

A Favor 351

Chapter 351

“Sophia, are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been very quiet, Anak.”

“I’m fine, Nanay Emily,” I replied, forcing a small smile.

“And how is your husband?”

“He’s improved a little. The fever isn’t as high now. But honestly, I think the medication might be making him act even stranger than usual.”

She blinked, clearly startled. “What do you mean, acting strange? Is something wrong with Daniel?”

I bit my lip, realizing too late that I’d let my thoughts slip out too honestly. The concern in her voice made me wish I’d chosen my words more carefully.

“That’s not exactly what I meant, Nanay. He asked me to sing for him... and to play my guitar. Do you think that means his fever is getting worse, or is it just some weird side effect?”

My words made her laugh as she shook her head, amused.

“Maybe you still don’t know his softer side, Anak. He may seem proud and distant, but give it time. Deep down, he’s a good man.”

I managed a shy smile and shrugged.

“Thanks, Nanay. I guess I’d better go back and pick a song. Wish me luck,” I added, rolling my eyes to make my point.

Her laughter followed me down the hall.

On the way to his room, I turned over different songs in my head. But I couldn’t ignore the biggest change of all: how much he’d changed in the last few days. We weren’t arguing constantly anymore, and his usual sharp tongue had been replaced by quieter moments and softer words.

Was he simply exhausted, or had his stormy moods finally passed?

I shook my head, pushing the thought away, and quietly opened the bedroom door.

Lost in my own thoughts, I barely noticed the way he watched me as I walked in. Without a word, I crossed to the closet and took my guitar, completely unaware of the intensity in his gaze.

“Why are you asking about the kitchen?”

I narrowed my eyes and stepped right in front of him, not quite understanding what he meant. “What do you mean—about the kitchen?”

“When you came in, you looked really upbeat.”

Oh. I bit my lip and looked away, and he noticed.

“You thought I looked happy?”

“That’s what it seemed like. Did something happen?”

“No, not really.” I shrugged and added, “I just spent some time talking about you with Nanay Emily.”

His brows drew together, and I could tell he was thrown off.

“I told her you seemed like you were enjoying being sick.”

“Then you want me to stay sick forever?”

I couldn't hold back a laugh at how stunned he looked.

"No, of course not! Even if you're always yelling at me and accusing me of marrying you for your money, I'm not the kind of person who would wish you harm."

For a second, I caught a flicker of sadness in his eyes, but I ignored it and offered him a cool smile.

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"You know, this fever of yours turned out to be a blessing in disguise. Something changed in you. You're not yelling at me anymore, and suddenly you even know how to say thank you. I just wonder how long this polite Daniel will last. But honestly, I like this version of you a lot more."

His lips curved into a smile that stole my breath. The look on his face told me he agreed with every word I'd said.

"So tell me—what song do you want me to play for you, Your Majesty?"

"Your Majesty? Seriously?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Of course. You call the shots. You're Daniel—the king of everything I do."

He laughed and rubbed the back of his neck, and I couldn't help smiling back. For the first time, he seemed genuine with me. There he was, laughing, letting his guard down. I wished that moment could last forever.

"You choose the song," he said, flashing another relaxed smile.

My heart pounded against my ribs as I bit my lip.

With a soft sigh, I set my fingers on the guitar and began to play.

"Isn't it funny how you stand out, even in the middle of a crowd? I couldn't help but notice your smile. While the world keeps spinning around us, could we stay here and talk for a while?"

As I sang the first notes, his gaze settled on my face. I did my best to stay composed, keeping my focus on the melody.

"Why don't you tell me more about you? Maybe we could trade a few stories. Wouldn't that be nice?"

My voice softened as I played. "What if we slow down, talk for a while, and see what we find? Maybe love is waiting for us, just around the corner."

"Is that really what you want?" he asked the moment the last chord faded, staring at me.

“To get to know each other better?”

“It was just a song. Nothing more,” I replied with a shrug.

“How did you learn to play the guitar?”

His question caught me off guard. I hesitated, unsure how to answer without stirring up old memories.

“My father taught me.” I kept my eyes on the guitar instead of meeting his. “Would you tell me what your childhood was like?”

“Wait, what?”

My throat tightened as I tried to respond, and I looked up to find him watching me in silence, waiting for whatever I might say.

A laugh slipped out as I shook my head, brushing it off.

“There isn’t much to say about my childhood. It was pretty dull,” I said, starting to rise, but he reached out and stopped me with a gentle hold on my arm.

My gaze dropped to his hand before my eyes met his.

“If you don’t feel comfortable sharing your childhood, would you mind listening to mine instead?”

For a split second, I wondered if he had really said that, or if I was imagining things again. I placed my hand on his forehead, and he frowned in confusion.

“What are you doing?” he asked, bewildered.

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Honestly, I was more puzzled than he was, but I answered anyway. “I wanted to see if your fever came back. Are you sure you’re okay? You’re not seeing things or feeling dizzy, right? If you’re hungry, I’ll make you something.”

The next thing I knew, somehow I was lying flat on my back on the bed, and he was right above me.

“Daniel—”

“Are you seriously calling me crazy now?” His voice was low, his face hovering just inches from mine.

"I didn't mean that at all." My words tangled, and I hated how nervous I sounded.

"Then what did you mean?" he asked, his eyes locked on mine, his elbows braced on either side of me.

Suddenly my mouth went dry, and I couldn't find a single word.

"Uh..."

Being that close to him scrambled my thoughts. My stomach flipped, my heart raced, and when I licked my lips, something shifted in his gaze.

His jaw tightened, and he muttered something I couldn't make out.

"What the hell."

My heart thundered in my ears as he leaned closer, his eyes never leaving my mouth. I froze, unable to move an inch.

My eyelids fluttered, ready to close, but before anything could happen, the door flew open.

Andrew stood there, eyes wide with shock.

Instinctively, I shoved Daniel away and sprang to my feet, heat rushing to my cheeks.

“Wow.” Andrew’s eyes went even wider, and he quickly covered his mouth with his hand.

“Seriously, Andrew? You don’t know how to knock?”

“Wow, it’s my fault! I didn’t realize I was about to catch you two in the middle of a romantic moment.”

A laugh nearly escaped me, and I had to bite my lip to keep it in.

“What the hell! Get out. Now!” Daniel shouted.

Andrew looked at me, struggling to hold back a grin even while Daniel yelled. “Hey, calm down! Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to clear your schedule today?” Andrew shot back. “Nobody thinks you’re actually sick. I practically ran over here to see how you were doing, and this is how you thank me?” he continued, complaining as he put on a dramatic snuffle.

“Andrew, I’m warning you. If you don’t get out, I’ll come after you and tear you apart!”

Andrew visibly flinched.

“Whoa, no need to threaten me!”

“Andrew.”

“Fine, I’m leaving! But when you two are done, I’m coming back. I’ll go chat with Nanay Emily and see if she can make something sweet for you lovebirds. Bye!”

The moment Andrew slipped out, Daniel and I stared at each other.

Laughter bubbled out of me, spilling freely. I couldn’t even tell what was so funny, but the happiness felt real, warm in my chest.

Seeing that playful side of him made me hope it would last—that he wouldn’t fall back into his old habits.

The next morning, I went to the studio.

“What is all this?” I shot Craig a bewildered look, frowning at the teddy bear the size of a small child sitting in my chair. “It’s a teddy bear.”

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I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms, staring at him. "I can see that. What I want to know is who brought it. Was it you?"

Craig burst out laughing. "No way. That bear came with a bouquet from T.M. early this morning."

I let out a low whistle. "Wow. That is excessive. Flowers and a giant teddy bear? Someone is really trying."

Rolling his eyes, he headed toward my desk.

"You know what's missing to make this completely over the top?"

"And what would that be?" I asked, genuinely curious.

A grin spread across his face.

"Chocolate, obviously! The guy already gave you flowers and a teddy bear. Now he just needs an elegant box of chocolates and the set will be complete."

I gave a dry laugh and shook my head, but soon a real laugh slipped out.

“But honestly, what’s the point of all these gifts if he never shows up? It seems like a waste, doesn’t it? You don’t even know what he looks like. Maybe he’s a troll, or maybe he’s as handsome as your so-called husband.”

He added extra drama to the last two words, and I rolled my eyes.

Still, he was right. Whoever this person was, he had managed to stay a mystery even while sending me flowers every day—and now a teddy bear. I couldn’t help wondering who he really was.

“If he starts leaving stuffed animals every morning, we’ll have to change the sign out front. Forget running a dance studio—we’ll be running a full-on Valentine’s gift shop.”

“Someone must be on their way to pick you up, girl.”

As he slid a CD into the player, Craig muttered something I didn’t quite catch.

“Girl?”

Huh? I lifted my head. “Are you talking to me?”

“No, I’m having a conversation with your soul,” he said, narrowing his eyes as if he were trying to read my mind.

His sarcasm made me laugh.

“I’m telling you someone’s coming to get you after work,” he added, tilting his lips toward the entrance.

“I don’t understand what you mean by someone’s coming to—” I didn’t finish, because Daniel walked into the studio and I froze.

“You’d better close your mouth, girl. You’re starting to drool,” Craig nudged me.

I elbowed him back to shut him up.

That was when Daniel noticed me, and our eyes met.

In that instant, everything around me seemed to fade. His smile rooted me in place, and his warm hazel eyes stole every coherent thought. My heart tried to leap out of my chest as he approached, and I had no idea how I was supposed to react.

Oh God. Please—what was happening to me?

“What are you talking about?” he asked when he reached my side.

“Huh?” His question snapped me back to reality when I realized I’d spoken out loud. “Uh... I mean, my feet feel weird today.”

“Did something happen to your feet?” he asked, glancing down at my shoes.

That strange numbness was still there.

“Let me check.”

“Hey, it’s really not necessary.” Before he could reach me, I stopped him, grabbing his arm quickly. “They’re fine, I promise.”

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“Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Completely.” I shifted the conversation. “So... what brings you here?” It felt like we should’ve started with that.

“I actually came to pick you up.”

“You came to pick me up...” My words collided with the sudden blast of music Craig threw on, making both of us jump.

“Sorry! I guess I got a little too lost in my own world. But see? I told you I was right.” He flashed a playful wink.

“What is he talking about?” Daniel gave me an interrogative look.

“Oh, he’s talking about his music choice. He says it fits the vibe,” I managed, trying to sound convincing.

“Does that actually make sense?” He arched a brow, clearly unconvinced.

“So, are we going or what?”

“Where are we going exactly?”

“You’re coming with me.”

“Wait—are you sure you’re feeling okay, Daniel Kelley?”

“As healthy as ever, sweetheart. Why? Did you think I’d let a little fever keep me away?”

“It’s just hard to believe you came all the way here just for me, Daniel Kelley. Are you sure your brain is working properly?”

He didn’t bother answering. Instead, he took my hand and pulled me into a tight hug.

“Why do you keep using my full name?” he murmured. “If I hear you call me Daniel Kelley—or even just Daniel—one more time, I’ll kiss you right here, no matter who’s watching.”

I gaped at him, completely stunned. “But Daniel—”

“That’s it,” he cut in without hesitation, framing my face gently with his hands as he kissed me.

There were moments when I didn’t dare speak, and this was definitely one of them.

When he finally let me go, my eyes were still wide. He wiped the corner of my mouth with his thumb, smiling faintly.

“And what was that for, Da—oh, never mind!”

“Go on. Say my name one more time. I dare you, sweetheart.” He leaned in, his eyes bright.

Avoiding his gaze, I tried to change the subject. “Anyway, why did you come here?”

“I already told you. I came to get you.”

“I could’ve gotten home on my own, you know.”

“That may be true, but I like the idea of picking up my wife after work.”

Everything he said blurred together, but the word “wife” rang in my head.

“And who decided we’re going straight home?”

“Then where are we going?”

He didn’t answer. He only stepped closer to Craig and murmured something that made Craig grin from ear to ear.

Standing there, I couldn't understand his sudden plans. Still, something in me lit up at his boldness, and I found myself enjoying every detail of this new side of him. Maybe I should be grateful for his fever—or maybe I should just be glad he was here.

Chapter 356

The people in the studio couldn't help watching us as we left together. Daniel slipped his hand into mine, guided me through the parking lot, and opened the car door for me as if it were the most natural thing in the world. I kept muttering protests under my breath, but he ignored them, buckled my seatbelt, and smiled the whole time.

If this was some kind of dream, I never wanted to wake up. I would gladly let reality wait.

"So, where exactly are you taking me?"

After almost twenty minutes on the road, I couldn't hold back my curiosity any longer.

"You'll see when we get there." He gave me a quick smile before turning his attention back to the highway. "In the meantime, just relax. Put some music on if you want."

Relaxing was basically all I'd been doing for the last twenty minutes, but I let it go.

"Don't stress, love. Just twenty more minutes and we'll be there."

“Wait—twenty more minutes? You can’t be serious!”

“It’s fine. I’m kidding.”

“Dani—ah!” I started to call him by name, but stopped short when he shot me a look. My lips snapped shut. “Okay, then what am I supposed to call you if I can’t use your name?”

“Whatever you want. Call me sweetheart, or love, or honey. Any of those are fine.”

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. Had I really just heard him say all those cheesy pet names? Was this actually Daniel, or was I dreaming?

“Do you seriously want me to call you sweetheart, love, or honey? Since when did you get so cheesy, Daniel Kelley? I never took you for the kind of person who used pet names.” Oh no.

The moment his name slipped out, I straightened and turned toward the window, as if ignoring him could undo what I’d said.

“Why’d you stop? Relax. I’m not going to kiss you in the car. I’ll just keep count until we get there.”

My only response was a dramatic eye roll.

He drove until we stopped in front of an imposing gate, the ocean glittering just beyond the fence.

“Wow.” Awe colored my voice as I took in the view. I looked at him, curiosity buzzing under my skin. “So what’s the plan? Why did we come here?”

“This place belongs to my family. It’s our private beach,” he said, a soft smile on his lips as he leaned over to unbuckle my seatbelt.

“I can do it myself,” I murmured, fingers searching for the latch, but he tapped my hand away playfully.

“I know you can, but let me do it this time.”

“Fine, you win. But you still haven’t told me why you brought me here.”

“I just want us to relax together—and there’s something special I want you to see.”

“Wait, what do you mean by that?”

“You’ll find out very soon.”

“When we get there, right?” I cut in, finishing his sentence.

“Exactly.” A laugh slipped out as he gave my nose a playful pinch. “Now, let’s go.”

When we got out of the car, a guard was waiting at the entrance.

“Good evening, sir. It’s been a long time since your last visit, Mr. Kelley. You usually bring your sister, but tonight you have a lovely companion.”

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“Yeah, it’s been ages since I came back. And actually...” Daniel offered a warm smile, resting his hand at my back, “this wonderful woman isn’t just my girlfriend.”

“Sir?” The guard looked confused for a second.

“Tim, meet Sophia. She’s my wife.”

“Really? None of us heard about your wedding.”

“It was a small, private ceremony. We decided to keep it to ourselves.”

Tim nodded, his smile growing wider. “Well, congratulations to you both. Welcome, Mrs. Sophia.”

“Thank you, Tim,” I replied, while Daniel laced his fingers through mine and guided me down toward the beach, the cool sand shifting beneath our feet.

“Have you ever wondered what I dreamed of being when I was a kid?”

His sudden question caught me off guard, and I saw a flicker of emotion in his eyes that I couldn’t quite decipher.

“There was a time when all I wanted was to become an engineer. I pictured myself designing houses, skyscrapers, schools, bridges... pretty much anything that could change the city. That was my dream.” He let out a deep sigh, and the corners of his lips lifted, but the smile never reached his eyes.

“If you loved it that much, why didn’t you try?” I asked softly.

“Instead, I ended up studying Business Administration.”

As we walked, he paused to look at the illuminated buildings rising along the coastline. The city lights stretched across Los Angeles, glittering like they were teasing him with memories of what could have been.

“Being the oldest comes with its own load of expectations. Even if I’d been the youngest, they still would’ve expected me to take over the company. After all, I’m their only son.”

“Does your sister know about this?” I asked, curious whether she understood the weight he carried. I followed his gaze, letting my eyes drift over the tall buildings that seemed locked in a silent competition to reach the sky.

“Probably.” He shrugged, barely looking away from the view. “But it wouldn’t have mattered. My parents made sure I went into business, not engineering.”

At the mention of his parents, my smile faded, and something heavy settled inside me as I listened.

“At least you grew up with your parents around. And you had Nanay Emily and Tatay Berto looking after you.” The rest slipped out in a whisper. “That’s worlds away from my own story.”

“Fair.” A quiet laugh slipped from him. “You’re right. Come on—let’s keep walking.”

“Are you going to tell me where we’re headed?” I asked.

“Be patient. You’ll see soon.”

We walked in comfortable silence until we reached a cabin tucked near the edge of the property. At first glance, it looked unremarkable—a simple, small place with one main room and a modest living area. But the moment he turned on the lights, my jaw dropped.

The inside was absolutely stunning: sleek modern furniture, a compact kitchen, two cozy bedrooms, and even a staircase that led down to a hidden room below.

“This is incredible. It feels so warm and cozy.”

“There’s more I want to show you,” he said with a smile, taking my hand again and leading me toward the kitchen.

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“And where are you taking me now?”

Instead of answering, he suddenly pulled me in and kissed me, stealing the words right off my lips.

“From now on, every time you ask that, I’ll kiss you,” he teased, then opened a small door at the back of the house.

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t have a fever?” I could only shake my head, smiling.

“Not at all, sweetheart. In fact, having you as my nurse has made me feel better than ever.”

“Seriously, what happened to the Daniel Kelley I met at the beginning? I barely recognize this version of you.”

“Don’t worry. That side of me hasn’t disappeared. I’ll let you see the real Daniel very soon.”

A strange feeling tightened in my chest, making me wonder if there was more behind his words.

“In college, this was my hideout. Whenever life got too heavy, or I needed to escape the chaos of running the company, I came here. The only one who knew about this place was Rian.”

“Not even your parents found out?”

“No. They never did.”

“And they still haven’t discovered it?”

He nodded again, a small smile on his lips.

“Then why did you bring me here? Why are you showing me this secret part of your life?”

“Because you’re part of me now. You’re my wife.”

His words made my heart flip. Thankfully, he didn’t see my stunned expression—he was busy searching for the light switch.

When the room flooded with light, I went speechless. Canvases of every size filled the space, each one bursting with color and emotion.

“They’re incredible,” I whispered, stepping closer to a painting of a mother comforting her child. “They almost look alive. Who made all of this?”

His presence was right behind me—silent, steady. “I did.”

I turned to him in disbelief. “You? Seriously?”

“Yeah. Painting has been my escape since high school. But like I told you before, my dreams never really stood a chance against the family business.”

“Did you ever tell your parents how much you liked it?”

“Not once. They shut down my dream of becoming an engineer, so can you imagine how they’d react if I told them I wanted to study art?” He reached for a nearby canvas—one of a father twirling his daughter on a dance floor—and handed it to me.

“This is Rian, isn’t it?”

“It is. I painted it after her wedding to Alex. It’s from a picture they took that day.”

“You’re amazing. I wish I had even a fraction of that talent.” Smiling, I looked away from him and back to the mother-and-child painting that had caught my attention.

“You’re not exactly lacking. You can sing, and you dance better than anyone I know.”

Instead of answering, I let my attention drift back to the piece in front of me. There was something about the way the mother leaned close to her child that tugged at me. I traced the painted face lightly with my fingertip.

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“What is it like growing up with your mother by your side?” My voice was barely a whisper as my hand hovered over the painted mother and child.

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he said my name quietly. “Sophia...”

"I never really knew what that felt like. My mother left when I was ten. After that, it was just Rian, our father, and me."

Something inside me shifted, and I realized I was ready to tell him my story too. If he could share his childhood dreams and secret hiding places, then I could trust him with fragments of my past.

Taking a shaky breath, I continued, letting myself speak freely for once.

"There were days when I'd see my friends at school with their mothers, and I couldn't help wishing I had that kind of family," I admitted as I moved past more of his paintings. "Even now, I can't stop wondering why she left. I spent years waiting for her to walk back through the door and give me an explanation."

He stepped closer, stopping silently behind me as I studied a painting of a little girl holding a doll.

"This is simply stunning."

I offered him a small smile, hoping for a bit of comfort in return, but he didn't mirror it. He only watched, hands tucked into his pockets, quiet and thoughtful.

"Sixteen years later, our paths crossed again. It was in Amador."

"You saw your mom there?" he asked.

I nodded, keeping my eyes on the painting.

"But I didn't dare speak to her. Instead, I ran. And that was how it stayed until recently, when our paths crossed at the mall. She actually saw me first and tried to come closer, but everything she'd done came rushing back, and I realized I still wasn't ready. No matter what words she had for me, nothing could change what had already happened."

"Why didn't you ask her? Not even once? Maybe she wanted to explain herself. I'm sure there's a reason behind it," he said.

"I was scared."

"Scared of what, Sophia?"

Scared of hearing her reasons. Scared of admitting how much I still needed her. Scared that I might forgive her. The fear made me run again before I could say a single word.

I quickly wiped the tear that slid down my cheek.

He stepped closer, reaching out to squeeze my hand in quiet comfort.

“I was at the mall that day too.”

Confusion swept through me, and I turned to look at him. “Wait, what are you talking about? You saw me there?”

“Yes. That afternoon, I was at a business lunch with Andrew. You and Nanay Emily showed up right as we were finishing. I saw you turn away, and right after that, a woman ran out after you. Andrew and I followed you...”

“So you saw everything. You were there,” I said, picking up where he left off.

At his confirmation, I let out a long breath, closing my eyes for a moment.

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“You should try to talk to her, Sophia. You’ll never understand why she left unless you give her the chance to explain,” he said, gently turning me so I faced him, his hands steady on my shoulders.

“I can’t. No matter what reason she had, abandoning her own daughter is still wrong.”

"I agree. She made a mistake. But don't you think it might be time to finally hear her out? Sixteen years is a long time, and I saw how badly she wishes she could undo it."

"It's not that simple, Daniel."

"I understand. I'm not saying you have to forgive her right away." He stepped closer, cradling my face in his hands until our eyes met. "But if you want, I'll be there with you."

Those words stayed with me long after he said them. Instead of collapsing beneath the weight of old wounds, I found myself smiling despite the ache, biting my lip as I held his steady gaze.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked.

I shook my head, looking him straight in the eyes. "I just never imagined we'd have a conversation like this without yelling. You're even being gentle with me."

A smug smile tugged at his mouth. He took a step back, suddenly a little shy, glancing down at the floor as a quiet laugh slipped out.

"Honestly, I have no idea what spell you've put on me, but I'm glad we can sit and talk like this." He shrugged with a lazy smile that made me laugh in spite of myself.

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” I asked, lifting a brow as I planted myself in front of him. “Are you finally falling in love with me, Mr. Kelley?”

His grin turned playful as he closed the distance between us. “You’ve gotten used to saying my name, sweetheart. I just can’t get enough of hearing it.”

His words made my eyes widen. I gasped as he stepped closer, but I retreated, putting space between us.

“Wait, that one doesn’t count! I was distracted, okay?”

“You must have forgotten what I warned you about on the way here. I told you, every time you say my name, you rack up a debt. If I’m not mistaken, you’re at fifteen now. Maybe sixteen.”

“Fifteen? You’re making that up! I only said your name, like, two times, didn’t I?” I said, eyes wide.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but there’s interest on your account,” he said with a grin, chasing me around the small table.

“Interest? Have you lost your mind? Saying your name isn’t a loan!”

He only laughed harder, finally cornering me. “Call it whatever you want, love. But it’s time to pay up.”

That wild game of chase lasted nearly five minutes, me weaving around furniture while he stayed determined to catch me.

Just when I thought he'd given up, strong arms wrapped around my waist from behind, pulling me flush against him.

"Got you."

A startled yelp escaped me, but he turned me around and eased me down onto the floor, still holding me close.

"Daniel!"

"Not so loud," he hushed, pressing a finger to my lips.