

A Favor 391

Chapter 391

“You’re going in whether you want to or not. Otherwise, you’ll be spending the night out here in the car.”

“Why did you bring me here? You could have dropped me anywhere — why here?”

“I told you. We need to talk.” He was reaching for the door handle when I caught his arm.

“What could you possibly need to say to me, Daniel? If it’s about the marriage, just say it now. I’d rather get this over with and go home.”

“This is your home.”

His words struck me, the fierceness in his tone catching me completely off guard.

“This is our home.”

I stared at him, unable to believe his insistence.

“This is not my home,” I said, forcing my voice to stay steady. “Just tell me whatever you need to say, Daniel. Why does this conversation have to happen here?” I struggled to hold myself together. “Honestly, I can’t think of anything left for us to discuss. But—”

I raised my voice with frustration, but he didn’t let me finish. Before I realized what was happening, he stepped out of the car, came around to my side, and opened my door with deliberate, unhurried patience.

I barely got a word out. “Why are you—” and then his finger pressed firmly against my lips, silencing me.

“One more word and I’ll quiet you with a kiss you won’t forget. Don’t push me, Sophia.”

I snapped my mouth shut and swatted his hand away, fingers curling into fists at my sides. He simply stood there with that slanted, insufferable smile — as if he had already won.

Sophia’s Point of View

“You can stay in my room tonight.”

“Absolutely not,” I shook my head and cut him off at once. “That is not happening.”

He closed the door behind him, passed by me, and headed toward the stairs.

“You’ll stay in my room and I’ll use the guest room,” he said, glancing back at me over his shoulder before heading up.

I stood there without a word until a plan began to take shape in my mind. I tried to hide a smile and turned to leave, but his voice stopped me cold.

“Sophia, don’t even think about it. The guards won’t let you out.”

“This is ridiculous,” I muttered, closing my eyes and drawing a slow breath. I knew exactly which guards he meant.

“I haven’t done anything — I haven’t even moved an inch.”

“Maybe not, but I can already tell what you’re thinking.”

“You said you wanted to talk, so let’s just get it over with. I need to go home.”

“I keep telling you — this is your home now.”

“Why do you keep insisting this house is mine?”

He said nothing, so I pressed on. “If you want to talk about our marriage or whatever arrangement we made, then let’s talk about it right now. I’m exhausted and I’m tired. I want to go home. Bryan is probably losing his mind because I still haven’t called him!” My voice rose as I stepped closer, frustration sharpening every word.

“No.”

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I stared at him, confused. “What do you mean, no?”

“We’re not discussing any of that tonight.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re exhausted, so you need to rest. We’ll sort everything out tomorrow.” And with that, he walked right past me.

“You drive me absolutely crazy!”

I wanted to scream and wake up the entire house, but I held it back. Nanay Emily, Tatay Berto, and the rest of the staff didn’t deserve to hear any of this. I clenched my fists and pulled at my own hair to stop myself from losing it entirely.

I marched to his room and raised my hand to knock when the door swung open. And there he was — my infuriating, insufferably handsome husband.

My throat tightened, and my eyes dropped of their own accord. He was wearing a crisp white shirt that clung to the broad line of his shoulders and the firm contours of his torso. His grey cotton trousers sat low on his hips, and for a moment my thoughts scattered completely.

“You’re staring, my love.”

“What? No, I am not!” My eyes snapped up to his face, only to find that teasing smile of his already in place.

“I said you’re staring.”

Heat crept up my cheeks as I bit my lip and looked away.

“You only have to ask, and this is all yours tonight. I promise you won’t forget it.” He leaned against the doorframe, that lopsided smile curling at the corner of his mouth.

My heart was pounding, but I refused to let him see it. I slipped past him, ignoring his attempt to throw me off balance.

“Relax, sweetheart. I had no idea you wanted me this badly.”

“That is enough, Daniel Kelley! I have more dignity than that, and I am nothing like the woman you seem to think I am.”

“Oh, really?” he shot back, his gaze hardening. “Remind me again how you ended up in bed with your ex’s best friend right before your wedding.” He shook his head, contempt plain on his face.

For the second time that night, I fought the urge to scream at him. All I wanted was to get my hands on whoever had filled his head with those lies.

“Will you ever bother to ask my side of what happened, or are you only interested in whatever fits the story you’ve already decided on?” I kept my voice steady, forcing myself to ask the same question I had put to him weeks before.

“What for — so you can feed me more lies?”

“Then why did you bring me here? Just to tear me apart all over again?” I felt the tightness pressing down on my chest as I tried to breathe through the knot in my throat. “You’ll never understand me if you keep shutting me out.”

He clicked his tongue with irritation. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this before the wedding? I asked you — didn’t I? I tried to find out why you agreed to marry me, and you never gave me an answer. You hid everything, and now you want to explain yourself? Why should I trust a single word you say?”

“I did try, but you never listened. How was I supposed to tell you anything when all you ever did was judge me? You could barely look at me back then — as though simply being near me was beneath you.”

He said nothing. Just stood there in silence.

“Why don’t we just end this once and for all? Sign the divorce papers and be done with the charade. You’ve held up every part of your deal — your partnership with Mr. Giovanni is locked in, your company has its foothold in California, and your career is exactly where you want it. What’s the point of dragging this fake marriage out any further?”

“I will decide when this arrangement ends — not you!”

“Then why keep prolonging it when you’re so convinced I’m a liar? Do you know what I’ve just realized? There’s no point trying to clear my name in front of people who’ve already made up their minds. I don’t owe my truth to anyone — least of all someone who’s determined to condemn me no matter what I say. If you won’t believe me, I can’t force you to. Why should I keep trying to earn the approval of someone who only wants to think the worst of me?”

A bitter laugh escaped me as I shook my head. He didn’t say a word — not one — as I bent down and pulled my suitcase out from under his bed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” He raised an eyebrow, watching me closely.

“Packing my things.” I shrugged. “You know what comes next.”

“No.” His eyes narrowed and he closed the distance between us in a few deliberate strides. “You are not taking a single thing out of here without my say-so!”

That caught me completely off guard. I stood there speechless as he snatched the suitcase right out of my hands, refusing to give it back no matter how firmly I demanded it.

“Get some rest. We’re not talking about any of this until tomorrow.” He held my gaze for a moment, then grabbed the suitcase and moved toward the door.

“Hey — what are you doing with my things? Why are you taking my suitcase?”

“So you don’t get any ideas about sneaking out tonight.”

“Sneaking out? Are you serious?”

“Dead serious, Sophia. Go to bed. I’ll be right next door, so if you try anything, don’t blame me if I have to tie you down to keep you there.”

“Unbelievable. You drag me out of a party, haul me here against my will, and now you expect me to sleep in your room? Do you have any idea how absurd you’re being? Why won’t you just let me have my old room so we can both get some sleep?”

“Not a chance. You’re staying here, and that’s final. We’ll sort this out in the morning.”

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Before I could get another word in, he slipped out and pulled the door firmly shut behind him. I stood there, fuming. Had he actually just locked me in? Unbelievable.

Sunlight was already pouring into the room when I finally woke up, and the panic that followed sent me running straight to the bathroom to get ready.

After a quick shower, I pulled on soft cotton shorts and a pale pink top. There was no time to do anything with my hair, so I left it loose and still damp against my shoulders.

I glanced at my phone and saw how late it was. I hurried out of his room and rushed toward the kitchen, clinging to the faint hope that Daniel would be there with his coffee or partway through breakfast.

Instead, the only person in the kitchen was Nanay Emily, busy at the stove flipping pancakes glistening with chocolate syrup. She looked up and greeted me with a smile that seemed to brighten the whole room.

“Good morning, Sophia!” Her voice was warm and cheerful as she crossed toward me.

“Good morning, Nanay Emily,” I replied, smiling back but unable to hide the worry creeping in. “Have you seen Daniel? He mentioned yesterday that he wanted to talk to me today.”

“Ahh... He already left for work.”

“He already left?” The words came out louder than I intended, surprise pulling me up short. “Do you know what time he went?”

“Hmm, I’d say before six.”

“Before six?” I blinked. “He usually leaves just before seven.”

“He said he had an urgent meeting. He wanted to get to the office early to prepare.”

“Daniel Kelley, honestly,” I muttered, pressing my fingers to my temple and grinding my teeth. “You had to leave early on purpose, didn’t you? Sometimes you are absolutely impossible!”

The words were out before I remembered Nanay Emily was standing right there.

“Ah — I’m sorry, Nanay,” I added quickly, biting my lip as a sheepish smile spread across my face.

“No need to apologize, anak.” She simply took my hands in hers and smiled gently. “I’ve missed having you here.”

“I’ve missed you too, Nanay Emily.”

A wave of warmth washed over us as we held each other in a brief, quiet embrace. Soon she guided me to the table with a nod toward the breakfast she had prepared.

“So how have you been, Sophia?”

Her question caught me off guard, my fork stopping halfway to my mouth.

“I’m all right, Nanay.” I tried to brush it off, looking for a way to redirect. “Why don’t you sit with me?”

“Oh, all of this is for you. I already ate a little while ago.”

With a grateful nod, I turned my attention to the pancakes, savoring their sweetness. She settled across from me, watching with a kind and unhurried expression.

A memory surfaced, and I suddenly realized I hadn’t mentioned my recent trip. Setting down my cup, I looked up. “I actually went to Seattle two weeks ago.”

“Seattle? What took you all the way there?” she asked, puzzled.

“I went to see my mother. We finally got to talk.”

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“What happened? Did she ever explain why she left you when you were little?”

She leaned in slightly, waiting for me to open up. I nodded and drew a slow breath, letting a quiet smile settle on my face. “Despite all the pain and disappointment over what my father had put my mother through sixteen years ago, I found one thing to be grateful for — I now have a brother. Someone younger to look after, to protect. The little brother I always wished for as a girl.” I paused. “I also found forgiveness in my heart — something I should have offered my mother the moment we saw each other again in Amador.”

“I’m so glad you made peace with her, and that you got to meet your little brother.”

“Thank you.” I smiled, then laughed softly. Out of nowhere, I thought of how stubborn my brother already was. “Honestly, Nanay, he gets annoyed whenever I call him my little brother.”

Her laughter rang out warmly as she took my hands in hers, her eyes bright.

“It makes me so happy to see you like this, anak. I may not know all the details, but watching you forgive your mother — that means the world to me.”

“I missed her so much, Nanay. I never stopped loving her. But that same love was what kept me from reaching out. I was afraid I’d find out she left because she didn’t want me anymore.”

“It’s never like that. A mother’s love stays with her children — even when she can’t be there, even when her children forget her face.”

“You’re right. I understand that now. Nothing compares to a mother’s love, and I was too blind to see it. I wish I had gone to find her sooner.”

She wiped the tears from my cheeks with a touch so gentle it felt like the brush of a breeze against my skin.

“You’re all right now, and you’ve let go of the pain. That’s what matters.” She paused, her gaze soft as she smiled at me. “Forgiveness is something you give to yourself — not to the person who hurt you.”

“Thank you so much, Nanay Emily.”

I was just about to reach for her when a loud voice rang out from the hallway.

“Tia Belle!”

We both turned just in time to see Dino come charging toward us.

“Dino!” we exclaimed together, and I dropped to a crouch and opened my arms so he could run straight into them.

“I missed you, Tia Belle.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“I missed you too, Dino,” I laughed, hugging him close and covering his cheeks with kisses until his giggles filled the whole room. “What brings you here?”

The moment the words left my mouth, I realized I probably should have asked something else.

I frowned, but before I could say another word, a different voice answered. I straightened up to find Rian and Alex in the doorway, both of them smiling.

“Rian, Alex.”

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“So — where exactly have you two been hiding for the past few weeks?”

A laugh slipped out of me as she raised an eyebrow and passed Dino over to Alex.

“You had me terrified!” She looked at me with narrowed eyes, then pulled me into a firm hug. “I missed you, Belle.”

“I missed you too.” I wrapped my arms around her and couldn’t stop smiling. “What brings you here? And how did you find out—”

“How did I find out what was going on? You ignored all my calls, so I ended up phoning my brother to ask about the two of you.”

“Oh,” I said, nodding slowly as the pieces fell into place. “But how did you know to come here? Wait — did you actually get it out of him again?”

“No, it was the other way around. He called me last night and told me you were back! You’re home, Belle!” With that, she hugged me again, and this time she whispered in my ear, her words making me hold back a sigh. “I’m so sorry about everything. I tried to make him see reason — I told him Félix was lying — but he wouldn’t listen. Did he ever tell you?”

She nodded, but before she could say more, my mother-in-law came rushing in and practically threw herself at me.

“Good heavens, sweetheart, you had everyone on edge!”

“Mom! How did you know where I was?”

“Your husband called me first thing this morning, so I came straight over. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Mom, truly.”

She gave me a radiant smile and pulled me into a warm embrace.

“So what’s been going on?”

Everyone leaned in at once, their voices overlapping — Mom, Rian, Alex, and Nanay Emily — all waiting for an explanation after I let slip that I had asked Daniel for a divorce.

“The truth is, this marriage has always been nothing more than a formality. It was built on an agreement, not on love or choice.”

I let out a quiet breath and went on. “Daniel has accomplished everything he set out to do. He closed the deal with those European investors, and KI Corporation has just received the highest honor in the business world. They’re now the most successful company in all of California. From the very beginning, he told me everything would end once the contract was signed.”

A small, rueful smile crossed my lips as I shook my head.

“There’s no reason to keep up this pretense. I’m willing to take the blame — to let everyone think I was after his money or that I never loved him. As long as the court grants us what we want, I don’t care what people say. The sooner it’s over, the better.”

“No!”

Everyone turned to Rian, caught off guard by her sudden outburst as she fixed her gaze on me.

“Belle, you can’t go through with this. It isn’t right — you shouldn’t even be thinking about asking for a divorce! You can’t leave my brother like this.”

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“Arrianna Angela!” Alex and Mom called out at the same time.

“He’s in love with you, Belle,” Rian added, her voice trembling.

That hit me without warning, and for a moment I could only stare at her. Then a laugh burst out of me, surprising even myself.

“I mean it! He really does love you, Belle! He’s just upset about the Félix situation — that’s all!”

Part of me wanted to say that Bryan had already told me the same thing, but instead I just shook my head and kept laughing.

“Rian, you’re wrong. He’s not jealous, and he is definitely not in love with me. Real love means seeing someone for who they are — understanding them even at their worst, not rushing to judgment when you don’t know the whole story. Love means accepting someone’s flaws, not jumping to conclusions the moment things get complicated.”

Silence settled over the room, and no one moved to break it until Nanay Emily asked quietly, “Who is Félix?”

I looked around at everyone, then answered her.

“He... used to be my ex, Nanay Emily.”

“Your ex?”

“My former fiancé.”

“I see,” she murmured with a slow nod.

After that, the room went completely still.

“Why did everyone stop talking? Did something happen?”

That was all it took. Laughter broke out around the table — sudden and loud — and Dino froze in the middle of the room, looking from one of us to the next as though we had all lost our minds.

“We’re just catching our breath. Too much talking wears you out.”

He scratched the back of his neck, thoroughly baffled.

The truth was, I didn’t even understand why I had said it. Of everything I could have come up with, that was what slipped out.

I reached for him, lifted him onto my lap, and held him tightly as a familiar sting rose behind my eyes.

I was already dreading the day the court approved our divorce. These people had become my family — every last one of them — in the nine months I had spent pretending to be Daniel’s wife.

Sophia’s Point of View

“And what about everything you’ve been fighting for? What about the justice you’ve been chasing for six years? Are you really going to stand by and watch Félix walk away, free to enjoy his life after everything he put you through?”

Bryan and I had already talked about this. I had made my decision. I was tired of fighting.

“What are you saying, Belle? Are you really going to let it go?” Mom and Rian asked at the same time.

“Yes. I’ve already decided,” I answered. My voice came out steady, even though my hands were trembling.

“This can’t be real! You’re actually going to let him get away with it?” Rian’s eyes blazed with indignation. “After all the years he spent hurting you? He tried to destroy you, Belle! What he did to you was unforgivable!” she cried.

“Arrianna Angela!” Mom’s sharp voice cut across the room.

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“I’m sorry, Mom. I just can’t believe Belle is giving up now, after everything that monster put her through!”

“I did everything I could, Rian,” I said. “I spent six years waiting for justice. Six years putting everything else on hold just to see him pay for what he did. And what did I get in return? What did any of it bring me?”

She tried to say something more, but I stopped her with a look.

“There’s more. I found Layla Angeles.” I watched her eyes go wide. “But she told me she’s forgotten everything. She doesn’t want to relive any of it. She said she can’t help me,” I added.

“That’s impossible!” Rian’s voice broke with disbelief. “How can anyone forget something like that?”

Maybe she truly had forgotten. Or maybe she just didn’t want to get involved. The truth was, I couldn’t know for certain.

“We need to go back and talk to her. I’ll go with you this time. If we have to offer her money, we will — whatever it takes to get her to help you.”

“Rian, I genuinely cannot keep doing this,” I said.

The surprise on her face said everything.

I was done. Exhausted from dragging all of this with me everywhere I went. I wanted to start over, to finally live the life I should have had years ago. Trying to appear strong every single day had worn me down, and waiting for justice that never came had left me completely hollow.

“Sophia...” Mom stepped closer and took my hands in hers, and I managed a faint smile for her.

After all this time, I had come to realize that I was never really fighting for myself. I had been fighting for everyone who doubted me, for everyone who never believed me — including my own father. It was always about proving the world wrong, never about finding peace. I was tired of waiting for things to magically return to how they once were. The past couldn't be rewritten, and nothing I did would change what had already happened. The more I searched for answers, the more painful everything became.

A hush fell over the room. The silence stretched between us.

“I’m so tired of trying to explain myself to people who refuse to see the truth. That’s all I’ve been doing — talking to a wall.”

Rian’s eyes glistened. “Are you talking about people like my brother?”

My mouth went dry, but I kept my eyes fixed on the floor.

“You still have feelings for him, don’t you?” Her tone was gentle, but her curiosity was plain.

“This isn’t about Daniel, Rian,” I said.

“That’s not what I asked. Do you still love him, Belle?” she pressed.

All at once, I felt every pair of eyes in the room settle on me, waiting.

“Belle, be honest. Do you love him?” she asked again.

I lifted my head and looked at each of their faces. Then, slowly, I nodded.

“Then let that be your reason to keep going. Don’t throw everything away now,” she said.

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A short, humorless laugh escaped me before I could stop it.

“You think love is reason enough for me to keep fighting? You’re really telling me that? He never gave me a chance, Rian. He didn’t believe a single word I said, no matter how hard I tried to explain myself. All I ever got were accusations and harsh words. Tell me — am I supposed to keep fighting for someone who has done nothing but doubt me?”

“Don’t worry, Sophia. I’ll help you talk to him. I’ll do everything I can to make him see reason—” she said, leaning closer, her expression set with determination.

“Thank you, Rian — but I’m done. We can’t force anyone to see things our way. If he refuses to believe the truth, then there’s nothing left to say.”

“So you’re just giving up? You’re willing to let him go on believing those lies?”

“There’s nothing left for me to do, Rian. I’ve already tried everything.” My shoulders dropped as I shook my head, resigned.

“No way, Sophia! You can’t just walk away from this! And for the record, I refuse to let you and Daniel fall apart!” She went quiet for a moment, and then a mischievous smile curved her lips. “You know, I could always hire someone to take care of Félix De Luca.”

“Rian!” I exclaimed, eyes going wide.

Alex’s jaw dropped.

“Sweetheart—” her mother’s voice cut in, thick with disbelief.

“Arrianna Angela!” Every single one of us recoiled at her wild suggestion.

“There is absolutely no way that is the solution,” Alex said, frowning.

“Relax! I’m only joking!” she cried, holding up two fingers in a playful peace sign.

“You’re all acting like that thought has never once crossed my mind.” Their stunned eyes turned to me. “Honestly, there were nights in Italy, when Bryan was helping me escape, that I imagined all kinds of terrible revenge. There were moments I pictured Félix dead — moments I pictured myself being the one to do it, moments I thought of ways to make him disappear for good. That anger nearly consumed me for a while.”

A faint smile crossed my lips as I thought of how distant those dark, vengeful fantasies felt now.

Bryan had told me once that going down that road would turn me into the very person who had ruined my life. Looking back, I know he was right.

We kept talking for a while longer, but nothing anyone said was going to change my mind. My decision was already made. Six years was long enough to keep dragging the past behind me. Maybe it was finally time to stop running from shadows and face what frightened me head-on. Maybe I needed to stand in front of everyone who had ever doubted me and show them that their opinions no longer had any power over me. I had a family now, and my life was far from over.

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On top of that, I was surrounded by people who cared for me. My bodyguards were never far away. Bryan was more than a brother — he was the friend I had always needed, the one who was always there the moment I called. Craig wasn’t just my work partner; he was a friend who showed up for me in good times and bad. And now, for the first time in a very long while, I had my mother back in my life. We had chosen to start fresh, as mother and daughter. My little brother — who still complained every time I called him “baby” — was part of my world too.

Some people might see what I was doing as surrender. Some might think me a coward. But anyone who truly knew me understood that wasn’t the truth.

Letting go wasn't about giving up. It was about making room for something better. I knew these memories would never fully disappear. The pain wouldn't vanish overnight. But I could choose to forgive, and I could choose to move forward. Even if I couldn't forget everything, I would always carry what I had learned by surviving it.

Sophia's Point of View

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Sophia, but you can't proceed."

"I beg your pardon?"

I stood there with my mouth open, unable to believe what I had just heard from Ben — the man who used to track my every move and was now head of security. I had barely reached the gate when he and three other guards stepped into my path without warning. It had been less than an hour since Rian, Alex, and my mother-in-law had left the house.

"Mrs. Sophia, you don't have permission to leave."

"What do you mean I don't have permission to leave?" I looked from one guard to the next, searching their faces for any sign that this was a joke. "You cannot be serious."

"Yes, ma'am. Mr. Kelley's orders were very clear. No one is to let you out without his approval."

What on earth? Daniel Kelley!

Fury burned beneath my composed exterior. I clenched my jaw and my fists, but kept my expression steady.

“We’re only following your husband’s instructions, ma’am.”

As if to make matters worse, all four of them lined up shoulder to shoulder, sealing off every possible gap between them.

I couldn’t help but laugh at the sheer absurdity of it. The way they were standing, you would think they were bracing for a confrontation, not guarding a front gate.

Their warning didn’t concern me in the slightest. I stepped forward and tried to squeeze past them, but not one of them budged an inch.

“Come on, move aside. I really do need to go,” I said with a strained smile, even though I was ready to explode on the inside.

“Ma’am, if you’d prefer, we can call Mr. Kelley—”

“That’s enough.” I cut him off, planting my hands firmly on my hips.

Then a mischievous idea sparked to life. I raised my eyebrows and fixed him with a pointed look.

“Here’s the deal: either you let me through that gate right now, or I’ll have to call for backup.”

The looks on their faces nearly made me burst out laughing. I could already picture Bryan picking up on the first ring and making sure these men deeply regretted trying to hold me here.