

A Favor 291

Chapter 291

“Hold on. Your husband is hiring new guards? Is that what I’m hearing?”

There was a pause, and then Bryan let out a short laugh.

“So that’s what this is. Your husband is getting possessive, huh? Belle, is there something I should know?”

“Thanks, Bryan. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Hey, wait—”

I hung up before he could say another word. I took a moment to steady myself, then turned to Daniel, who was still watching me with that stubborn intensity.

“Is there anything else you’d like me to take care of, Mr. Kelley?” I asked, looking him straight in the eyes.

He frowned and held my gaze.

“Do you feel okay?”

The question caught me so off guard I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing.

“And why would you think I don’t feel okay, Mr. Kelley?”

He didn’t answer right away. He just kept studying me as if searching for something I wasn’t giving him.

When he remained silent, I left him standing there on the stairs. His eyes followed me, but I didn’t bother looking back. I headed for the front door. I needed to explain things to the bodyguards—all because of my husband’s sudden demands.

The next morning, Rian called with alarming news: Dino was missing. His own mother had taken him, along with every cent from his account.

I was on my way to tell Daniel when he rushed down the stairs, urgency carved into his face. Our eyes met at the bottom, and he hurried toward me.

“My sister just called—”

“I know,” I tried to say, but he cut me off, grabbing my hand. “We have to go. Now! Alex called and filled me in.”

He led me straight to the garage and opened the car door for me. The gesture surprised me, but I didn't let it show.

"That woman wasn't satisfied with taking the money. She had to take Dino, too," he said, slamming his palm against the steering wheel as he started the engine.

The drive to Alex and Rian's house passed in tense silence. Daniel muttered and cursed under his breath, and I let his frustration fill the space while I kept my thoughts to myself.

I didn't speak again until my phone vibrated with a call from Rian. She told me they were heading to Francine's old apartment.

Daniel looked at me the moment I hung up. "What did Rian say?"

"They're on their way to Francine's old apartment. She said we should wait here for them."

I slipped my phone back into my bag and stared out the window. Neither of us broke the silence again until we were sitting in Alex and Rian's living room, waiting for their next move.

A long silence settled between us.

When Daniel finally spoke, his voice sounded almost hesitant. “Sophia, you feel sick, don’t you?”

“For the last time, Daniel, I’m not sick,” I said, sinking deeper into my seat.

“Then why aren’t you saying anything?”

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A faint smile tugged at my lips. “Does it really surprise you that I’m quiet? Don’t worry. It’ll pass.” I paused and looked at him steadily. “And don’t pretend you actually care. We both know you don’t.”

I turned, grabbing my phone, ready to call Rian, but the sound of the front door opening stopped me short. Daniel and I stood at the same time as Alex and Rian walked in.

“How did it go at Francine’s old apartment?” we asked in unison.

Alex and Rian exchanged a look at our synchronized voices.

“We ran into Myla—Francine’s ex,” Rian answered, giving me a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Wait, so Francine had a girlfriend?” I blurted, while Daniel repeated the question beside me.

Alex couldn't help laughing. "You two seem telepathically linked today," he joked.

I rolled my eyes at that, but Daniel went straight to the point, ignoring Alex's comment.

"Then how did Francine's mother get all that money?"

"By withdrawing it directly from the bank."

Daniel leaned forward on the couch, his tone sharp. "She managed to take it out without your signature?"

"She forged it. Signed my name on the documents."

"That's desperation," Daniel muttered. "She even took the kid."

A heavy silence settled over the room until Rian broke it. "Belle, don't you know someone who runs a detective agency?"

I frowned. "Yes. Why?"

Rian's eyes brightened. "Why don't you call him? Maybe he can help us locate them."

Before I could answer, Daniel cut in, his voice firm. "Absolutely not. She won't call him."

Everyone turned to him—me included.

"And why not? He's the same guy who found me when I disappeared, remember?" Rian said.

"I said no, Belle. You're not involving him."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do. We need all the help we can get, and I trust him." I held my ground and pulled out my phone.

Daniel shot me a furious look, but I ignored him, walking over to the window as I dialed Bryan's number.

"Seriously, Daniel, can you drop the jealousy for once? Just for today?" Rian sighed and turned to her brother.

"This has nothing to do with jealousy!"

“Oh, yeah? Then why do you get so worked up every time Bryan comes up?”

While Daniel fumed behind me, I focused on my call. Bryan picked up almost right away.

“Belle, everything okay?”

“I need your help again, Bryan.”

“Let me guess. Another problem with your husband?”

“Of course not. This isn’t about Daniel. It’s Alex’s son. His mother took him and emptied his bank account. We don’t know where she went.”

“First your sister-in-law caused a mess, and now her kid is caught up in it too?”

“That’s right. I’m counting on you, Bryan.”

“Okay. Just give me every detail you have. The more I know, the faster I can find them.”

“Thank you, Bryan. I really appreciate it.”

“By the way, is your husband with you?”

“Yes, he’s here. Why?”

“I’m just picturing him with smoke coming out of his ears while you’re on the phone with me.”

Bryan laughed, and I couldn’t stop myself from rolling my eyes.

“Yeah. Very funny.”

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“I’ll let you know as soon as I find out anything.”

“Thank you, Bryan. I mean it.”

I could feel Daniel’s stare on me as I turned back, but I focused on Rian.

“Bryan said he’ll contact us as soon as he has news.”

Rian smiled, then turned to her brother, a teasing glint in her eyes. “Hear that, Dani? Belle has it under control. Doesn’t that make you feel better?”

Daniel only clicked his tongue in irritation.

Alex and Rian burst into laughter at his sour reaction. I looked at Daniel, searching for any clue of what he was feeling, but as always, his face gave nothing away.

Bryan finally called to tell me where they had found Francine’s car. It took almost a week to trace any sign of her or Dino.

Daniel stood uncomfortably beside me during the call, and since he seemed far too curious about what I was saying, I spoke in Italian so he wouldn’t understand a word.

Bryan’s update offered little comfort. Authorities had located Francine’s car in San Bernardino, almost an hour from Los Angeles, but there was still no sign of her or Dino. We dropped everything and rushed to the location. The moment we arrived, the scene sent all of us into panic.

The car was wrecked. It was obvious an accident had happened, and that both Dino and Francine must have been involved. We immediately called the local police. All they told us was that the people involved in the crash had already been taken to the nearest hospital, but they refused to give us any more information about the incident or their condition.

Alex lost it and slammed his fist onto the hood of his own car. Daniel stepped in before things could get worse. I turned and saw Rian trembling, terror plain on her face. I pulled her close and offered her water, hoping it would help her calm down.

After a few minutes, Alex and Rian managed to regain their composure. We got back into our cars and drove straight to the hospital, desperate for any news about Dino. Daniel and I didn't say a single word the entire way.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where Dino Joshua Imperial is?" I asked the nurse at the front desk.

She glanced at her screen and replied, "May I ask your relationship to the patient, ma'am?"

I looked back to where the others were. Alex stepped forward immediately, unable to hide his frustration.

"I'm his father!" he exclaimed.

"The patient, Imperial, is still being treated in the emergency room, sir. Just go down that hallway," the woman said with a gentle nod, gesturing with her hand.

Rian and I said in unison, "Thank you very much."

We exchanged a glance, both of us understanding that the men were too absorbed in their own thoughts to notice.

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After we found the emergency room, we ran into another obstacle. Staff wouldn't let us inside, so we ended up sitting with a group of distressed families, all waiting for news of their loved ones.

"Alex."

Rian's voice broke the silence as she gave Alex a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

"He's a strong boy. Dino will pull through, so try not to lose faith."

Alex took her hands in his, his voice trembling as he murmured, "I'm so sorry, my love."

"You're apologizing to me? Why?"

"For dragging you into all of this. I let things get out of control, and you ended up right in the middle of it with me."

"You and I are in this together. Whatever you face, I face too. Stop blaming yourself for everything that's happened. The past can't be changed. What we do now, and what the future holds, is what matters."

They embraced, and I caught the tender moment when Alex kissed her forehead. The softness in his voice surprised me when he whispered, “I love you.”

The warmth between them made me smile—until Rian suddenly looked at me. I lifted my gaze and saw my husband watching me. My brow rose in surprise, and he quickly looked away, pretending he hadn’t been staring.

Just then, a doctor stepped out of the emergency room and asked, “Who are the patient Imperial’s family members?”

Everyone rushed to her at once.

Alex spoke first, his voice thick with anxiety. “I’m his father.”

“I’m sorry, sir. Your son suffered serious injuries from the accident.”

A chill ran through us. None of us had expected things to be that critical.

“He’s lost a considerable amount of blood and needs a transfusion as soon as possible.”

Alex stepped forward, determination clear in his eyes. "Let me donate. Whatever it takes, I'll do it. Where do we start?"

"First, we have to make sure your blood type is compatible with the child's. The nurse will take a blood sample to check compatibility."

Rian squeezed Alex's hand and said, "If my blood is compatible, I want to donate too."

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but since you're pregnant, it isn't safe for you to donate blood. In addition, you'll need to wait at least six months after giving birth before you can donate again."

"Oh, heavens..." Rian let out a quiet sigh, disappointment written all over her face.

"I can volunteer, Doctor. And I'm definitely not pregnant," I said, hoping to help.

All eyes snapped to me as if I'd just said something scandalous. I simply shrugged.

"All right, thank you. We'll take a blood sample in a few minutes." With that, the doctor went back into the emergency room.

Once they drew my blood, we all waited for the results. The minutes crawled by as we prayed in silence that at least one of us would be compatible with Dino.

Not long after, the doctor returned with our results. "I'm sorry, sir, but your blood type is not compatible with your son's. The good news is that Mrs. Del Mundo's blood is perfectly compatible, so we can proceed with the transfusion."

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Everyone turned to me, surprise on their faces. I stayed quiet, listening as the doctor explained why my blood was suitable for the transfusion.

Daniel watched me closely from his seat when I returned to the waiting area. When I reached him, he stood and hugged me for a moment before gently guiding me into the chair beside him.

"Do you feel dizzy?" he asked, taking my hand and rubbing it softly.

His sudden concern caught me off guard, but I chose to let it slide.

"A little, yes. But it'll pass," I replied quietly.

"Just rest for now. Once all of this is over, we'll go home."

His attempt to be tender almost made me laugh. I held back a smile and looked down, painfully aware that he was putting on a show for the others, eager for everyone to notice his devotion.

Alex's furious voice echoed down the hallway. "That bitch! She made a fool of me! All she wanted was my money!"

We all turned toward him, startled by how his voice rang through the corridor.

The truth had come out only moments earlier. Myla, who had been Francine's lover, confessed that Dino wasn't even Francine's son. Francine had adopted him after his real mother left, wanting nothing to do with the child.

I struggled to process it all. How could a mother abandon her own child for money? And yet... I knew that kind of pain. My own mother had left when I was just a child, and I never had the chance to ask her why.

Daniel turned his attention to Alex and Myla. He asked, "Do you know what your next steps will be?"

Alex let out a heavy sigh, his gaze fixed on the boy, who was sleeping peacefully on the gurney. "The truth is, I don't know what comes next."

"I think I have a suggestion." My words drew everyone's attention, curiosity bright in their eyes. "Alex, you and Dino can take another DNA test. It could be useful."

Before I could finish, Daniel cut in. "What's the point? We already know Alex isn't his biological father."

My look said everything as I turned to Daniel, brows lifted in clear irritation at being interrupted.

“If you would just let me finish, Mr. Kelley, you might understand my point.” My tone stayed firm. “We all know Alex isn’t Dino’s biological father, but since we don’t know his family, this could be the first step toward an official adoption.”

Dani chimed in with a thoughtful nod. “She’s right,” he said, looking between Alex and me.

I allowed myself a small, satisfied smile. “I told you, Mr. Kelley. I’m usually right about these things.”

“Don’t get too confident, Mrs. Kelley. You’re not always right.”

Hearing Daniel call me “Mrs. Kelley” caught me completely off guard. It was the first time he’d used my married name, and for a moment, my breath caught.

Our eyes met, and for a second, the world blurred. Neither of us noticed the confused looks from Alex and Dani nearby.

That fragile spell broke when Dino’s voice rang out in the room.

“Mom, what is this place?” he asked, confused.

In an instant, we hurried to his side. He darted anxious looks around, trying to piece together what had happened.

“Oh no! I’ll get the doctor!” I blurted, turning toward the door.

Daniel’s hand caught my arm before I could take another step.

“Stay here. Let me handle it.”

For a moment, I stood there, stunned and silent, as he strode quickly down the hallway. Rian shot me a mischievous smile, but I only rolled my eyes, knowing exactly what she was thinking.

“Sophia, I’ve missed this so much!” Craig exclaimed, slamming the car door. We had barely pulled into the mall parking lot when his excitement became obvious.

“You know, shopping isn’t the same without you, my best friend!” His contagious laugh filled the air as I looped my arm through his and guided him toward the entrance. It didn’t escape my notice that his eyes flicked to the bodyguards following a few steps behind us.

Then he clicked his tongue. "See? Your husband really went all out and got you your very own personal security team." Craig shot me a mischievous smile.

"Don't look at me like that," I warned, narrowing my eyes in mock accusation.

He shrugged, trying to act indifferent. "I don't know, Sophia. Something tells me your heart is about to have a change of plans."

"Please, Craig. Nothing is going to change, and nothing ever will."

He hummed playfully. "If you say so!"

I gave him a disapproving look but didn't argue. Instead, I dragged him straight into a women's boutique.

After wandering through stores for a while, the smell of pizza lured us toward my favorite place. Just as we reached the door, a voice sounded behind me.

Craig gripped my elbow. "Hey, someone's calling you," he murmured.

"My beautiful!"

That voice stopped me cold, my heart hammering against my ribs. I didn't need to turn around to know who it was. Still, I slowly faced her, confirming what I already suspected.

"My Belle!"

Seeing her there left me stunned. I never imagined I'd run into her again in Los Angeles, especially after that chance encounter in Amador not long ago.

She started walking toward me, but I stepped back on instinct.

"My beautiful!"

Her words echoed as I kept moving, determined to keep distance between us.

"Ysabelle, wait!"

She kept trying to get my attention. I clenched my teeth when her hand closed around my left arm.

"My daughter."

“Look, I understand you, but I only speak Portuguese, not whatever it is you’re saying,” I snapped, yanking my arm free and turning away, desperate to escape.

“Belle, listen to me. It’s really me. I’m your mother.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you’ve got the wrong person. Craig, we’re leaving. Now.”

“What? I thought we were getting pizza!”

“We have to go. Right now,” I insisted, holding his gaze until he understood he shouldn’t argue with me.

“Okay, okay. Let’s go,” he replied, still bewildered as I grabbed his arm.

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“My daughter, please... forgive me.”

I heard every word, but I ignored her and kept dragging Craig toward the parking lot, refusing to look back.

Memory...

"Mom, where are you going?"

"Mommy has to leave for a little while, but I'll come back. And when I do, I promise I'll take you with me."

"Then why do you have a suitcase?"

"It's just some of Mommy's clothes."

"Mommy, don't you love me anymore?"

"Why would you ask that? Of course I love you. You'll always be my little one."

"Then why are you leaving? Why can't you stay with me? Why do you have to go?"

"Sweetheart, I wish I could explain it to you. You're too little to understand right now. Someday, when you're older, you'll understand why I have to leave, and why things are like this."

"Just promise you'll come back. Promise me, Mom."

"I promise, sweetheart. Really. I'll come back for you."

The memory faded.

"Bryan... I saw her again," I whispered. Tears ran down my cheeks as I spoke to him in the kitchen, Nanay Emily's lunch filling the air with its warm scent.

After that strange encounter with my mother at the mall, I'd come straight home with Craig and tried to calm down.

"Was it your mother again? Where did you see her this time?"

"At the mall. Today."

"But I thought she was still in Amador."

"That's exactly what I thought. All this time I believed she'd settled in Seattle, and then I ran into her in Amador. Now she showed up here in Los Angeles. Sometimes it really feels like the world is too small."

“Why won’t you talk to her, Belle? Ask her to explain everything. After everything that’s happened, maybe she finally has a reason for leaving all those years ago.”

“I’m not interested anymore, Bryan. I don’t need to hear her excuses. She was my mother for the first ten years of my life, and that was it. After she left, she wasn’t anymore—and she never will be. I have no connection to her.”

“But Belle, no matter what happened in the past, she’s still your mother.”

“A real mother never abandons her child, Bryan. I would give up everything before I ever left my own child.”

“You’ll never find out her side of the story if you don’t talk to her, Belle.”

“What’s the point of asking? No excuse she gives can erase the fact that she failed me as a mother.”

A dry laugh escaped me as I wiped the tears from my cheeks.

“Even if she explained everything, would it change anything at all? She can’t undo my childhood, Bryan. If she’d stayed... maybe I never would’ve gone through the things I went through with Félix.”

“Ysabelle!”

“There was a time when I believed she’d come back. Every year—on my birthday, on Christmas, any important day—I sat there waiting for her to walk through the door. But she never did. Over time, I learned to stop hoping.”

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I paused, fighting to steady my breathing. “Sometimes I wonder what I did to deserve this, Bryan. Why couldn’t I have a complete family like everyone else? Why did I have to go through so much pain? I’m so tired.”

I kept talking before I realized someone was standing silently behind me, listening.

“I never asked for much, Bryan. All I ever wanted was a quiet life. Why does that feel so impossible?”

I bit my lower lip, trying to hold back the sobs threatening to break free.

“Hey, listen to me. That’s what I’m here for. You have Craig, and you have me. We’re not going to give up searching for Layla, and once we find her, I promise you’ll feel better.”

“I really hope you find her soon.”

I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes as I tried to regain control.

“Belle...”

“Yes?”

“Don’t let your past trap you. Everything you lived through was only a lesson, not your whole story.”

A small, tired smile pulled at my lips, but I couldn’t find the words to answer.

“Anyway, I have to go. Just call me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will, Bryan. Thank you.”

When the call ended, I slipped my phone back into my pocket and tried to wipe away the last of my tears. The kitchen felt like a safe place to let my guard down. With Nanay Emily out all day and Daniel shut away in his office, I didn’t have to worry about anyone seeing me fall apart.

I never imagined the person who haunted the back of my mind was standing at the end of the hallway.

Daniel’s POV:

At the last minute, I remembered I'd left a stack of important documents at home—documents I needed for my meeting that afternoon. Since the office wasn't far, I figured I could grab them myself instead of bothering Andrew or Denise.

The moment I walked in, I heard someone crying. I stopped, trying to figure out who it was, and then I headed straight for the kitchen.

What I found took me completely by surprise.

Sophia was standing near the oven, tears streaking her face, clutching her phone and struggling to hold herself together as she spoke.

I tried to make out pieces of her conversation, but frustration tightened in my chest when I realized I couldn't understand the language she was speaking. Only one word caught my attention: "Bryan."

Anger stirred at the sound of his name. My thoughts spun out of control. She'd insisted they were only friends, but if that was true, why was she crying to him over the phone? None of this made any sense.

I turned and started toward the living room, but her last words reached my ears before she ended the call.

"Yes, I'll call. Thank you."

Bah. “What a friend,” I muttered, imagining Bryan and wishing I could strangle him once and for all.

I decided I’d seen enough, so I slipped out silently and went to my study without anyone noticing. She was so absorbed in her call with Bryan that she didn’t even realize I’d been standing right behind her.

Not even when I left the house again.

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“Back to the office, Erwin,” I ordered as I got into the car, slamming the door behind me.

All my suspicions surged back to life. She was exactly like the others—making up lies and selling whatever story she needed to survive.

Sophia’s POV:

“Sophia!”

I stopped with my hand on the doorknob, frowning as I heard Daniel calling me from across the hall.

“This afternoon, you’re coming with me to the company’s press conference.”

I turned, baffled. “A press conference? Why would you need me there?”

He clicked his tongue in disdain. “Isn’t it obvious? You’re supposed to be my wife, remember? Don’t pretend this isn’t exactly what you wanted, so please, Sophia, spare me the act.”

His words hit me like a slap, catching me off guard.

“I honestly don’t know what you mean,” I said, shooting him a confused look. His only response was a mocking smile, dripping with sarcasm.

“I almost believed you were sincere. I guess I was wrong about you.” With that, he left me speechless, turning away before I could even argue.

“Wait! What is that supposed to mean?” I shouted, following him down the hallway to his office.

“I don’t have time for explanations, Sophia. If you care that much, figure it out yourself.”

“Unbelievable. That’s your answer, Daniel? All I wanted was to understand what the press conference was about. And didn’t we already agree that no one was supposed to know we were married?”

“Oh, did we? I don’t remember making that agreement, Sophia. You signed up for this. That means you play by my rules.”

I stood by his desk, frustration rising, still waiting for a real answer.

“You know, I honestly don’t understand why you hate me so much. I haven’t done anything to deserve it.”

The words slipped out before I could stop them. He laughed then, sharp and derisive, the sound twisting in my stomach.

I stared at him, waiting for him to stop as he moved closer with a predatory calm.

“Do you really want to know why, Sophia?” His fingers clamped around my arm. “Because I can’t stand liars, or people who pretend to be something they’re not.”

Without warning, he shoved me aside with a rough force that caught me off balance.

“And for the record, I don’t like you at all.”

His voice was loaded with open contempt.

I stood there, stunned for a moment, but I forced myself to breathe and steady my nerves.

“Oh, yeah? Then let me make something clear, Mr. Kelley. I don’t like you either. And believe me, I don’t wake up every morning hoping to earn your approval.”

I crossed my arms, refusing to let him see how much he’d shaken me.

“Oh, please. Spare me the act. It’s always the people who know nothing about me who have the most to say, isn’t it? Liar, fraud, pick whichever you like.” He clicked his tongue, shaking his head in feigned disappointment.

My reply came softly, a bittersweet smile tugging at my lips.

Chapter 300

“Everyone has a story that came before them, Daniel. Before you judge me, try living one day in my skin. You may know my name, but you don’t know my past.”

Somehow, I found the strength to meet his eyes, holding his cold stare without flinching.

He didn’t respond. He simply slid his chair back and settled behind his desk as if I were invisible, and I let out a quiet sigh.

Without another word, I turned and left his office, his silence following me out.

Later that day, I went to the venue for the press conference he'd insisted I attend. Camera flashes chased us as we took our seats, and I forced a polite smile each time a reporter addressed me.

Daniel spoke with polished confidence about the company's latest triumph: reaching number one at the California box office and announcing a high-profile partnership with Norman Giovanni's firm.

But the event didn't end peacefully. The reporters quickly pounced with personal questions, pressing him for details about our relationship. In front of the entire press, Daniel introduced me as his wife, presenting me to the world with a calculated move.

That was when I realized my life would never feel small or hidden again. My face and my name would be everywhere, and the people I'd worked so hard to avoid would have no trouble finding me.

Daniel's POV:

I was buried in spreadsheets, double-checking Andrew's numbers, when my phone vibrated. It was my mother.

"Hi, Mom. How are you?"

“Come see me. I’ll be at the restaurant across from the KI Corporation building.”

I couldn’t stop the grimace that crossed my face at her flat tone.

“Why now? I’m up to my neck in work, Mom—”

“Daniel Kelley, I’m waiting at the restaurant across from your building right now. Do not make your mother wait.”

“Is something wrong, Mom? Why do you suddenly need to see me?”

I didn’t have to wonder if she was upset. Every time she used my full name, it meant I’d pushed too far.

“We have things to discuss. And when I say now, I mean now, Daniel. Don’t make me wait.”

With a resigned sigh, I snapped my laptop shut.

“Fine. I’m on my way.”

I grabbed my phone, swung my jacket over my shoulder, and headed for the door with questions spinning in my mind. Whatever it was, I hadn't seen it coming.

"Andrew, I'm stepping out to meet my mother. Get things ready for our next meeting." He nodded quietly as I walked to the elevator.

The restaurant was calm, and I spotted her seated in a corner booth.

"Mom," I greeted, kissing her cheek.

"Sit down, Daniel."

My brows knit when she didn't return the greeting, breaking from her usual warmth.

"What is it, Mom?"

"We need to talk about what happened at your press conference yesterday."

She leaned forward, elbows on the table, a clear sign she was about to get serious.

“All right.”

“Why did you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Why did you introduce your wife to the entire media?”