

A Favor 371

Chapter 371

I wanted to tell him the truth. I wanted to tell him that I had never felt anything for that man. I never loved Félix De Luca. How could I, when I had barely known him before my father forced that engagement on us? But how was I supposed to explain any of it when he never let me get more than a few words out?

“Then why did you marry me? Was it because of him?”

A lump rose in my throat as I nodded, knowing this was the question I had feared most since realizing how much he truly mattered to me now.

“I knew it,” he said, his voice trembling with barely contained anger as his fists tightened at his sides.

“It’s not what you’re imagining, Daniel.”

“Then tell me what it is. Did you marry me just to throw it in his face?” A bitter laugh escaped him. “Now it all makes sense. You kept insisting you didn’t marry me for my money.”

“Please, just let me speak,” I begged, my voice breaking as tears blurred my vision.

“Oh, I should let you speak? What for — so you can pretend none of this is real?” He stepped closer, his presence filling the space between us. “Did you think I wouldn’t look into your past? I hired a private investigator to dig up everything.”

The shock of it hit me, but nothing could have prepared me for what came next.

“Do you want to hear what he found?”

His hands closed around my shoulders.

“Layla. Layla Angeles — the woman you swore was an old friend — used to work for your former fiancé. And you weren’t searching for her because you missed her. You were hunting her down so she could explain your affair to him. You cheated on him, and he caught you in his own bedroom with his best friend.”

“What the hell—” The words escaped me as I pressed a hand to my chest, my breath coming in sharp, painful bursts.

“Where did you get that filth?” I demanded, teeth clenched, tears streaming down my face.

“Where did I hear it? Straight from your former fiancé himself, my dear.”

“So that’s what he told you? And you simply believed him — just like that?”

“Of course I did!”

“Don’t you dare speak to me about love, Sophia Del Mundo. That’s a word you use whenever it suits you. I’d bet you said it to your former fiancé too, and look how that ended. You betrayed him.”

“That is not true! Why can’t you believe me for once? He tried to assault me six years ago! Yes, Layla worked for them — and I was desperate to find her because she is the only witness to what Félix did to me!”

“Incredible. You actually expect me to believe that, sweetheart? Maybe that story worked on Félix and his father, but you won’t fool me.”

Hearing him drag my father into it made my fists clench. A wave of anger surged through me before I could stop it.

“He saw through your story back then, just as I’m seeing through it now. Félix knew the truth. And when his family tried to forgive you, you chose to run — from your engagement, from everyone who had trusted you.”

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I had to swallow again and again just to keep from falling apart. I couldn’t believe this was real. I had never imagined I would stand here watching the same man who had once been gentle with me grow this cold. How was it possible that I was listening to him repeat lie after lie when all I wanted was for him to see the truth?

“So that’s it? You’ve already made up your mind about us. You’re not even going to hear what I have to say — you’re just going to believe every rotten thing he told you?” Tears ran freely down my face as disappointment and anguish tangled together in my chest. “Don’t I deserve the chance to tell my side of the story? At least that much?”

He kept his lips pressed together, jaw tight, eyes fixed on anything but mine.

“If this is how things are going to be, then we should end this.”

That finally got his attention. His eyes narrowed as he turned to look at me.

“End this? Sophia, there’s nothing to end here, because we never had anything real to begin with.”

If my heart could speak, I know it would have screamed at those words into the silence stretching between us.

“Fine.” I drew a shaky breath and wiped the tears from my cheeks. “You’ve made it clear you won’t change your mind, so I don’t see any point in staying here any longer.”

He said nothing. He was nearly gone — slipping back into his room — when my voice stopped him at the door.

“Go ahead and start the divorce proceedings,” I told him quietly, keeping my eyes on my trembling fingers as I slid off my ring. “Just have the papers sent to my old address.”

He turned, brow furrowed, confusion written across his face. “I never said you had to move out. This is your home too.”

A strange sound escaped me — half laugh, half sob — hollow with disbelief as fresh tears rolled down my cheeks. “You were always the one who said this marriage only existed on paper. And when my lawyer sent that prenuptial agreement, it meant I would never take a single cent from you.” The tears kept coming as I stepped forward and pressed the ring — my wedding ring — into his palm.

“Take it. I don’t want it anymore. Do whatever you like with it.”

I didn’t understand why his words hurt so much that night when he had treated me this way before. Maybe it cut deeper now because I had allowed myself to love him. Maybe I had begun to hope for something I never should have hoped for.

“All right, then,” I said, meeting his eyes one last time. “Thank you for everything, Mr. Kelley. For the moments that mattered — at least now I finally understand how little I mean to you.”

Before anyone could watch me fall apart, I turned away and wiped at the tears I couldn’t hide. At the foot of the stairs, Nanay Emily stood watching me, her face tight with worry. I managed a small, trembling smile despite my wet cheeks.

“Anak...” Her soft voice made it clear she had heard everything.

“Thank you for your kindness, Nanay Emily — but I think this is the end of the road for me.”

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“Sophia, maybe you should give him another chance. Talk to him one more time.”

Shaking my head, I pressed my hand over my mouth as another sob threatened to break free.

“He’s not willing to listen to me. He’s already made up his mind, no matter what I say.” I drew a trembling breath. “I have to go now, Nanay Emily.”

“Sophia, where are you going at this hour? It’s almost midnight!” She reached for me, worry sharpening her voice.

“I’ll be all right, Nanay. I’ve managed on my own for years. One more night won’t finish me off.”

“Sophia...”

“Thank you for everything, Nanay,” I said, warmth filling my chest despite everything, and leaned in to kiss her cheek before hurrying down the stairs.

When I reached the car, I knocked lightly on the driver's window. Ben opened the door, confusion clear on his face as he looked up at me.

"Ben, can you get me the keys to my old car?"

"Miss Sophia, are you all right? What happened in there?"

"Please, Ben — just give me the keys," I said, not bothering to answer his question.

"But does Mr. Kelley know you're taking the car?"

"He doesn't care what I do, Ben. Just give me the keys. Please."

My raised voice caught him off guard, but he went to fetch them without another word.

"Would you like me to drive you somewhere, Miss Sophia?"

"I'll be fine on my own, Ben. Thank you for offering."

He stayed close as I walked to the garage and stopped beside my old car.

“Thank you for your help, Ben.”

He said something more, but I closed the door and turned the key in the ignition without looking back.

What I didn’t know was that upstairs, Daniel had finally stepped out of his room and tried to reach me — but by then, I was already gone.

Why did so few people ever believe my version of things? Why wouldn’t anyone give me a moment to explain before rushing to judge me? How could they accuse me so quickly?

“Come on, Sophia. How many times are you going to let this break you? Your own father turned his back on you without listening, and now you’re facing the same verdict for something you didn’t even do.” The frustration overwhelmed me. I struck the steering wheel with both palms and let out a cry that rang through the entire car.

“Why is it so easy for you to take his word over mine, Daniel Kelley? I was the one who got hurt, but you act as though I’m the one to blame. You even went as far as hiring a private investigator, and this is where it gets us. Is my life just doomed to keep repeating itself?”

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My mind drifted as I drove, barely paying attention to where I was going, until I found myself parked in front of Bryan’s house. The guards at the gate recognized me and waved me through without bothering to check with their employer first. It was already past one in the morning.

That place had been a refuge for me since I moved to California. Bryan had always hoped I would stay there for good, but I had preferred to rent an apartment with Craig. Still, my old room — the one right beside Bryan's — had always been kept for me.

Heart hammering, I made my way toward his door, but soft voices from inside stopped me cold. Panic surged through me, and without thinking, I shoved the door open without knocking.

Nothing in my entire life had prepared me for what I saw. Not even my most absurd, far-fetched dreams had come close to this moment.

Right there, in Bryan's bed, lay a naked woman — sprawled without the faintest trace of shame — while a man knelt between her legs with his face buried exactly where it shouldn't be. Both of them turned toward me as the door swung shut behind me, and the shock hit me a second time when I realized the man was Bryan.

"Oh my God!" the woman and I exclaimed at the exact same moment. I clapped both hands over my eyes as Bryan scrambled to pull the nearest sheet over himself.

"What the hell, Ysabelle?" Bryan sputtered, grabbing his shirt to cover himself. "Do you seriously not know how to knock?"

"I'm sorry! I heard strange noises and thought someone had broken in. You know — a burglar."

“A burglar? Really, Ysabelle? I have a small army of guards outside. How exactly would a burglar get in here?”

“I don’t know! Anything is possible,” I said, lifting my shoulders. “And excuse me, brother, but have you ever heard of locking your door? If you’re going to perform your little magic tricks in here, at least lock it next time!”

“There’s no point locking the door unless you’re around! You’re the only person who thinks barging in unannounced is perfectly normal.”

“Yes, yes. Whatever you say. Good night, Bryan. Make sure to give my regards to your girlfriend.” I forced a smile, drawing out the word “girlfriend” for full effect.

I was halfway to the door when he called after me.

“Wait, Ysabelle! What’s going on? Why did you show up here out of nowhere?”

“Let’s leave it for tomorrow, all right? Go back to — whatever it was I interrupted. Good night!”

“We’re not done talking!” he insisted, but I ignored him and closed the door quietly behind me.

Once I stepped into the room next door, I let out a long, weary sigh. Sleep felt impossible with everything still spinning through my head.

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Sophia's Point of View

"Good morning! Did you two manage to get any sleep after last night's little... surprise?" I said with a wink, watching Bryan walk into the kitchen with his girlfriend trailing behind him.

"We barely slept, and it's entirely your fault!" He shot me a look of exaggerated reproach.

"Oh, come on — is it the lost sleep that bothers you, or the fact that I ruined your moment?"

"Next time, Sophia Ysabelle, knock before you come crashing into my room."

Just picturing the scene from the night before made me dissolve into giggles all over again.

"By the way, Aira — this is my sister Belle. Belle, meet Aira, my girlfriend." He gave me a pointed look, clearly daring me to behave myself.

"Hi, Belle. I've been looking forward to meeting you. Bryan talks about you all the time." Aira smiled warmly and extended her hand.

"I'm glad we've finally met, Aira." I shook it. "My brother has been searching a long time for someone he could actually introduce as his girlfriend. I'm glad he found you." I leaned into that last word just enough, and her cheeks flushed pink while Bryan shot me a quick glance from where he stood behind her.

"Come on, let's eat. I made pancakes and scrambled eggs — they'll taste even better with hot coffee."

With that, I turned to the counter to grab extra plates and pour two mugs of coffee.

Breakfast was going smoothly until my phone buzzed in my pocket. I glanced at the screen, let out a tired sigh when I saw it was Craig, finished the last bite of my pancake, and stepped away to call him back.

By the time I hung up, I realized Bryan had followed me out, and I nearly jumped when I turned around to find him standing right behind me.

"Oh my God, Bryan! How long have you been standing there?" I asked, tucking my phone away.

"Since you started talking to your friend."

"So... did you catch any of that?"

“Not a word. I was too busy admiring that lovely childhood photo of me.” He pointed proudly toward a framed picture on the corner table, earning a slow roll of my eyes.

As I started back toward the kitchen, he draped an arm gently around my shoulders.

“Belle, we need to talk about what happened.”

I let out a slow breath, met his eyes, and gave a small nod. He guided me out to the porch and we settled onto the wooden bench, him close beside me.

“So what exactly brought you here out of nowhere? I know you well enough to figure it’s not about Félix. If it were, you would’ve called instead of driving all the way here.”

“Félix is part of it, but he’s not the whole story.”

“Is it your husband?”

My answer was a small nod. I looked down at my hand and traced the faint line the ring had left on my finger.

“He went as far as hiring a private investigator. He wanted to uncover everything — my past, who I was before, and even why I agreed to marry him in the first place.”

“All right, and what did he find?”

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I closed my eyes, gathering my thoughts, then told him everything. I walked him through Daniel’s recent change, how distant he had become, how hollow our marriage had begun to feel over the past few weeks. I was honest about what I had hoped for and what I still wanted between us.

It became clear that the real fracture was all the unanswered questions — about my mother, about Layla, about Félix. That last incident had changed everything, sending us all the way back to the beginning.

“You know, maybe I should thank him.”

That was the first thing out of Bryan’s mouth after I finished.

“Why on earth would you thank him for what he did?” I asked, frowning.

“Because if he hadn’t stirred things up, you probably wouldn’t have come. I’d still just be a distant memory in the background of your life,” he said, a teasing smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Bryan, I’m being serious. Don’t joke about this.”

“All right, all right. I’m just trying to make you feel a little better.”

Even after he conceded, I kept my gaze sharp, refusing to let him off the hook. After a long breath, he took my hand gently and began to rub it.

“Belle, tell me the truth. Do you love him?”

My throat tightened. Instead of answering, I launched into everything else, hoping to sidestep the real question.

“I don’t understand how he believed everything Félix said. He barely knows the man. I’ve been with Daniel for months, and he still took his side without a second thought — judged me before I could even get a word in, as if my explanation meant nothing at all. And do you know what hurt the most? He told me I couldn’t fool him. He said he would never fall for my tricks.”

“You still haven’t answered me, Belle. Do you love him?”

“Oh, for God’s sake.”

I couldn’t avoid his gaze, so I simply nodded and bit my lip.

“And do you really think he’s only acting out of jealousy?”

A pained smile crossed my lips as I shook my head.

“If he truly cared about me, why would jealousy even matter? I tried to open up to him, to tell him how I felt, but he shut me down. He told me I had no business talking about love because I didn’t understand what it meant.”

“Belle, I think he feels something for you too, even if he’s not ready to admit it. Jealousy might be the very reason he took what Félix told him so seriously.”

I shook my head again, still not convinced.

“If he cared about me, why didn’t he listen? Why didn’t he give me the chance to explain? He was so consumed by his anger, Bryan, that it never seemed to occur to him that I might be hurting too. He said he hired a private investigator — but did what he found actually reflect the truth? All he did was speak to Félix and decide that was enough.”

“Speaking of which, how did those two ever cross paths?”

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“He doesn’t actually know Félix. The only reason he knew the name was because I let it slip once when we were out to eat. Remember that day I told you about someone watching us from across the restaurant? I think that’s when it all started — and when he began digging into my life.”

“All right, but answer me this. Did you ever try to explain to him why you married him in the first place?”

“I did, Bryan. I genuinely did. But he wouldn’t hear it. Félix had already twisted the whole story, and Daniel chose to believe every word of it. He decided I was nothing more than a cheat — someone who had betrayed her former fiancé and everyone who had ever trusted her.”

My voice faltered as tears gathered at the corners of my eyes. “I can’t even find the words for what I’m feeling. I’m furious and heartbroken at the same time.”

“You know, when he finally came back, I decided to tell him everything. I wanted to explain my past, why I chose to marry him, and what truly pushed me to open up. But he caught me off guard when he claimed he already knew the truth. For a moment, I actually hoped he would support me. I wanted to believe he had genuinely listened to my side of things. But it turned out he was just repeating more of Félix’s lies. I had fooled myself into thinking he had changed — but I was wrong.”

“And because you thought he had changed, you probably believed things between you were finally moving forward.”

The question hung in the air as I stared down at my lap, saying nothing.

“You know, sometimes we end up breaking our own hearts simply because we let ourselves hope too much. If you had never fallen in love with him, do you think his accusations would hurt this deeply?” He tilted my chin up with his finger. “Tell me, Belle — is there really any difference between the things he used to say and the things he says now? Has anything actually changed?”

I could only shake my head slowly.

“Exactly. His words haven’t changed at all — he keeps repeating them. What changed are your feelings. It’s not his judgment that hurts you. It’s that you wanted him to feel the same way. You started believing that the way he cared for you meant something more, that he felt what you felt.”

He paused and offered a soft smile, though his eyes didn’t quite meet mine.

“And what am I supposed to do, Bryan? Just switch off my heart and disconnect from everything I feel for him? I wish I could. I really do love him. But I have no idea how to stop!”

“I never said you had to stop loving him, Belle.” He shook his head slowly. “If your heart still holds something for him, that’s all right. You can keep hoping if you want to. Just don’t tie yourself to expectations, because expectations only set you up for disappointment. Sometimes it’s better to be pleasantly surprised than to be let down by something you were counting on.”

The words “expectation” and “disappointment” turned over in my mind, and suddenly a decision settled within me.

Chapter 378

“What if I just give up and walk away from all of this?”

Bryan sat up straighter, concern sharpening his eyes.

“Hold on — are you saying you’re done? Are you actually thinking about quitting?”

“I’m saying I’m ready to stop chasing justice for what happened to me. I don’t want to keep fighting this battle anymore. I’m exhausted, Bryan. I want to let it all go.”

“Are you out of your mind?” His voice rose, cutting through mine. “Ysabelle, you’ve given six years of your life to this. How can you just give up now?”

“That’s exactly why I’m so worn out! Six years, Bryan — six years — and what do I have to show for it? Félix is still getting away with everything, and I’m still having nightmares because of him. I finally found Layla, and she claims she doesn’t remember anything. Maybe her memory is truly gone, or maybe she just doesn’t want to get involved!”

“You can’t afford to quit now, Belle. There has to be another way — I know it. You’re so close. One more step and you’ll finally have the justice you deserve.”

“One more step? Another option?” I looked at him directly, frustration bleeding into my voice. “Do you have any idea what these six years have cost me? I’ve put everything on hold — searching for Layla, chasing justice. I can’t keep doing this, Bryan. I’m exhausted.”

“Exhausted? Since when do you talk about being exhausted, Ysabelle?”

“You don’t understand.”

“Oh, what a tragedy that I don’t understand you — isn’t it? Who was by your side through all of it? When your mother left, I was there. When your father almost turned his back on you because you trusted that bastard you were engaged to, I stayed. Every night you woke up shaking from another nightmare, I was the one who sat with you. I’m still here, still trying to help you, still trying to keep you safe. So tell me, Ysabelle — what part of your life is it that I don’t understand?”

Tears slid down my cheeks as his words hit somewhere deep, and I couldn’t hold them back any longer.

“That’s not what I meant, Bryan.”

“Or is it because of him? Is that why you want to give up now?”

“No! This has nothing to do with him!” I said quickly, knowing exactly who he meant.

“Then tell me — what is it that’s really making you want to quit?”

“I’m tired, Bryan. That’s the truth. I am so worn down from chasing a justice that keeps slipping further out of reach. Every morning I wake up dreading how I’ll get through the day without thinking about that man and everything he did to me. I can’t keep living inside the past like this. I want to find a way to move forward.”

The words snagged in my throat, and I had to draw a slow breath to keep the sobs from breaking through.

Chapter 379

“Do you know what I realized last night? I finally understood that all of this — everything I’ve done — was never purely about justice. It wasn’t even entirely about me. I’ve been fighting this hard for my father. I was furious that he didn’t stand by me when I needed him most. I wanted to prove he was wrong — that he should have chosen his daughter over his business. I needed him to regret turning his back on me.”

“And your fight against Félix?”

“We’ve tried everything within our reach, but maybe it’s time to let the past rest. Maybe I should focus on what’s happening right now and what might still be ahead of me. Craig told me that sometimes, when we’re obsessed with yesterday, we blind ourselves to the opportunities standing right in front of us.”

Bryan stared at me, blinking slowly, as though he barely recognized me. He stood, gently cradled my face in his hands, and gave me a light tap on the forehead.

“Ow! What was that for?” I asked, frowning up at him.

“Just checking whether you had a fever or were losing your mind.”

“What are you talking about now?” For a fraction of a second I wanted to swat him, but a smile found its way to my lips as a similar moment from a few weeks ago came back to me.

“Are you really sure you want to let it go?”

I answered with a firm nod.

“Then what was it that finally brought you to this point?”

“I already told you. I’m too tired to keep fighting,” I said, lifting my shoulders.

“That’s not the real answer. You might have convinced yourself otherwise, but I know you too well, Belle. I understand why you’re saying this — but listen to me. You should never have to beg someone to love you. The right person will notice you, love you as you are, and accept every part of your story. You don’t need someone to fix you or fill what’s missing. You just need someone who will love you completely, without conditions.”

“My, Bryan. I didn’t know you were a poet,” I teased, giving back the same kind of jab he had thrown at me not so long ago.

“I mean every word, Ysabelle.” He narrowed his eyes at me, though the corners of his mouth betrayed him. “Whatever happens — I will always be here for you. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes, I know. Thank you for always being there, and for everything you’ve done. I mean it, Bryan.” I stood and wrapped my arms around his waist, holding on tight. “Thank you, brother.”

Daniel's Point of View

"Mr. Kelley, a package arrived for you earlier this morning. I've placed it in the left drawer of your desk," said Denise, handing me the photocopied reports I had asked her for yesterday.

"Who sent it, exactly?" I asked, frowning.

"I'm not sure, sir. There's no sender name on it, and no note — just your name written on the box."

"All right, thank you." I opened the left drawer and found a plain white box with my name scrawled across the top.

Without giving it another thought, I slid the drawer shut and left the package where it was.

"Is there anything else you need, sir?"

"That'll be all for now, Denise. You can head back to your office. Thank you."

"Of course, sir."

Chapter 380

Once the door clicked shut behind her, I sank back into my chair. That package kept nagging at the edges of my mind, and ever since Sophia had walked out that night, I had been on edge over every small thing. Four days had passed, and she hadn't called anyone — not my mother, not my sister, not even Nanay Emily.

Just then, my phone buzzed in my pocket, and when I looked at the screen, a sharp sting of disappointment hit me. It was my sister Rian, not her.

"Dani, why isn't Belle picking up? I've been trying to reach her since yesterday, but it keeps going to voicemail. Do you know where she is? Is she swamped with work or something?"

A long sigh escaped me as I tried to figure out how to tell her what had happened four days ago.

"Dani? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here. I'm listening."

"So — is Belle with you?"

"No, she's not with me right now."

“Then where is she? Why isn’t she returning my calls?”

“Maybe she’s at the studio. Try again — she might pick up this time.”

“Wait, did something happen between you two?”

“Nothing happened.”

“Oh, come on, Dani. I can tell you’re keeping something from me. What’s going on?”

“I already told you, everything is fine between us. There’s nothing to worry about!”

“Aha! I didn’t even ask if things were fine, and look how fast you jumped to defend yourself. You just gave yourself away!” Damn it.

“Come on, Dani. Just tell me what actually happened. I’ve known Belle for a long time, and she would never ignore my calls without a reason.”

I let out another sigh, knowing she wouldn’t let this go until she had an answer.

“She left the house four days ago, Rian. I haven’t tried to reach her since, so don’t bother asking where she is — because I genuinely have no idea.”

“Wait — what are you saying?”

“She left, Rian. She just walked out.”

“Oh my God! Why would she disappear like that? Did something happen between you two? Did you fight?”

“I found out the truth, Rian.” I clenched my jaw as Félix’s words replayed in my head.

“What truth are you talking about?”

“The real reason she married me.”

She went quiet, so I kept going.

“You were right — it wasn’t for my money. It was all because of her former fiancé.”

“What are you talking about? Where are you getting this from?”

“She wanted to make him jealous, to get him back. She’s still in love with him!”

What I didn’t know was that on the other end of the line, Rian’s eyes had gone wide.

“Daniel Kelley, what on earth are you talking about?”

I frowned. Rian only used my full name when her patience with me had completely run out.

“Isn’t that what happened, Rian? Belle cheated on her fiancé six years ago. You know it’s true.”

“For the love of God, Daniel, where are you getting these ideas?”

“I hired a private investigator. I even spoke to her former fiancé myself.”

“So you spoke with Félix De Luca?”

“You know him?” I narrowed my eyes.

“Of course I do! Belle told me everything about him!”