hospital. We have to contact his sister now!” My voice shook, speeding up as panic took hold.

“Wait. Slow down.” Daniel squeezed my hands and touched my face, trying to steady me. “I can’t help if I can’t understand you.”

Taking a trembling breath, I closed my eyes for a moment and forced myself to speak clearly. “Alex was in a car accident. They took him to the hospital.”

His eyes widened, worry etched into his face. “Damn it,” he snapped, grabbing my hand and dragging me toward the garage without hesitating.

When his hand settled gently on my knee, I turned to look at him. The hospital parking lot surrounded us, both of us waiting for any sign of Rian.

My chest tightened, every breath sharp and shallow. A chill ran through me. We stayed there, caught in a silent stare, neither of us daring to break the quiet.

After a moment, I let out a tired sigh and looked away, focusing on the world beyond the car window.

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Rian's call snapped us out of our haze, and we ran for the hospital entrance. Daniel took my hand halfway there, and even though I wanted to pull away and say something, the crowd around us forced me to stay silent. He laced our fingers together, holding on as we hurried inside. Even after we passed through the doors, he never let go.

Three long hours passed before the doctor finally came out of the operating room. He told us Alex was out of danger for now, but his fractured rib would need careful monitoring. We all breathed out in relief and offered silent prayers.

Alex was moved to the ICU, and Rian was the first one allowed in to see him. The rest of us stayed in the hallway, desperate for any update.

Scanning the waiting area, I realized there wasn't a single seat left. I wove past the crowded chairs to find a quiet spot by the wall, hoping not to be in anyone's way. Out of nowhere, someone tugged my hand, and before I could react, I fell straight into my husband's lap.

"Daniel, what the hell—"

I barely got the words out. He pressed a quick kiss to my lips before I could finish. The shock stole my voice, and all I could do was melt into him as his arms wrapped around my waist.

Rian appeared in front of me, catching my attention before I even realized she'd already come out of the ICU. The moment I noticed nearly every head in the room turning in our direction, I tried to pry Daniel's hands off my waist and stand up.

Daniel pulled me closer, his warm breath against my ear. "Lower your voice," he said, barely above a whisper as he rested his head on my shoulder.

"Are you trying to put on a show?" I whispered.

"You see them, don't you? Every one of them is watching us," he murmured, tipping his chin toward the curious faces around us. "They're acting like they have no idea what's going on between us."

"Stay still, unless you want me to give them something they can actually gossip about."

That warning made my heart stumble. Forcing myself to stay quiet, I kept my eyes on the ICU doors, pushing away the nerves twisting inside me.

"Any news about Alex?" Craig asked as he settled onto the couch across from my desk.

A long sigh escaped me before I crossed the room and sat down in front of him.

"He finally got out of the hospital. But he still can't remember what happened in the accident... or the wedding."

Craig winced. "That's rough."

"He spent almost a month hooked up to monitors. When Rian brought her son to see him, Alex acted like he was meeting a stranger." I exhaled. "The only thing that surprised me more was the DNA test. Turns out Dino really is his son."

Changing the subject, Craig smiled and asked, "So, how are things with your famous husband?"

That made me roll my eyes. I stood and returned to my desk, dodging the question.

"Seriously, Craig? Do we really have to talk about him right now?" I asked, frowning as I slipped my phone into my bag.

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"What's the problem? He's your husband, isn't he?" He just smiled, crossing his arms and refusing to drop it.

"That doesn't mean I want to talk about it," I shot back, holding his gaze.

Halfway to the bathroom, my phone started vibrating in my bag.

Great. It was Daniel.

“What now?” I muttered, glaring at my phone.

Right on cue, Daniel’s name flashed across the screen. I held my phone up so Craig could see who was calling.

He only smiled and excused himself, closing the door behind him to give me some privacy.

Alone, I steadied myself with a deep breath before answering. “Hello?”

“I need you in my office right now. There are papers for the new project that need your signature.”

That caught me off guard. He didn’t even greet me—he went straight to demands.

“Seriously, Mr. Kelley? You could’ve emailed the documents,” I said, pressing my palm to my forehead.
“I have plans this afternoon!”

The truth was, my schedule was completely open. I just needed an excuse to avoid him.

“Mr. Giovanni will be arriving soon. I need you here.”

“Fine. I’m coming,” I muttered, rolling my eyes as if he could see me.

Sometimes I wished he’d finally grow up and lose the bossy, irritating attitude. As expected, he hung up before I could say another word.

“Unbelievable. Daniel Kelley, you make my blood boil.”

Annoyed that I had to leave the studio, I threw on my coat, tucked my phone back into my bag, and went to tell Craig I needed to rush to Daniel’s office to sign urgent documents.

My brows lifted when the sleek glass tower of Kelley International Corporation rose in front of me.

“Can you believe it? The building is almost as big as Daniel’s ego,” I murmured, clicking my tongue in mock admiration.

I rummaged through my bag and grabbed my red coat from the front seat before stepping out of the car. Inside, I was greeted by a chorus of cheerful faces, almost every employee smiling at me.

“Good morning, ma’am!”

“Good morning, everyone,” I replied, returning their smiles.

At first, I assumed it was because I was a new face in the building—maybe they thought I was a client, or maybe it was just part of their training to welcome everyone.

My confusion grew when the receptionist greeted me by name, smiling so widely it practically stretched from ear to ear.

“Good morning, Mrs. Sophia,” she said.

That startled me. I automatically checked my jacket for a name tag, but I wasn’t wearing one.

“Hi—wait. How do you already know my name?” I asked, trying not to sound completely bewildered.

“Everyone here knows you, Mrs. Sophia. You’re the CEO’s wife,” she replied as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Part of me wanted to push for more details, but I held back. Instead, I gave another polite smile and asked, “Could you tell me what floor my husband’s office is on?”

The elevator doors opened, and as I stepped inside, two more employees greeted me with equally wide smiles. I nodded and smiled back, wondering the entire time how it was possible everyone seemed to recognize me on sight.

When I reached the executive floor, the hallway seemed to fall silent the moment I appeared. Heads turned. The sudden attention made me want to shrink into my coat, and I forced myself to swallow.

“Good morning, Mrs. Sophia.” A small crowd greeted me in unison, making me feel even more out of place.

“Hi, good morning,” I answered, trying to sound friendly despite my discomfort.

“You look even more stunning in person than in the photo, Mrs. Sophia.”

Confusion flickered across my face as I turned to the woman beside me. “What photo?”

“The one in the hallway,” she said, walking with me as we headed toward Daniel’s office.

When I turned the corner, I stopped short.

A huge photo from our wedding reception hung on the wall—the kind of posed portrait photographers always insist on taking. Daniel stood behind me, one arm wrapped around my waist, my hand laced with his. We’d been caught mid-laugh, a happiness so bright it practically radiated from the image.

I stared at the photo, completely blindsided, at a loss for words. Hanging something so personal at his workplace was the last thing I expected from Daniel, and I couldn't understand why he'd chosen that particular moment.

A memory hit me out of nowhere, reminding me exactly why Daniel had walked down the aisle with me in the first place.

Seriously, Sophia Ysabelle? You forgot that quickly? Of course he wants everyone to see that photo—especially his new partner, Mr. Giovanni.

With a sigh, I shook my head in disbelief. How could I be so clueless sometimes?

Honestly, I could be a lost cause.

Seeing an empty desk where his secretary used to sit, I headed straight for his office and knocked softly.

"Come in!"

That simple invitation sent a shiver down my spine. Was his voice always that warm? When did simply hearing Daniel speak start tying my stomach into knots?

The moment I stepped inside, Daniel's whole face lit up.

"Sophia!" he exclaimed, grinning from ear to ear as he left his seat and crossed the room to greet me.

If the room had been empty, I might've blurted, Are you serious? Are you actually happy to see me? But with several stern-looking businessmen scattered around his office, I kept my thoughts to myself.

"Hi, sweetheart."

I barely got the words out before Daniel pulled me in and pressed a deep kiss to my lips in front of everyone.

For a moment, I froze, unable to process what had just happened, while the sound of polite applause echoed around us.

"Gentlemen, allow me to introduce my wife, Sophia Kelley."

He kept an arm comfortably around my waist as he introduced me to each of the four men seated nearby. I wore my best smile and greeted them one by one, even as the warmth of his hand against my back distracted me.

Soon the conversation shifted to business—new ventures, new contracts, endless discussions. I waited quietly beside Daniel, expecting him to hand me the papers he'd called me here for.

The entire meeting passed without a single document appearing.

Once the last guest left, I turned to Daniel with my hands on my hips. "So, where are the papers you needed me to sign?"

He shrugged as he walked back to his desk. "Mr. Giovanni couldn't make it today."

A frustrated grimace pulled at my mouth. "And what does Mr. Giovanni missing the meeting have to do with you dragging me all the way here?" I asked, following him across the office and stopping right in front of his desk.

"He's the one who has all the papers for the new project!"

Unbelievable. I shook my head and stared at him. "Then tell me again—what exactly am I doing here?" My eyes never left his as I waited for an answer.

"Sit down and be quiet," he snapped, pointing at the sofa with a look that didn't invite argument.

“Honestly, I don’t know how you manage to be so irritating,” I shot back, grabbing my coat and bag. I was halfway to the door when his voice stopped me.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Back to the studio, obviously! There’s no point staying here. Goodbye, Mr. Kelley!”

“Let Erwin drive you home.”

I paused in the doorway and turned back.

“No need, sweetheart. I’m perfectly capable of driving myself. And before I forget, thank you so much for dragging me here to do absolutely nothing.”

Now it was his turn to look surprised.

“Seriously, Daniel, thank you so much for bringing me here. You have no idea how much I love wasting my time like this. Truly, you’ve made my day unforgettable,” I said, my voice thick with sarcasm as I rolled my eyes.

I didn’t give him the chance to respond. Spinning on my heel, I yanked the door open and walked out, making sure to shut it behind me before he could say a word.

“Perfect. I canceled two dance classes for nothing.” Sliding into the car, I let out a dry laugh. “What an absolutely fantastic day,” I muttered, shaking my head.

It had been almost an hour since I stormed out of Daniel’s office, and I was still stuck in traffic, nowhere near the studio. My stomach growled impatiently as I checked my watch for what felt like the hundredth time.

When the cars finally inched forward, I decided a proper meal might salvage my day. I parked in front of a cozy Italian place and hurried inside.

A Margherita pizza and a plate of lasagna bolognese soon sat at the center of my table. Lost in the comfort of familiar flavors, I barely noticed someone sliding into the seat across from me. I was so hungry I didn’t look up—until I heard a voice I’d prayed I would never have to hear again.

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That voice sliced through my thoughts like a blade. The one sound in the world I never wanted to hear again. My grip tightened around my fork as I slowly lifted my gaze, dread settling in my stomach the moment my eyes met his.

Félix De Luca.

Six years hadn’t been long enough to escape him. He was the source of my sleepless nights, my ruined memories. The man who shattered my place in society, tore me away from my father, and dismantled every part of my life with a smile. And now he was sitting across from me as if fate took pleasure in cruelty.

“Ysabelle, sweetheart. You look stunning. Tell me... did you miss me, even a little?”

“Why are you here, Félix? What do you want from me?” The words came through clenched teeth, my expression sharp enough to cut.

“Is that how you greet me? I thought you’d be happier to see an old friend.” He chuckled under his breath and leaned back with that arrogant tilt of his chin.

I dropped my fork onto the table with a loud clang, ignoring the annoyed looks around us. My gaze stayed locked on him. “Don’t come near me. And stop calling me sweetheart. You make my skin crawl.”

My disgust only entertained him. He leaned forward, his face too close for my comfort. “Relax, Belle. I just wanted to remind you how much I still want you. I want to touch you again. Taste you again. Make you mine again.”

Hearing that twisted line again stole my breath, and a familiar, suffocating sensation closed around my throat.

“Why did you run the last time we saw each other? I didn’t do anything to you. Isn’t that right?”

“You have the nerve to say that?” I hissed. “Six years ago, you deleted every second of the security footage to cover up what you did to me. But it won’t save you forever. The moment I find Layla, you’re going to prison. And when that day comes, I’ll gladly watch you rot there until your last breath.”

I shoved my chair back and stood, never taking my eyes off him. Suddenly, every bite I'd enjoyed turned to ash. I couldn't swallow another mouthful. Without a word, I left enough money on the table to cover my bill and headed for the exit.

I'd barely taken a few steps when his voice cut through the air again. "I know who your husband is, Ysabelle!"

I stopped, closing my eyes for a moment as I took a deep breath to steady myself. Slowly, I turned back and walked to him, facing him head-on.

"Let me see if I've got this right. You married Daniel Kelley. That's Daniel Kelley from KI Corporation, isn't it?"

I stayed silent as I stepped closer until I was right in front of him.

He clicked his tongue and shook his head, that same smug smile curling his mouth. "Well, well. Looks like you finally figured out how to land the biggest fish in the city."

Planting my hand firmly on the table, I gave him a smile that didn't reach my eyes.

"That's right. I didn't just land a big fish. He's top-shelf, the best you could possibly imagine."

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“Is he that impressive in bed, Ysabelle? Does he give you what you need?”

My jaw tightened, my fists clenching in my lap.

“Tell me, does he make you scream the way I used to—”

Before he could finish, I grabbed my wineglass and threw what was left straight into his face.

He shouted, drawing the attention of half the restaurant with his outrage. “You’re insane...!”

Every head turned toward us, but I didn’t flinch. I grabbed my fork and pointed it at him, my hand steady.

“Don’t you dare come near me or my husband. You’re a bastard, Félix. Try it, and you’ll regret it.”

“And if I don’t, Ysabelle?”

“Then you’d better start running, because I’ll make sure you don’t get a second chance.”

His laughter only made my blood boil. I tossed the fork aside, grabbed the nearest glass of water, and splashed it straight into his face.

“What the hell?”

A slow smile spread across my lips.

“Relax, Félix. It’s just water. I figured it might help rinse off some of the filth you’re dripping.”

I didn’t give him time to recover. I turned and stormed out, weaving between tables and bursting into the parking lot. My pulse thundered as I fumbled for my car keys, clumsily working my phone to call Bryan.

“Come on, Bryan, pick up,” I muttered, smacking the steering wheel when his line went straight to voicemail again and again.

With a surge of frustration, I yanked out my earbuds and shoved them into my bag. There was no point calling Bryan again—not now, not with my hands shaking and my nerves stretched to the breaking point.

My only concern was getting out of that parking lot before Félix tried something else. My eyes flicked repeatedly to the rearview mirror, searching for any sign that he was following me. When I was finally sure he wasn’t, I didn’t waste another second. I drove home as fast as I could.

Once I was safely inside, I went straight to my bedroom and dialed Bryan again. Relief flooded me when he finally answered. I told him everything that had happened at the restaurant, the words tumbling out of me. He ordered me not to move, not to leave the house. Bryan wouldn't take no for an answer and insisted on hiring a bodyguard, and this time I didn't bother protesting.

After I hung up, I called Craig to explain why I'd be keeping a low profile for a while. I told him the truth: after running into Félix, I was too shaken to risk going out again, and I'd rather wait until Bryan's security arrived before even thinking about stepping outside.

The rest of the day passed in silence. I stayed locked inside, filling the hours with music and mindless television, doing everything I could to keep my thoughts away from the fear still lingering just beneath the surface.

"Anak, aren't you going to work today?"