

A Favor 531

Chapter 531

My brows drew together, not because the guest surprised me. I had known about that since morning. What irritated me was the ridiculous way he decided to introduce me.

“Hello, my official sister-in-law!”.

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Surprise hit me when Rian suddenly walked in and hurried straight toward me. She wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug, then dropped herself onto the sofa across from my desk as if she owned the place.

“Official sister-in-law? Are you serious right now, Rian?”.

“Why not? What’s wrong with that? You are my official sister-in-law now, right?”.

“W-what are you even talking about?”.

“Because you are married to my brother now. A real wife. Not some wife tied to a contract, a business deal, or an agreement.”

“O-oh, I get it. But why are you here?”.

“Oops. Did Nanny Emily not tell you I called this morning?”.

“She did mention it. But why are you leaving so suddenly? And where are Alex and the kids?”.

She rose from the sofa with a wide smile and walked toward me.

“I asked Mom and Dad to watch the kids for a bit. As for my husband, nothing new there. He is at the office, stuck in a meeting with the CEO of his new business partner.”

She guided me toward the mirror hanging near the bathroom door. “You look awful, Belle. Your skin looks so dry, and your hair...” . She reached out and played with a strand. “It looks dull and frizzy.”

What the heck is she doing? I frowned.

“Look, Rian...”.

“That is exactly why I wanted this to be a girls-only day with you,” she said, and her excitement was written all over her face.

“What?”.

“I want to switch up my hairstyle, get a full-body massage, enjoy a foot spa, a skin spa, and basically every kind of spa they offer.”

“Wait a second...”.

“And obviously, you are coming with me. I already know the perfect place. They have a complete beauty package, and I promise you are going to love it. Come on.”

“Hold on, Rian. I still have reports I need to finish.”

“Come on, Belle. What is Craig doing right now?”.

“He was busy helping our new students.”

“And the rest of your team?”.

“Rian...”.

"Please, Belle?", she insisted, pouting the same way she used to whenever she wanted something from her brother. I pressed my lips together, and my thoughts drifted back to him again.

"Alright." I let out a sigh.

She drove us to the place she had mentioned earlier, and Ben along with the rest of his team had no option but to trail behind us.

Just like Rian promised, the spa turned out to be an exclusive spot that offered an all-in-one beauty treatment package. The staff started with our haircuts, and after that, we were guided into the next room for a full-body massage followed by a foot spa.

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Something about her felt different that day. From the moment she barged into my office to the time we sat side by side in the spa lounge, her energy never dipped. She kept murmuring thoughts that barely made sense to me, yet I nodded along each time she glanced my way, since that seemed to satisfy her.

At one point, I tried steering the conversation toward her brother. His absence for nearly two days and his strange behavior lately had been weighing on my mind. She never gave me the chance. Each time I tried to bring him up, she immediately jumped to a new topic or turned to chat with the woman working on her nails.

"Rian, is your brother calling you?".

“Miss, could I see your nail art catalog? I am thinking about getting a design. What do you think, Belle?”.

“Huh?”, I murmured, still caught off guard. Before I could respond properly, she was already talking again.

“And you, miss? Which one do you think looks cool? I want something that feels unique.”

Blah... blah... blah... blah...

They discussed nail designs as if I was not sitting right beside her. It felt like I was invisible. I could not tell whether she truly did not hear me, even though we were only inches apart, or if she was pretending not to. Either way, the silence she left me in felt deliberate, and I did not know what to make of it.

It felt like she was deliberately avoiding anything related to her brother, as if pretending not to hear me would make the issue disappear.

When I tried bringing it up again, she slipped past the question and threw one of her own at me instead.

“Are you hungry?”.

“What?”.

“There is a new restaurant nearby. We should eat lunch first before we head to the mall.”

The mall. Of course. I should have seen that coming.

“Does Alex know about this? I mean, does he know about our girls’ day today?”.

“Of course he does. He even called me earlier just to remind me to be careful.” I nodded without much reaction. She leaned closer and added, “So, do you want to come with me and finally try that restaurant I keep talking about? I promise you will enjoy lunch with me.”

“Hmm... all right. Just make sure you cover my orders.” I blinked, half joking.

“Obviously! I will pay for everything. Even the girl stuff you pick up at the mall.”

“Oh no, you really do not have to do that. I was only kidding.”

“Nah, it is fine. It is on me. At least for now.”

“What do you mean?”. I asked, one brow lifting in doubt. Rian, still very much the same person I had always known, answered me with a mischievous smile that already hinted at trouble.

“Relax. I will just tell Dani to cover everything for you. Mine included.”

A laugh slipped out before I could stop it, and I shook my head as she winked and flipped her hair with obvious pride.

I really should have known better.

“So, Belle, can I ask you for a favor?”.

Her shift in tone made me sit up straighter, my attention fully on her now.

“Sure. What do you need?”.

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After drawing in a steady breath, she reached for my hand where it rested on the sofa arm.

“You know how busy Alex has been lately, right?”.

“Yes. He is the CEO of the family company.”

“Exactly. Because of that, he could not come with me tonight.”

“Come with you where?”.

“To a party.”

“A party?”.

She gave a quick nod. “A friend from college invited me to his engagement celebration. He was one of my closest friends back then, and he asked me to be his witness. He is planning to propose to his girlfriend tonight.”

“Do I know him?”.

“I do not think so,” she replied while shaking her head. “You were already two years ahead of me at the time. I only met him during my third year in college.”

“I see. So what exactly is the favor you want from me?”.

The way she pressed her lower lip made my stomach tighten. I did not know why, but I had a strong feeling I already knew where this was going.

“Could you come with me to the party tonight?”, she asked, her eyes softening as she looked at me.

“Oh.” My lips parted as realization set in. I had expected that.

“Please, Belle. My husband cannot go with me.”

“Did you even ask him about it?”.

“I did. He told me he has a very late meeting with his new investors, so he suggested that I ask you instead.”

A hesitant smile crossed my face as I nodded. Going with her was not the issue instead. The idea that he might come home that night made me want to stay. My thoughts were stuck on Daniel. I needed to talk to him and clear whatever tension had been growing between us.

“If this is about my brother, then I can speak to him for you.”

“That is not really the issue, Rian. He is working on a project out of town, and he has not answered any of my calls. He has been unreachable since yesterday. I already sent him messages asking him to call me, but I still have not heard anything back.”

A long breath left me as my eyes closed. Because of that, I missed the change in her expression. The playful look she had been holding onto faded, and concern took its place.

“Oh, I am sorry, Belle. I did not know that was happening. But try not to worry too much. He is probably just busy, which is why he cannot answer right now.” She finished with a small shrug.

“Rian, it has already been two days. If he is that busy, then how did he manage to call Nanay Emily but still ignore all of my messages?”.

“I... I honestly do not know how to answer that. If you want, I can talk to him when he gets back.”

“No, Rian. Thank you, but this is something I need to talk to him about myself.”

“Alright,” she said with a nod. “I honestly think coming with me tonight would help you unwind while you wait for him.”

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A tired breath slipped out of me, but I did not respond to her suggestion.

“Belle, try not to worry so much. I know my brother better than anyone. He would not do this without a reason. He already told you how he feels about you, and I truly believe he would never do anything to damage your trust or your love for him.”

Her words made me look up at her. I wanted to tell her about my concern over those three words, but I stopped myself. That conversation belonged only between her brother and me, and I chose to keep it that way.

“You are going to have fun at this party. I promise you that.”

“And how can you be so sure?”.

“Because I know you well, sister-in-law. When I say this party will be great, it will be. Besides, you will enjoy being stuck with me.”

Another sigh escaped me.

“Do you think this party will go on all night?”.

She thought about it for a moment. “Probably not. Relax. We will be back home before midnight.”

Silence followed when I did not answer right away.

“Oh, come on,” she said dramatically, tapping her forehead with her palm. “I feel like I am going to collapse just waiting for your reply.” Her reaction made my eyes roll on their own.

“Alright. I will go with you.”

“Perfect. Then we are going shopping after lunch.”

“Oh no. I really do not think I need another dress. My closet is already overflowing, because your brother seems determined to turn our room into his own personal boutique.”

“Is that so?”, she muttered with a laugh. “Well, that works out anyway, because this party has a theme. We still need to find something that actually fits the dress code.”

“A dress code?”.

“Yes. The future bride loves purple, just like you. That is why the entire engagement party revolves around that color. He wants everything to be perfect for her. The venue, the food, even the guest list. He only invited people who are truly close to her.”

“Wow. What is your friend’s name? From the way you describe him, he sounds like someone who really adores his fiancée.”

“My friend’s name?”. I repeated as my eyebrow lifted. She hesitated, and the pause did not go unnoticed.

“It is fine. You do not have to tell me,” I replied with a small smile, waving my hand to stop her.

“No. It is okay. His name is Bob.”

Bob. I repeated the name silently to myself.

“Alright,” I answered, giving a light shrug.

They meant a lot to me. I had seen their relationship grow from the very beginning, and watching it deepen over the years had been nothing short of remarkable. Together, they truly felt like they belonged with each other.

A perfect couple. Two ordinary words, yet they carried layers of meaning. Those words could describe partners in crime, lovers bound by devotion, or people simply navigating life side by side.

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A faint smile curved on my lips as I lingered on her words. I failed to notice the playful look Rian sent my way, too busy turning her thoughts over in my mind.

Almost three hours passed as we went through every women’s store in the mall, until Rian finally announced that she had found the perfect dress for me. At least, perfect according to her standards.

I could not figure out why she was so determined to buy something for me. The Rian I knew was not the type to comb through every shop, inspecting each rack, just to find an outfit for a single party.

The moment she spotted a dress displayed in the shop window, I silently thanked the Almighty. My feet felt numb from trailing behind her for so long, and I was certain they would give out at any second.

“Wait. Did you not say the party theme was purple?”. I asked when she shoved the dress into my hands and pushed me toward the fitting room.

“Yes. It is plum purple.”

“But this does not look like eggplant purple.”

“I know. Because I never said the theme was eggplant purple.”

“But you said...”.

“Belle, stop getting stuck on the exact shade of purple. Just go into the fitting room and try it on already. I know it will fit you perfectly.” A playful wink followed, and she gently pushed me inside before shutting the door.

All I could do was shake my head as the door clicked closed.

“Take your time. Ignore me completely. Just shout if you need help with the zipper.”

“Ugh, fine,” I muttered, rolling my eyes while her laughter floated in from outside.

A few minutes passed.

“Wow. That is perfect.” Those were the first words out of Rian’s mouth when I stepped out. “You look incredibly glamorous. And yes, very sexy.”

“Really?”. I asked, pressing my lower lip between my teeth as I tried to hide the smile creeping up.

“Really,” she answered, nodding with approval.

The dress was a deep plum shade, with bare shoulders and an elastic neckline that sat off the shoulder and revealed more skin than I was used to showing. Short sleeves hugged my arms, while the fitted bodice shaped my waist. The zipper stayed hidden at the back, and the skirt dipped low behind me while lifting slightly in front, brushing the floor with every step.

“I love the front cut. It shows off your pale, creamy legs. That alone will be my brother’s weakness. He will not even make it through the party before pulling you aside and dragging you off somewhere private. What happens after that is entirely up to your imagination.”

Her hands came together in quick claps as she smiled, while the saleswoman chuckled nearby. Out of everything she said, only one word stuck in my head. Brother.

“Was your brother invited to the party too?”.

“What? N-no. Where did that come from?”. She asked, clearly startled.

“Because you mentioned—”.

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“What I meant was that Dani would probably drag you off somewhere the second he sees you in that dress. That does not mean he is invited. I never said that, did I?”.

“No, you did not, but—”.

“Belle, stop thinking about him for a few hours and just enjoy tonight. And when he finally calls, tell him you are out having fun. Tell him he should not have disappeared on you like that. He should have called before going silent for almost two days.”

A tired breath left me as I focused on her words. She was right. I could deal with Daniel when he came back.

“Alright. Let us do this,” I responded, forcing some resolve into my voice.

“There we go. That is my Belle.” She quickly helped me with the zipper and pulled the fitting room door open, her smile wide and satisfied.

“Should I send one of my makeup artist friends to help you get ready, or do you want me to ask Craig to come up instead?”. Rian asked as the moment we pulled into the private parking area beneath KI Corporation’s building, she turned to me and spoke up.

“Help me with what? I can handle my own makeup, Rian.”

“I know you can. But things always go faster when someone assists you. It is already two in the afternoon, and the party starts at five,” she replied patiently and checked her watch.

“Fine.” A long sigh escaped me. “Just call Craig. There is no need to bring in a professional makeup artist. It is not like this party is for me anyway. It is for your friend.”

“You have that wrong. Actually, the party is, ah, never mind. Forget it.”

Confusion crossed my face as I looked at her, but she only responded with a small, unreadable smile.

“Anyway, do you want help carrying your things up to the penthouse?”.

“No. I can manage on my own. Thank you.” I shook my head.

“Are you sure?”.

I nodded to reassure her.

“Alright then. I will call you later so I can pick you up. Make sure you are ready before five.”

“Okay.” I leaned over to give her a quick hug before stepping out of the car.

After thanking her bodyguard for opening the door, I barely took a step before Ben appeared in front of me and smoothly took the bags from my hands.

Halfway down the staircase, the sharp ring of the phone echoed from the living room. I slowed my steps, silently wishing Nanay Emily or anyone else would get to it first. When the ringing went unanswered, I let out a quiet sigh and headed over to pick it up myself.

“Hello?”.

“Good afternoon, ma’am. This call is from the lobby. We just want to confirm whether Mrs. Kelley is expecting a makeup artist today.”

“This is Sophia Kelley. And no, I am not expecting a makeup artist. The only person I am waiting for is my friend, Craig Castello.”

“Understood, Mrs. Kelley. However, the guest mentioned she was arranged by Miss Rian, the CEO’s sister.”

“Wait. What?”. Confusion tightened my expression as I frowned at the phone.

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“She said she is a friend of Miss Rian Smith and was told to come here to do your makeup today.”

I pressed my lips together. “What?”. A beat passed before irritation crept in. “No. I mean... never mind. Rian. Of course. Please send her up. Thank you.”

“It is my pleasure, Mrs. Kelley.”

Once the call ended, I placed the phone back on its base and stood there for a moment, drawing in a slow, steady breath. As if I had any real say in this.

“Oh God. Arrianna Angela Smith.”

Pulling out my phone, I decided to call her right away. We had agreed to let Craig help me. Hiring a professional makeup artist was never part of the plan, and I needed to know exactly what she was thinking.

Unfortunately, none of my calls went through. No matter how many times I tried, she never answered. I figured she might be busy getting herself ready, which was why I switched to calling Craig instead. That only made things worse, because his phone had no signal at all.

What was going on with him? Where could he be, and why was he completely unreachable?

A sharp chime broke through my thoughts.

The doorbell rang, pulling my attention away from my phone. Letting out a tired breath, I headed for the door, already planning to ask Rian when she intended to pick me up later.

“Hello,” I said with a polite smile as I opened the door. The woman standing outside looked about the same age as Rian.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Sophia. My name is Kristine. Miss Rian asked me to come and help with your makeup.” She smiled and gave a small, respectful bow.

I almost told her that it was unnecessary and that I could handle my own makeup. In the end, I kept those words to myself. Seeing how friendly she was and knowing she had gone out of her way to come here, I chose not to turn her away.

“Please do not call me madam. Just call me Belle. Or Sophia.” I opened the door wider and motioned for her to come in.

As she entered, I glanced around the living room, half expecting someone from the house to appear and ask about the visitor. The space stayed quiet, with no one else in sight.

“Are you waiting for someone else?”.

I turned toward her in surprise, only then realizing she had been watching me.

I shook my head lightly. “No. Let us go upstairs instead.” With that, I turned and led her toward the bedroom.

Because I had already showered after Rian dropped me off earlier, she wasted no time. She seated me in front of the vanity and immediately began working.

Right on the dot at four in the afternoon, she stepped back and checked the time. Since Rian was expected at 4:30, Kristine urged me to change into the dress. In that moment, I could not help feeling grateful to Rian for sending her over. Kristine was undeniably skilled at what she did.

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She gathered my hair into a low bun, loosened the braids just enough, and let a few soft strands frame my face. The makeup she applied was light and clean, finished off with a generous coat of mascara that made my eyes stand out.

“Thank you, Kristine. You really did an amazing job.”

Pride lit up her face as she smiled back at me.

“One of our senior stylists always says that the key to highlighting a dress is choosing a hairstyle that complements the neckline. That is why I pulled your hair back. It shows off the details of the dress and, of course, the beauty of the woman wearing it.” She finished with a playful wink.

“I appreciate that. Even if I still feel a little out of place.”

“Out of place? Why?”. Her brows drew together.

“For one thing, this is not my party. I was not even personally invited by the host. On top of that, I feel overdressed, and I do not know any of the guests. I do not even know who the celebrants are.”

Kristine tilted her head in thought. “But Mrs. Rian will be there. I am sure she will introduce you to everyone.”

"I suppose that is true." I shrugged and gave her a small, hopeful smile.

While she crouched in front of me to help fasten my shoes, my phone vibrated with a new message from Rian.

"Hi, Belle. I hope you are all set. I am on my way to pick you up. I will call you once I arrive at the KI building."

I stared at the screen in disbelief. She had not even noticed the pile of missed calls I had made earlier. I clicked my tongue quietly and chose not to reply.

"You are all set now, Miss Sophia."

She had clearly swapped out madam for miss. I did not bother correcting her. Between the options, this one felt far more comfortable.

I acknowledged her with a small nod, slipped my phone into my gray purse, and turned back toward the mirror. After a moment of consideration, I added a few finishing touches. A delicate bracelet. A pair of earrings. Nothing more.

Downstairs felt oddly quiet. Nanay Emily was nowhere in sight. Tatay Berto was gone as well, and even the two other maids were missing. The house felt unfamiliar without them, but instead of letting the unease linger, I chose not to dwell on it. I grabbed a pen and left a note on the dining table.

“Nanay Emily. Tatay Berto. Rian invited me to a friend’s party tonight. I will be home before midnight. If my loving husband has finally decided to return, please tell him not to call me. I plan to enjoy the evening. Do not worry, I will be fine.”

After pulling Kristine into a quick hug and thanking her once more for her incredible work, we said goodbye in the lobby. She headed toward her car, while I walked straight to the private parking area where Rian was already waiting.

“Wow. Oh my God. Belle, you look stunning. Seriously, you are unbelievably beautiful.” The moment Ben opened the passenger door, Rian practically burst.

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“Thank you. And Kristine deserves credit too.” I laughed softly and leaned in to hug her.

“See? I knew it was the right call to contact her instead of Craig.”

“Sorry, what was that?”. I asked, catching only part of what she said.

“I mean, I am glad I asked her to do your makeup. I could not reach Craig at all.”

“You too?”. I grimaced. “I tried calling him earlier, but his phone had no signal.”

“Same here. That is why I did not waste time and called Kristine instead, then sent her over to you.”

“Madame Rian, shall we head out now?”. A voice came from the front seat before either of us could continue. Both of us looked forward at the same time.

“Yes, Mike,” Rian replied calmly.

“Where would you like to go, ma’am?”.

“Bel-Air.”

I turned my head so fast I nearly gave myself whiplash. For a second, I was not even sure I had heard her correctly.

“Sorry, where are we headed?”. I asked, still stunned.

“Bel-Air.” She gave a casual shrug, as if she had just mentioned a grocery run or a quick stop at church.

From what I knew, Bel-Air was one of the most exclusive and expensive neighborhoods in all of Los Angeles.

Rian burst out laughing when she saw my expression.

“Relax. It is perfectly safe.”

“That is not what I meant.”

“I know. I am teasing you. Honestly, I reacted the same way when I first heard about it.”

Her eyes lit up as she continued. “I mean, Bel-Air. That alone says everything. It just shows how much this man adores his woman. He is ready to spend millions on her dream house and give her everything she wants.”

“Wow,” slipped out of me before I could stop myself. “She really is lucky.” There was a trace of envy in my voice. Not because of the money, but because of the effort. Because someone cared enough to go that far just to show his love.

“She truly is.” Rian smiled and nodded in agreement.

Our conversation drifted off after that, and the question I had been meaning to ask her earlier quietly faded away. The rest of the ride passed in silence. Still, the idea of effort and the thought of that grand surprise stayed with me long after the car kept moving forward.

We finally pulled up to our destination at six fifty-five sharp.

Rolling past the enormous black gates, six guards in crisp uniforms waved us through, their presence as serious as their weapons. For a split second, I thought we were about to get our first glimpse of the legendary mansion Rian had described, but all that greeted me were clusters of towering trees, stretching high above us and blocking the view.

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One of the guards let us know we'd still need to drive for another couple of minutes before reaching the main house, which reminded me of Rian's earlier claim: the mansion sat smack in the middle of 100,000 square meters of land. I could only shake my head in awe. This place was beyond huge. If her friend's stories were even half true, she belonged to a whole different world. The evidence was all around us, pure, unfiltered wealth.

With the sun gone for the day, a velvet darkness wrapped itself over the grounds, broken only by little lights shining among the branches lining the road. Everywhere I looked, plants of every kind bloomed with vibrant flowers, splashing the greenery with bursts of color and making the whole scene feel like something from a dream.

Almost instantly, my attention was stolen by clusters of tulips, some pink, some white, others yellow, orange, and the occasional deep purple. Without thinking, I rolled down my window, letting the sweet fragrance rush in and fill my lungs. A wide smile crept onto my face as I breathed it all in.

I closed my eyes and imagined what it would be like to stroll this road every morning, picking a fresh tulip for my hair, or maybe enough to fill a vase in our room. Maybe he'd reach for one before I could, tucking it behind my ear with a grin.

A gentle nudge pulled me from my daydream.

“We’re here, sis.”

My eyes fluttered open, startled and excited at once by the soft touch on my arm.

“We’ve arrived,” she muttered, and just then, Ben came around to open my door.

As soon as my feet touched the ground, my eyes landed on a stunning line-up of luxury cars, each one more extravagant than the last, spread across the open driveway. At the center of it all stood a massive fountain, its streams lit up with swirling purple lights. So, her friend’s bride must have a serious love for purple.

A soft gasp slipped out before I could help myself, awe written all over my face. I tried to keep my cool as we walked past the fountain, but then, suddenly, every light around us blinked out at once. The darkness only lasted a heartbeat before everything glowed back to life, and in that instant, an enormous mansion, sleek, modern, and impossibly grand, rose into view right before my eyes.

“Wow,” I whispered, so stunned I wondered if I was actually awake. I had to blink again and again, half expecting the vision to disappear, but the mansion stood firm and real, its sheer size impossible to miss.

“This main house is eighty thousand square meters, with another twenty thousand for gardens, decks, and pools. Altogether, the whole estate covers 100,000 square meters,” Rian explained beside me, her grin stretching ear to ear, the pride in her voice unmistakable.

She had already tried to describe just how huge this place was on the way over, but seeing it up close made everything feel brand new.

“Do you think the owners ever manage to find each other in a place this big? It’s hard to believe two people could need all this space.”

Rian just laughed at my disbelief.