

A Favor 381

Chapter 381

A bitter laugh slipped out. “Then you must know he found her in bed with his best friend.”

“That is not what happened, Daniel.”

“Don’t tell me you actually believe Belle’s version, Rian.”

“Obviously I believe her. She’s my friend and I trust her. The truth is, Daniel — Félix tried to force himself on her. He tried to assault her six years ago. That is what actually happened!”

“That’s not true. She’s just making it up—”

“For the love of God, Daniel! How can you take a stranger’s word over your own wife’s? You believe Félix without even bothering to hear Belle out? Why won’t you just talk to her for once? Why won’t you—”

“Why should I? So she can come up with another story? And if you’re right — if Félix actually did those things — why didn’t she go to the police? Why did she just run, like someone who’s guilty, instead of standing her ground?”

“So that’s what Félix told you — that Belle simply ran? If your famous investigator did his job, why doesn’t he know what happened with her father? Her own father turned his back on her for money,

Daniel! She didn't just disappear. She tried to speak up. She filed charges against Félix, but no one listened. She had no money, no support — not even from her own family!"

"Rian..." My voice faltered as I heard her quiet, muffled sobs through the phone.

"Do you hate her that much, Dani? Is it really that easy for you to abandon her? I hope that someday you'll finally see who she truly is. She's not the villain you think she is — she's not the person you keep trying to convince yourself she is. Don't judge a book by its cover, little brother, and that is exactly what you're doing. You have no right to judge her when you haven't bothered to hear the whole story. You think you know Belle inside and out, but you don't. You have no idea what she's been through, Daniel. If anything happens to her, I don't know if I'll ever be able to forgive you!"

Rian ended the call before I could get another word in. Her last words echoed in my head, over and over, leaving me restless and uncertain of what to do next.

Sophia's Point of View

A startled cry escaped me as I hit the pavement. Someone in a hurry had clipped my shoulder and sent me tumbling to the ground.

"I'm so sorry, miss!" The stranger quickly doubled back and reached out a hand to help me up. "Are you all right? I truly didn't see you standing there — I'm so sorry."

I tried to wave it off with a smile and finally looked up at them.

“Please, don’t worry about it — it was probably—”

Before I could finish, I was pulled into a tight embrace, the breath nearly knocked out of me all over again.

“Oh my God! I can’t believe it — I finally found you, sis!”

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“Oh my God! I can’t believe this is real — I actually found you! You’re my sister!”

I stood frozen, eyes wide, completely at a loss for words as he wrapped me in a hug and kept calling me his sister. When he finally let go, his hands settled on my shoulders and he gave me a smile warmer than anything I had felt all day.

“I think... you might have the wrong person,” I managed, stepping back slightly while keeping a polite smile on my face. I studied his features, and something familiar about them sent a nervous twist through my stomach.

“No, I know it’s you,” he said with quiet certainty, already pulling out his phone. After a quick swipe, he turned the screen toward me. “See? You’re Sophia Ysabelle Del Mundo. I looked you up after Mom told me I had a sister.”

“Wait... what?”

The words left my mouth before I could think of what to follow them with. Maybe he had seen me somewhere — on television, or online. My name wasn't exactly hard to find.

"I'm an only child. There's no way you could be my brother," I insisted.

But then a thought surfaced. Sixteen years had passed since my mother left, and nearly seven since I had walked away from Italy. I had no idea what had happened in their lives since then.

"Steven. That's my name," he said, extending his hand. I hesitated, then took it. "So, Sophia — what brings you here?" he asked, still smiling.

I glanced at the green gate behind me and remembered exactly why I had come.

"I'm looking for my mother."

His whole face lit up at that word. His smile widened, eyes dancing with excitement.

"Of course! Come on, let's go inside!" Before I could say anything, he grabbed my hand and pulled me along, practically dragging me toward the house.

“Hey, slow down! Where are you taking me?”

He didn’t answer — only picked up the pace and called out down the hallway, “Mom! Sophia’s here! She came to see you!”

A wave of nerves ran through me. Was he just playing some kind of trick? Before I could figure it out, a woman stepped out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a dish towel, her expression puzzled at first.

“Steven, why are you shouting like that—” She stopped the moment her eyes landed on me. For a moment, my whole world seemed to hold its breath. “Belle?” Her voice was thick with disbelief.

“I found her outside, Mom. She came looking for you,” Steven said, releasing my hand.

Had he just called her Mom?

I steadied myself as it finally sank in — he had been telling the truth all along. My mother walked toward me with tears sliding down her cheeks.

“My darling,” she said softly, taking my hands and drawing me into a gentle embrace. “You’re here. What a wonderful surprise.”

I told her I needed to talk to her, my voice wavering slightly.

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“Of course, come with me, sweetheart,” she said, guiding me inside. She gestured to the sofa and asked, “What would you like to drink? Orange juice, pineapple, apple?”

I told her not to trouble herself.

“What about some grape juice? I remember how much you loved it when you were little.”

Rather than give her a real answer, I simply smiled and nodded.

“All right, I’ll get you some grape juice.” With that, she disappeared into the kitchen, and I didn’t try to stop her.

When I glanced around the room, I found Steven watching me.

“You’re very beautiful, you know. You remind me of Mom sometimes, when she was younger,” he said with a smile.

That left me without words, so I offered him another small smile in return.

A few days earlier...

"Bryan, I've decided to fly to Seattle. I already have my ticket," I said quietly over dinner.

"What's taking you there?"

"I want to talk to my mother. I didn't let her finish what she was trying to say before, so I thought I should go see her and finally hear the whole story."

"That sounds like a big step, Belle! When do you leave?"

I hesitated. "My flight is tomorrow morning."

"You know, a little advance notice would have been nice. I could have sent my plane to pick you up in style."

"You've already done more than enough for me. This time I wanted to do things on my own."

"Are you really sure about this?"

A small smile and a nod was all I gave him.

"I'll be fine, truly. Thank you for always looking after me, Bry."

End of memory.

Steven excused himself to shower, still flushed from his run outside.

I waited until we were both seated before asking how old he was.

"He just turned sixteen last month," my mother answered.

"Why did you hide the pregnancy from Dad?" I asked, watching her carefully as her gaze dropped to her hands.

"I didn't even know I was pregnant when I left him. I found out three months later."

"Then why did you leave? And why didn't you take me with you?" The question came out before I could stop it. When she finally looked up at me, the regret in her eyes said everything.

“Belle, I am so sorry. Please believe me — I never wanted to leave you behind. Your father had a gambling problem, and every time he lost, he took it out on me. He started calling me bad luck and insisted that hitting me would drive away evil spirits.”

It was the first time I had ever seen her come apart like this. Watching her cry, I could only stare, stunned by the raw pain written across her face.

“I tried to come back for you, Belle. I truly did. But he threatened to kill me if I ever tried to take you from him.”

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The weight of her words hit me all at once. Tears began to fall, one after another, and I couldn't hold them back. Everything I had believed for years crumbled. I had spent so long carrying resentment toward her, pushing her away every time she reached out, certain she had simply chosen to leave me.

“When I was eighteen, he forced me into a marriage with his friend's son. He said it was the only way to keep the family afloat, that the business was drowning in debt,” she continued.

“And he actually went through with it?” I asked, my voice barely holding steady as she rose and moved closer to me.

“There's more. My former fiancé tried to assault me two days before the wedding.”

The shock of it went through me like a jolt. “Are you serious? What kind of nightmare was that?”

“I told your father everything, Belle. He refused to believe a single word. He went ahead with the wedding as though nothing had happened.”

“Oh, sweetheart, come here.” She drew me close and rubbed my back gently.

“Mom...”

I pressed my cheek against her chest and held on. Tears ran freely down my face, but I couldn’t let go. I had ached for this moment for so long — just to be in her arms again, to feel the kind of comfort only she could give. Every part of me had missed her.

“If I had known what he would put you through, nothing in this world could have stopped me from taking you with me. I would have risked everything — even my own safety — just to keep you from harm.”

Her words made me hold her tighter. Old memories came flooding back all at once: her running to me when I scraped my knees, wiping my tears, smothering me with hugs and kisses in the moments I needed them most. I remembered her soft voice spinning bedtime stories in the dark, and the cheerful way she always greeted me with a “good morning” the moment I opened my eyes.

“I love you so much, Mom. I’ve missed you every single day.”

“I love you too, my darling. I’ve missed you just as much. From now on, I’ll be here with you. We’ll make new memories together — nothing matters more to me than you,” she murmured, wiping my tears and pulling me into another embrace.

If there is one thing this life has taught me, it is that a mother’s love never truly fades. It is the one thing I know I can always count on.

Sophia’s Point of View

“Are you absolutely sure you want me to go with you instead of Aira?”

For the third time, I repeated the question, watching Bryan as he handed me the invitation to one of his client’s parties.

“Belle, how many times do I have to say it? Come with me. Aira is in Las Vegas for a fashion event tonight, so she can’t make it.”

“All right, if you say so.” A sigh escaped me as I finally nodded.

“I’ve hired new security guards for tonight, just so you know. They’ll start as soon as we leave.”

I stepped behind him and wrapped my arms around his waist in a grateful hug. “Thank you, Bry.”

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“You don’t have to thank me. I’ll keep looking after you even after you’re married.”

His words settled in my mind, and I found myself biting my lip and exhaling a quiet sigh. Two weeks had passed since I left Daniel’s house, and mornings felt heavier now. His face came to me with every dawn, and to push it back I buried myself in an endless stream of tasks.

Craig had stopped by twice after I mentioned taking a temporary break from work, but I hadn’t returned his calls, or answered Rian’s messages, or those from Nanny Emily, or even my mother-in-law’s.

“Come on, let’s go or we’ll be late.”

We climbed into his car, the bodyguard and driver already waiting up front, and headed out into the night.

My jaw dropped the moment we stepped out of the car. Camera flashes burst around us from every direction, and paparazzi crowded every corner of the entrance. On instinct, I tightened my grip on Bryan’s arm as we made our way toward the hotel.

“Don’t worry, I’ve got you.” Bryan’s voice was calm as he glanced at me, steady and reassuring.

I managed a nervous smile, biting my lip as we walked inside. Even so, I couldn't shake the feeling that running into Daniel tonight was nearly inevitable. I hadn't actually planned to accept Bryan's invitation, but given everything he had done for me over the years, I simply couldn't say no.

"Do you think he'll be here?" I whispered, scanning the room as we crossed the lobby.

Bryan let out a soft laugh and shook his head.

"I knew it. The only reason you agreed to come is because you thought you might find him here. Are you actually hoping he shows up?"

I tried to look indifferent, but the truth was obvious. I rolled my eyes at his teasing. "That's not it. This is a high-profile event — almost every major figure in the city's business world is on the guest list. It wouldn't surprise me if he were here."

He gave me a knowing look. "So you're saying it wouldn't bother you if he walked in with someone on his arm?"

I was about to fire back, but I noticed his attention had shifted. Following his gaze, my heart stopped for a fraction of a second.

Daniel Kelley stood out in the crowd with effortless composure, and beside him was a woman I recognized all too well. Chloe. Memories of that night in the parking lot came rushing back — her lips on his, the triumphant way she had introduced herself at the last party.

Daniel was deep in conversation with a circle of business associates, while Chloe held court nearby, clearly savoring the attention of every man within range.

“That’s Chloe Enriquez — sole heiress to the Enriquez family and, more to the point, your husband’s ex.” He let that last part linger a beat too long. “And in case you didn’t know, she’s also his business partner here in California.”

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“Why are you telling me this?” But one look at his expression told me everything — he was wearing that sly, teasing smile.

“You’re jealous.”

“I am not.”

“If you say so.” He shrugged, unbothered. “I just thought you’d want the facts before jumping to conclusions.”

I gave a short, dismissive sound. “I wasn’t thinking anything of the sort.” Even so, I couldn’t stop my gaze from drifting back to Daniel and Chloe.

Watching them together stirred a swirl of questions I couldn’t quiet. Had the tender moments with my husband ever meant anything, or had they all been an illusion? Perhaps his feelings for me had been real once — until Félix twisted the truth and turned him against me.

Letting out a silent breath, I pulled my gaze away and let it wander across the room. That was when I spotted a familiar face in the crowd, and a faint smile crossed my lips — our first meeting had been at a party, just like this one.

“Well, look at that — JM Saavedra, the big name behind Saavedra Industries.” Bryan released my hand and cut through the crowd to greet him.

I wondered briefly whether they were friends.

“Bryan!” JM called out, pulling him into a quick embrace. They fell into business talk straight away, neither of them noticing me at first.

“I brought my sister tonight!” A moment later, Bryan rested a hand on my elbow.

JM’s eyebrows rose as he finally registered my presence. “Wait — she’s your sister?” His surprise was genuine; the connection clearly hadn’t occurred to him.

“That’s right. Belle, meet JM.”

“We’ve actually already met,” I said, after JM and I exchanged a brief, slightly awkward glance.

“Really? Where did you two meet?” Bryan asked, looking back and forth between us with genuine curiosity.

A shy smile found its way to my lips, and I left it to JM to explain our earlier encounter.

“So, Belle — where’s your husband tonight?” JM asked after a short pause, shifting the subject abruptly. The question caught me completely off guard, and for a second I had nothing to say. “I saw you earlier with—”

“A business associate.”

At that, Bryan leaned in, his head accidentally bumping mine as he chimed in. “Exactly. Business associate.” JM gave a small laugh and nodded, getting the message.

I felt relieved when he didn’t press further on the subject of Daniel. He and Bryan moved on to work topics, focusing on agency matters, and I stayed quiet, content not to draw the conversation back to myself. How the two of them had become friends remained a mystery to me — neither had ever told me the story, and I had never thought to ask.

After a few minutes, I slipped away and drifted toward the wine table. If it weren’t for Bryan’s insistence, I would have skipped this event entirely. Parties like this always felt hollow to me — everyone jostling for attention, eager to rub shoulders with the so-called elite, hoping to close a deal or simply be seen.

I had barely lifted my second glass before a familiar voice cut through the noise behind me.

“Well, if it isn’t Mrs. Kelley herself.”

I recognized her instantly — the sharp edge of her perfume hit me just as hard as her tone. I turned to find Chloe standing far too close.

“Miss Enriquez.” I greeted her with a composed smile and took my wine from the server’s tray.

“Still clinging to that marriage?”

I took a measured sip, then met her eyes without flinching. “Yes, Chloe — Daniel and I are still married. Is there something you wanted to say to me?”

“How strange. He asked me to accompany him tonight. One would think a man would want his wife by his side, not an old flame.”

I tightened my grip on the wine glass, but I held my smile steady as Chloe laughed, nearly causing me to spill my drink.

“Is that so? Funny — coming tonight wasn’t even my idea. My brother invited me as his guest, so I told Daniel to bring one of his friends. I had no idea he’d show up with his ex.” My words were laced with quiet sarcasm as I watched the smugness drain from her face. “If you’ll excuse me, Miss Enriquez, I need to powder my nose.”

I walked past her without bothering to hide the faint, cool smile on my lips. But I hadn’t gone far before her voice rang out behind me, loud enough to turn heads.

“You’ll never be on my level, Sophia Del Mundo! Just who do you think you are? You’re nothing but a dancer who latched onto Daniel Kelley to sort out her life.”

I drew a sharp breath and fought to hold myself together. I turned and looked at her with a calm, practiced smile.

“You really don’t know what you’re talking about, Chloe. And for the record, I have no interest in playing your game. I am not your rival,” I said, keeping my voice even.

“Oh, really?” Chloe arched an eyebrow and stepped closer, refusing to back down. “Don’t play innocent, Sophia. Everything was perfect with Daniel until you came along. You’re the reason we’re not together. You stole him from me!”

A ripple of murmurs moved through the crowd, and her outburst drew more than a few curious stares. For all her theatrics, it was plain to everyone watching that she was putting on a performance. If Chloe hoped to humiliate me, she was only managing to dismantle her own dignity.

“With all due respect, Miss Enriquez, I never took anything from you.”

“Don’t bother denying it! You only married him for his money.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’re nothing but a gold-digger. You used him, you seduced him—”

“Chloe!”

A sharp voice cut across the room, silencing her mid-sentence. Every head turned. I went rigid as Daniel stepped forward, his expression stormy, stopping just inches from her.

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All the energy seemed to drain from my body the moment he took hold of Chloe’s elbow. For a brief second, I braced myself — half-expecting him to calm her down, to take her side. But when he spoke, his voice rang out clearly, louder and sharper than I had ever heard it.

“You have no right to speak about my wife that way. And let’s be very clear — we were over two years before she ever came into my life. I married her because I chose to. I love her.”

He glanced briefly in my direction — quick, unreadable — before turning his full attention back to Chloe.

“And even if you believe she married me for my money, what does it matter? She deserves everything. Everything I have is hers if she wants it. If she spends every last cent to my name, that is her right, and I would give it gladly. You have nothing to say about any of it. You are my business partner, Chloe — nothing more. That is all you will ever be. Do you understand?”

A few weeks ago, hearing him declare his love for me in front of a room full of strangers would have made my heart race. It would have made our marriage feel real — as though love had been the foundation from the very beginning.

But tonight, it only felt like a truth I could no longer afford to hold onto. Whatever we had once been, it was over now. He was defending me because the divorce wasn't final — nothing more. Whatever warmth had once existed between us had long since gone cold.

“No! You don't love her!”

Every eye in the room turned to Chloe as she clutched Daniel's arm and stamped her foot with a fury that bordered on childish.

All I could do was watch, shaking my head at her performance. She ought to consider herself lucky that my marriage to Daniel was all for show — because if it were real, she would have gotten a genuine taste of my anger.

“Don't touch me. And if you make one more scene, Miss Enriquez, I will personally see to it that every alliance between our companies comes to a permanent end.”

I let out a heavy sigh just as Chloe lunged toward him in one last, desperate attempt.

He didn't give her the satisfaction of a second glance. Instead, he walked directly toward me. My heart hammered in my chest, but I forced myself to appear calm, unmoved by the chaos unfolding behind us.

That composure shattered the moment Daniel reached out and took my hand, leaning in to murmur a quiet command.

"We're talking." Without waiting for an answer, he steered me out of the ballroom, indifferent to the whispers and stares that followed us.

"What are you doing?" I hissed, pulling at his hand and trying to free myself.

"Don't say anything. Just come with me." His voice dropped even lower.

"Where are we going?"

"I told you not to talk. Just follow me." He shot me a look that left no room for argument.

Even so, I refused to go quietly, tugging against his grip with every step.

“What on earth are you doing, Daniel?”

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Before I could break free, he pressed me against the wall, pinning my wrists above my head. His mouth crashed into mine in a kiss so fierce it stole the breath from my lungs. Every protest I had died on my lips, smothered by a wave of sensation as he kissed me — hungry, relentless, desperate.

He pressed his body against mine and gripped my waist, pulling me firmly toward him. The world around us dissolved, leaving only the raw current between us, like a scene from a film where the hero throws caution to the wind in one reckless, unguarded moment.

My mind screamed at me to keep my distance, but my body refused to listen. I closed my eyes and melted into his embrace, losing myself in the heat of his kiss. There was something electric in the way he held me — the fire of his touch sent sparks along every nerve. The kiss only deepened, consuming what little resistance I had left.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathless, chests heaving as though we had just surfaced from somewhere very deep. Daniel offered no explanation. He took my hand and led me away from the commotion, heading straight for the parking lot.

“Let’s go.”

“Wait — where are you taking me? I didn’t come here with you. Bryan is my date tonight!”

“And you think I care?” He didn’t slow down, just threw me a look laced with dry sarcasm. “Right now, my only priority is getting you away from Chloe before she causes a scene that ends up on the evening news.”

“After what she just did in there, do you really think tomorrow’s headlines won’t be about us anyway?”

“Ending up in the gossip columns after that is unavoidable, but at least if we’re seen leaving together, it’ll look like our marriage is solid — not falling apart.”

Daniel pulled the car door open and gestured for me to get in, but I stood my ground and shook my head with a wry smile.

“Why don’t you just send over the divorce papers and put an end to this charade? Then we wouldn’t have to keep pretending.”

“Get in the car, Sophia. This is not the time or the place.” He clenched his jaw, and though his tone stayed measured, the authority behind it was unmistakable.

“I’m not going anywhere with you. I’ll call Bryan and tell him—”

“I said get in the car!”

The words lodged in my throat, and just as I was about to respond, a man in white appeared at my side. I recognized him immediately — Damian, one of Bryan's new escorts.

"Mrs. Sophia, are you all right? Is this man bothering you?" Damian's eyes never left Daniel.

"I — I'm fine. We're just—"

"Who the hell are you, and why are you getting involved?"

My stomach tightened as Daniel stepped forward, fists clenching, eyes narrowing at Damian.

"Shouldn't I be the one asking that? Who are you, and why are you pressuring her to get in your car?"

I had to admit — Bryan's new bodyguard didn't pull his punches.

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"You have no idea what's happening here, so I suggest you step back and let me take her home." Daniel turned to me, pushed the car door open wider, and took my hand. "Sophia. Get in. Now."

Before I could react, Damian stepped between us and pulled me gently away from Daniel — a firm but careful grip. He was only doing his job, protecting me, without knowing who Daniel actually was.

“She’s not going with you.”

My eyes went wide — not at Damian’s intervention, but at the flash of fury that crossed Daniel’s face the moment the bodyguard touched my arm.

“Get your hands off my wife!” The words burst out of him, raw and forceful. Before anyone could react, he yanked me back and landed a punch squarely on Damian’s jaw. Damian stumbled backward, dazed, clutching his face.

“Oh my God!”

For a moment I stood completely still, words trapped in my throat, as Daniel lunged forward and seized him by the collar.

“Your wife?” Damian blinked up at him, visibly confused.

“That’s right. She’s my wife. Touch her again and you’ll answer to me.”

“Daniel, stop! He was just doing his job. Damian didn’t know who you were.”

I grabbed Daniel's wrist and wrapped my arms around his waist, trying to pull him back. Slowly, I felt the rigid tension in his muscles ease beneath my hands, his wild anger giving way to something harder to read. For one brief moment our eyes met, and I caught a storm of emotions flickering in his — none of which I could untangle. Before I could get lost in that look, I took a step back and turned to Damian.

"Damian, it's all right. Go back inside. I'll talk to Bryan and explain everything. If he asks, just tell him I left—"

"With your husband?" Damian's gaze stayed fixed on Daniel rather than on me.

"Yes. With my husband." I nodded and swallowed against the tightness in my throat.

"What exactly is the problem with that, if I'm her husband?"

"Daniel, enough. Leave him alone."

If looks could kill, I was fairly certain Damian would already be six feet under. Both men stood there, stubborn and silent, each daring the other to make the next move.

"We're leaving."

Daniel opened the car door and waited for me to get in before reaching across to fasten my seatbelt — the same habit he had fallen into over the past few weeks.

I let out a long, tired sigh as he closed the door and walked around to the driver's side.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked, unable to hide the frustration in my voice when the car stopped in front of his door.

He didn't answer. Instead he kept his gaze fixed straight ahead. "All your things are still in my room."

The fact that he had left everything of mine exactly as I'd left it caught me off guard, but I pushed the feeling aside and kept my expression neutral, as though his words meant nothing.

"I'm not going in," I said firmly, unfastening my seatbelt before he could pull into the garage.