

A Favor 281

Chapter 281

Nanay Emily's gentle voice reached me as I sat on the garden bench, a guitar resting on my lap while my fingers strummed the strings absently.

"Not today, Nanay. I took a few days off," I replied, my tone sharp enough to discourage any further questions.

Three days had already passed since that encounter with Félix at the restaurant. For three days, I hadn't set foot outside the house. On the first day, I threw myself into chores, helping Nanay Emily dust and scrub every corner, changing all the sheets and curtains—even in Daniel's room. The next day, I followed Tatay Berto to the garage, rolling up my sleeves to help clean and wash Daniel's cars.

People asked from time to time why I was still home instead of at work. I always gave the same easy answer: I was just taking a short break.

"Do you want me to bring you some juice and a few snacks?"

A small sigh of relief escaped me when she didn't press with more questions.

"Yes, Nanay Emily, that would be great. Thank you." I nodded and smiled back at her.

"Alright, which one do you want—orange, apple, or strawberry?"

“Anything is fine, Nanay. I’m not picky today.”

She chuckled and disappeared through the door.

Alone again, I let my fingers glide over the guitar strings, humming a soft childhood melody—one that always brought back memories of the days I spent with my father. Even after everything, a part of me still ached for his comfort and the unwavering support I once believed he would always give me.

Back then, before the world turned harsh and complicated, my father would scoop me into his arms and spin me around the living room. He would dance with my mother and me, twirling us until I felt dizzy with happiness. Then he would carry me upstairs and tuck me in, making sure I always knew how much he loved me.

If fate gave me one more moment—one more dance, one last walk with him—I would want that song to last forever. There was nothing I wouldn’t give for another chance to dance with my father.

Lost in the melody, I kept playing and singing, unaware that someone had stopped behind me.

Whenever I clashed with my mother, I ran to my father. He would tell a silly joke or pull ridiculous faces until I laughed and forgot my worries, then he would gently encourage me to do what my mother asked. Some nights, he slipped a bill under my pillow while I slept. I never imagined a day would come when he wouldn’t be there for me.

A warm sting spread across my cheek as a single tear slid down. I wiped it away before Nanay Emily could notice and ask what was wrong.

I didn't even know why my chest suddenly felt so heavy.

Before I could pull myself together, the air went still—until a single clap broke the quiet right as I finished the song.

"Sophia, I had no idea you could play the guitar!"

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I turned, startled, forcing my breathing to steady. Andrew was clapping, and Daniel stood behind him with a perplexed expression that I chose to ignore as I focused on Andrew, who took a seat beside me.

"And you sing really well, too," Andrew added with a wide smile.

I smiled back.

"Do you mind if I try your guitar?"

"Sure," I said, handing it to him.

I glanced over my shoulder, half-expecting to find Daniel again, but he was already gone.

Andrew kept talking enthusiastically about his guitar skills and all the instruments he'd collected, but my mind drifted back to the song I'd chosen and the memories of when my father and mother were still with me.

"What made you choose that song?" he asked.

I wanted more than anything to have grown up with both of them by my side, holding me tight whenever things fell apart.

"Sophia?"

Dreaming of a future where everything could go back to the way it was felt pointless. Life had carried us all down different paths, and that would never change.

"Sophia!"

My thoughts scattered when he snapped his fingers right in front of my face.

"Are you sure you're okay?" His face leaned closer.

“Yes, I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

He couldn’t help chuckling, shaking his head slightly.

“You know, that’s the third time I’ve tried to get your attention.”

“Sorry.”

“Seriously, are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m perfectly fine, really,” I said with a faint smile.

He looked like he wanted to press the issue, but before he could, Nanay Emily arrived carrying a tray with a glass of juice and a tuna sandwich.

As I took the tray from her, I looked at Andrew.

“By the way, what brings you here today?”

“My boss needed help organizing some paperwork for his trip to Mexico tomorrow, so I came with him.”

I nodded.

“Do you know how long he’ll be in Mexico?” Nanay Emily asked, voicing the same question that was already in my mind.

“There aren’t any definite plans yet. He could be gone for a week, or maybe longer, depending on how those meetings go.”

A plan began to form the moment I heard that. With Daniel out of my way, I could finally make that trip to Amador City without having to answer his endless questions. Immediately, I thought of calling Bryan to see if he could send someone to watch my back.

Not long after, Andrew answered a call from Daniel, who wanted to know if he could come in.

“Are you really going to Amador City alone?”

Bryan didn’t waste a second expressing his concern the moment I mentioned traveling while Daniel would be gone for the week.

“Bryan, don’t worry. I won’t be alone. The bodyguards Daniel hired are coming with me, remember?”

“Alright, but the moment I finish my last project, I’ll book a flight and catch up with you there.”

“That’s fine. Just let me know when you arrive.”

As soon as Daniel’s car passed through the gates, I started packing my things into a suitcase. I waited another hour, making sure he would be at the airport before I left the house.

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Since his trip was for business, I assumed he would be busy for several days. I promised Nanay I would be back in three days.

Point of view of Daniel:

News about a powerful typhoon hitting California and other cities in the United States flashed across the television. I stopped flipping channels the moment the anchor mentioned the latest super typhoon barreling toward the country. I didn’t have to work today, so I stayed in my room, constantly checking the updates.

Weather reports filled the screen as the anchor explained that a super typhoon was expected to slam into California early Sunday morning, July 20. Meteorologists warned that its sustained winds were nearing 200 kilometers per hour—strong enough to be comparable to a Category Three hurricane. California’s emergency offices released their own statements, claiming the system already felt like a Category Five monster.

A firm knock at the door cut through the broadcast, followed by Nanay Emily calling my name.

“You can come in, Nanay Emily.”

She entered and asked, “Aren’t you going to work today?”

Without taking my eyes off the TV, I replied, “No, Nanay. I’m staying home.”

The news switched to another update. Early on the morning of July 19, the eye of the storm was more than 700 kilometers west of Amador City—a place that had already taken a Category Four hit barely two months earlier.

“Oh my God!”

Nanay’s gasp sounded behind me. I assumed she was reacting to the report, so I ignored it and asked about what had been bothering me.

“Nanay Emily, have you seen Sophia? She wasn’t here last night, and she’s not here this morning.”

I rubbed my forehead, remembering the change of plans. I'd come back yesterday, even though the trip to Mexico was supposed to last a full week. Our clients canceled half of the meetings, so we decided to return and reschedule everything for two weeks later.

"Oh, I forgot to mention it yesterday when you came home," Nanay Emily said, her eyes wide.

I frowned. "What did you forget to tell me?"

"Your wife left for Amador City the same day you left."

A jolt of panic shot through me—especially now, with the storm looming over that city. I sprang off the bed, reaching for my phone.

"Why did she go there alone? What was she thinking?" I demanded, already calling the pilot.

"She told me she wanted to donate the prize money from that competition. And so you know, Anak, she didn't go alone," Nanay hurried after me.

The moment she said Sophia wasn't alone, I froze and turned back to her.

"What do you mean she isn't alone?" I asked, still dialing as anxiety clenched tighter around my chest.

“She took two bodyguards with her.”

I frowned. “Bodyguards?”

“Sophia said a friend of hers hired bodyguards to go with her.” Nanay shrugged.

My body went rigid as I realized exactly which friend she meant.

“Good evening, Mr. Kelley.”

Roger’s voice came through the call.

“Roger, ready the plane. I have to go to Amador City now!”

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“I’m sorry, sir. We can’t take off today. The weather is too dangerous. The typhoon—”

“Storm or no storm, I have to get to Amador! My wife is there!”

“But, sir—”

“Anak, listen to your pilot. It isn’t safe to fly in this weather. Why don’t you call Sophia and make sure she’s—”

Without another word, I ended the call with Roger and immediately tried to reach Sophia.

Point of View: Daniel

It had been more than four hours since I saw the weather forecast on television, watching the clock tick forward. During that time, I tried calling Sophia’s phone again and again, but she didn’t answer or call back.

Every channel was broadcasting news about the storm. California was taking a brutal hit, and Amador City was one of the places already dealing with flooding.

Earlier, I contacted Rian and Alex just to make sure they were okay. I even had a quick call with my sister, mostly to complain about how stubborn Sophia was.

“You still haven’t had lunch, Anak.”

A hand rested on my shoulder, and I looked up to see Tatay Berto watching me with a serious expression. We were gathered in the living room, waiting for any news about what was happening in Amador City.

"I'm fine, Tatay Berto," I replied, letting out a long sigh.

"I don't know how I'm going to explain all of this to my mother. She's going to lose it when she finds out what's happening! God, that woman never gives me a moment of peace!" I added, dragging my fingers through my hair.

My eyebrows lifted when Tatay Berto suddenly laughed.

"Aren't you worried about your wife?" he asked, sitting down in the chair across from me.

"Of course I'm worried! Why else would I keep calling her?"

He nodded thoughtfully. "Hmm."

I couldn't stop thinking about why she insisted on being so stubborn. I told her not to go. I even suggested we could simply send money to help the typhoon victims, but she ignored everything I said.

"Maybe she really wanted to do something for those people."

"I understand her intention. What I can't wrap my head around is why she had to travel all the way there. Does she know someone in that place? Or is there some man she hasn't told me about?"

Tatay Berto laughed again.

"Anak, now you're confusing me. Are you scared for her, or are you jealous?"

"Tatay Berto, I'm not jealous. What scares me is imagining how my mom will react when she finds out what happened."

"Leave your mother aside for now, Daniel. She'll calm down. Worry about your wife first, because we still don't know what's happening in Amador City."

I closed my eyes as frustration washed over me, and I let out a slow, exhausted sigh.

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Point of View: Sophia

"Miss Sophia, we can't fly back to Los Angeles right now."

“What? What do you mean we can’t go back to Los Angeles?” I asked. Niko had come to my door that morning, right when we were supposed to leave for our flight.

“All flights out of Amador Airport have been canceled—domestic and international. The super typhoon approaching has made it impossible for planes to take off.”

“Are you sure?” I asked as I walked to the hotel window. The torrential rain blurred everything outside, making the streets look like they were sinking.

“Yes. Every news channel is talking about it.”

He stepped inside and went straight to the TV. The moment he turned it on, the reporter’s voice filled the room.

“On the morning of July nineteenth, the center of the storm is approximately 730 kilometers—455 miles—west of Amador City. The city already endured a Category Four typhoon within the last two months. If these systems continue to strengthen, the world could witness five Category Five cyclones simultaneously, a phenomenon recorded only once in history. Since reaching California, the storm’s trajectory has remained unpredictable, though it is expected to weaken significantly by Wednesday, July twenty-third.”

“Then what if we try to get back to Los Angeles by car?”

“I wish I had better news, Miss Sophia, but the flooding around Amador has led authorities to close the main highway into and out of the city.”

“You can’t be serious! How are we supposed to get home now?”

He met my eyes, shrugged helplessly, and said, “There’s nothing we can do, miss. Until the storm loses strength, the roads and the airport will stay closed.”

With a frustrated groan, I covered my face with my hands. “I need to contact Nanay Emily and Bryan.”

I rushed to grab my phone from the nightstand, but a sudden knock at the door froze me in place.

Niko answered it, and there, in the hallway, stood Bryan.

“Bryan?” I blurted, staring at him in disbelief. “How did you get here? Aren’t the roads supposed to be closed?”

With a theatrical sigh, he replied, “I got into the city before they shut everything down and canceled the flights.”

“Oh, Bryan!” Laughing with relief, I ran to him, threw my arms around his neck, and kissed both his cheeks. “I can’t believe you came! Thank you for coming!”

“I’ll never understand why you needed to be here in person when your husband was more than willing to make a donation for the victims.”

“Because it wasn’t my money, Bryan. And I didn’t want to hear a single complaint from him afterward—especially when it comes to money.”

“Well, well. So, have you told them your flight was canceled yet?”

“Not yet. I’ll tell Nanay Emily today.”

“And your husband? Did it occur to you to call him?” Bryan’s lips curved into a mischievous smile.

I stood without answering, pretending I hadn’t heard the question, and started dialing Nanay Emily’s number. The call didn’t connect. Then I tried Craig, but I couldn’t reach him either.

A frown formed on my face. “Why can’t I contact anyone?”

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Bryan checked his phone and shook his head. “No signal,” he said, lifting it in the air. “It probably went down because of the storm.”

“They’re going to be worried sick.”

“Just be patient. When the storm calms down and the signal comes back, you’ll be able to reach them. The wind and rain are probably affecting the towers.”

I let out a long sigh and tried to relax, but there was nothing to do except wait for the weather to settle.

We ended up stuck in Amador for four more days before the sky finally cleared. Once the storm passed, the authorities reopened the main road, and the airport returned to normal operations.

On our way to the airport, we saw people lined up along the sidewalks, desperate for help. The city looked devastated. Houses were destroyed, and families were left with nothing.

Seeing so much suffering, we changed our plans. Instead of taking the flight, Bryan and I decided to stay and help however we could. That same day, volunteer teams from other towns began to arrive alongside city officials, determined to do whatever possible for everyone who had lost everything.

We were busy handing out supplies from the back of a town truck when something—no, someone—caught my attention among the crowd of volunteers riding in another vehicle.

My throat tightened, and I blinked several times, convinced I was seeing things. Maybe my mind was playing tricks on me after so many sleepless nights. But the longer I stared, the clearer it became—it wasn’t a dream or an illusion. My mother was there, helping just like everyone else.

“What’s wrong? Why did you stop like that?” Bryan’s voice pulled me out of my shock. He stepped closer and placed a steady hand on my shoulder.

“Are you okay?” He nudged me gently, but I barely felt it. My entire world had narrowed to the sight of my mother.

He looked in the same direction, and the moment he realized what I was staring at, he turned back to me. I couldn’t hold the tears back; they slid down my cheeks before I could stop them.

“That’s your mom, isn’t it?” he asked, giving me an encouraging smile. I managed to nod.

“Do you want to go talk to her?”

“No,” I murmured, even though a part of me wanted to. As if she’d heard me somehow, my mother’s eyes suddenly found mine through the crowd.

She started walking toward us, and my heart began pounding.

“No.” The word slipped out as a whisper as I grabbed Bryan’s arm and pulled him toward our rental car, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“What’s going on? You’re not even going to talk to her? She’s still your—”

“No! She’s not my mother anymore! She stopped being my mother the moment she abandoned me. I don’t owe her anything now.” I wiped the tears off my cheeks, refusing to let any more fall. “Let’s just go. I want to go home.”

Bryan let out a long, weary sigh before getting into the car with me.

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The entire drive to the airport passed in silence. I didn’t say a word on the plane, and that same quiet followed us all the way home.

Point of View: Daniel

The moment my plane landed in Amador, I didn’t waste any time dialing Sophia’s number, but every call went straight to voicemail.

We drove through the narrow streets, watching every person we passed, hoping she wasn’t one of the stranded travelers along the roadside.

We even stopped at nearly every hotel in the city to see if she was staying at any of them, but there was no record of Sophia.

Roger, my pilot, did what he could and called nearby airports to see if she might have arrived or departed from one of them. The answer was always the same: no one by the name Sophia Kelley had checked in anywhere.

Where could you be, Sophia?

I stared at my phone, gripping it so hard my knuckles turned white.

Every minute that passed without news of her only made my anxiety worse. My hope faded with every failed attempt.

We were about to finish searching the last area when my phone vibrated with an incoming call.

It was Nanay Emily.

“Anak, where are you?” Her voice came through tight with worry.

“I’m still in Amador, looking for Sophia everywhere. Why? What’s going on?”

“You don’t have to keep looking. She’s with me.”

I frowned. “Wait—what do you mean she’s there?”

“She arrived just a few minutes ago.”

Relief flooded me the moment I knew Sophia was safe. Still, I couldn’t help clenching my fists as a new question circled my mind. If she’d managed to get back, how had she done it without ever showing up on any passenger list for the flights to Los Angeles?

“Thank you, Nanay Emily,” I said, then hung up. “Roger, let’s go.”

“Where to, sir?” He blinked, confused.

“Back to Los Angeles.”

“But what about the search—”

“We’re done here. She’s already back home. I need to talk to my wife. Now.”

“Yes, sir.”

Point of View: Sophia

When I heard Nanay Emily's gentle voice just outside my door, I quickly wiped the tears running down my cheeks.

"Come in, Nanay Emily."

She entered carrying a tray of snacks and a glass of apple juice. After setting the tray on the nightstand, she sat on the edge of the bed, worry written all over her face.

"Are you okay, Anak?" she asked, searching my face for any sign that I was.

I nodded, trying to force a smile that barely reached my eyes.

"Can you tell me what really happened in Amador? Where did you stay during the storm? We were scared to death when we couldn't reach you."

"I'm so sorry for worrying you, Nanay," I replied, letting out a long sigh as I lowered my gaze to my hands.

"Your husband was desperate, you know. Especially when he found out you were stuck in Amador and unreachable for almost a week—"

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A hollow laugh escaped me. "Was he really worried about me? Or was it just because he didn't want his mother to blame him if something happened to me?"

She exhaled heavily, her concern deepening as she met my eyes.

All I could do was shake my head and laugh bitterly.

"See? I knew it," I said, taking the tray and drinking a long sip of apple juice. "I'm truly sorry I scared you, Nanay Emily. I promise it won't happen again. I planned to come back as soon as possible, but once the flights were canceled, I had no choice but to wait for the storm to pass."

"What matters most is that you're safe and back home. Besides, your husband is still in Amador City."

I frowned. "What is he doing there?"

"He's looking for you, Anak."

"Why would he go through all that trouble?"

“Because he’s worried about you. He was afraid something might happen to you.”

“Nanay—”

“Sometimes people say one thing, but their heart feels another.”

I didn’t argue, even though I wanted to. Instead, I just listened, and when she finally left, I let out a long sigh.

Once the room fell silent, I picked up my phone and dialed Craig.

He answered almost instantly.

“Sophia! Thank God! You’re alive!”

I pulled the phone away from my ear. “Of course I’m alive. Why are you yelling?”

“Do you have any idea how much you scared us? Your husband called me last week—he sounded desperate!”

“Wait. Why would he call you?”

“He hadn’t heard from you. None of us knew anything! What happened, Sophia?”

I took a deep breath and told him everything—the chaos, being stranded, and even seeing my mother.

“Are you serious? Was it really her?”

Craig’s question made me burst into laughter. “I know what I saw. She was right in front of me.”

“Did you go talk to her?”

“No, Craig. That woman stopped being my mother a long time ago. Sixteen years ago, to be exact.”

“Sophia.”

“Let’s leave it there, okay? I don’t want to talk about her anymore.”

“Okay,” he said quietly, and I could hear the worry in his sigh. “You know I’m always here for you, right?”

I nodded even though he couldn't see me. "I know, Craig. And thank you for always being by my side. It means more than you think."

"Anytime, Sophia. You don't even have to ask."

For a few seconds, neither of us spoke.

"Hey, Craig, can you send me my piano?"

"Why are you asking me that now?"

"I just want to play again. It's been too long." I tried to sound casual, but even I could hear the longing in my voice.

"Tell me the truth, Sophia. Are you really okay, or are you just pretending to be brave?"

"I am, Craig. Why would you ask that?"

"Come on. I've known you for years. Every time something goes wrong, you end up playing the piano nonstop."

Pressing my lips together, I tried to keep my tone light. “Honestly, I just miss having music in the house. That’s all. Really. You don’t have to worry about me.”

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“Are you sure?”

“Actually, now that you mention it, I’ll have Niko come pick up my piano,” I said, trying to steer the conversation away.

“Oh? So you mean that handsome bodyguard of yours?” His teasing tone made me laugh.

“Yes, Craig. That one,” I said, shaking my head.

“Fine. Just send him over, and I’ll make sure your piano is delivered today.”

“Deal. I’ll let him know, and thank you for always being so helpful.”

I was still smiling when I ended the call.

After a while, the four walls of my bedroom started to suffocate me, so I picked up my tray and headed to the kitchen.

Just as I reached the doorway, the front door creaked open. Daniel stood in the entryway, his expression grim.

I did my best to pretend he wasn't there and kept walking toward the kitchen, but his voice cut through the silence of the house.

"Sophia!"

My shoulders tensed. I set the tray on the counter and finally turned to him, only to find he'd already closed the distance between us.

"We need to talk," he muttered, his jaw tight, the words bitten out.

Not wanting to argue or trade cruel remarks, I simply nodded and followed him down the hall as he led me into his study—the one place he always chose for serious conversations.

He turned the moment I closed the door. "What were you thinking, Sophia? Why did you rush to Amador after everything I told you? Didn't I make it clear I would handle the donation for the typhoon victims?" Frustration flared across his face as he dragged his fingers through his hair. "You went to Amador right after I did. Is that it?"

The questions came one after another, his voice still loaded with anger. I stayed quiet—not out of surrender, but because I didn’t have the strength to defend myself yet again.

“If something had happened to you, how was I supposed to explain all of this to my mother?”

I looked at him, unable to answer. The truth was obvious: his anxiety had nothing to do with my safety and everything to do with how his family might react.

“You didn’t even think about the people who were truly worried about you.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, meeting his eyes.

“What did you just say?” He blinked, thrown off by my response.

“I said I’m sorry. I’m apologizing for making everyone here worry about me.”

He frowned as he stepped closer, lifting his hand to press his palm to my forehead, as if he thought I must have a fever—since I was apologizing for once.

Letting out a long sigh, I looked him in the eyes again. “I’m sorry I ignored your warnings and went to Amador anyway. But don’t worry. Your mother won’t scold you. I came back safe and sound.”

He stood there staring at me, as if he couldn't tell whether I meant it. The shock on his face was almost comical.

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"Is there anything else we need to talk about?" I asked, already exhausted by the conversation.

When he didn't answer, I turned to leave, but he caught my arm and stopped me.

"What really happened to you in Amador?"

I pulled my arm free gently. "Nothing happened, Daniel. I told you, I'm fine."

His frown deepened.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm waiting for a call from my assistant."

If he'd asked me about Amador on any other day, I might have told him everything immediately. Instead, the words circling my tongue were sharp. Why do you even care? This isn't your business. Why don't you focus on your own life for once?

Seeing my mother after sixteen years brought back memories I'd buried for a long time. Childhood should have been filled with laughter, milestones, and a sense of belonging. It was supposed to be the story of a family that stayed together.

All of that shattered the day she left and abandoned me.

Point of View: Sophia

As I walked down the hallway, I saw Daniel coming down the stairs. I assumed he would ignore me, so I kept going, but he caught up and grabbed my arm.

His voice was stern when he asked, "Tell me about those bodyguards. Who hired them for you?"

"It wasn't my idea." I pulled free and kept my tone neutral.

"Then it was Bryan, wasn't it? He brought them?"

Honestly, the way he said it, anyone would think he was jealous. "Yes. Bryan thought I needed people to protect me."

I watched his jaw tighten, frustration sharp on his face.

“Get rid of them.”

His demand caught me off guard. I stared at him, blinking in disbelief.

“I’m sorry—what did you just say?”

His voice rose, harsher and louder. “I said get rid of them. Fire those bodyguards.”

“And who do you think you are, ordering me around like that?”

“Because you don’t need them anymore. That’s why.”

A bitter laugh slipped out as I shook my head. “Who told you that you get to run my life, Daniel? You don’t decide what I need or who I hire.”

“Don’t make this harder for yourself, Sophia.”

My chest tightened when he leaned in and whispered beside my ear, “Do it now. If you want bodyguards, I’ll choose them myself.”

Whatever was going on with him, I didn't have the strength to fight in that moment. So, in full view of everyone, I pulled out my phone and called Bryan.

He answered immediately. "Hey, Belle. What's wrong?"

"Bryan, you need to withdraw the bodyguards you hired for me. Have them return to your office."

"Wait—what? What's going on? Why are you doing this all of a sudden?"

"I don't need their protection anymore. Thank you for always looking out for me, Bryan. I really appreciate your concern."

"Ysabelle, absolutely not. I can't leave you unprotected—especially now that Félix is back in Los Angeles. It's not safe!"

"I understand, but there's no reason to worry. Daniel has offered to handle my security from now on."