

A Favor 541

Chapter 541

“Don’t worry, sis. My brother has his own ways of finding you, no matter which corner you’re hiding in,” she teased with a playful wink, only adding to the whirlwind of questions crowding my thoughts.

“What do you mean your brother has his own ways to find me? Are you telling me this entire place is his?”. I asked, my eyes glued to the jaw-dropping mansion just a few steps away. The thought almost made me laugh, it sounded ridiculous, but a twinge of envy for his friend’s bride crept in anyway.

“I’m saying that if my brother ever buys a place like this for you, you can bet he’ll always know where to find you.” She just shrugged and grinned.

A long sigh escaped me. To be honest, it didn’t matter to me if we had a sprawling estate, a cozy villa, or the tiniest apartment. What truly counted was being together. For me, the heart of any relationship wasn’t about square footage, it was about love and respect, how two people cared for each other.

Clicking my tongue, I shook my head and made a silent promise to myself: tonight, I’d enjoy this party, push my worries aside, and not think about anything else until morning, or until he came back.

“Rian, are you sure we’re in the right spot for your friend’s engagement party?”. I asked, standing uncertainly by the massive front door.

Doubt crept in as I glanced around. There were plenty of expensive cars, but not a single guest in sight or any hint of music drifting from inside.

“Of course, this is the place! Why do you ask?”.

“It just feels strange. I can’t hear any music from in there.”

She flashed a huge, knowing smile. “That’s because the door is soundproof, sis.”

“Oh, right. That makes sense.” I shook my head, feeling a little foolish as I let out a long breath. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of that.”

“You seem a little on edge, Sophia Ysabelle Kelley. Are you sure you’re all right?”.

“I’m fine! Completely fine.”

She gave me a sly look. “Just so you remember, this party isn’t actually for you.”

“I know that!”.

I huffed, even as her laughter rang out and lingered in the air. I had no idea what had made her so amused.

“Ready to go in?”.

I turned to Rian and nodded, though a nagging uncertainty had started to creep in. What reason would I possibly have to be nervous? This night wasn’t even about me.

The enormous double doors swung open with a flourish, letting a wave of soft music spill out into the night. I took one step forward and immediately stumbled back, nearly coughing as thick white smoke wrapped around us like a fog.

“What is going on?”, I muttered, my eyes stinging, while Rian nearly doubled over with laughter.

“Honestly, what is the point of this much smoke? It feels more like we’re walking into a haunted house than an engagement party. Who thought this was a good idea?”.

By the time we finally emerged from the haze, I stopped dead in my tracks, completely stunned by what I saw.

Paparazzi.

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Flashes burst from every corner of the room, one after another, until it felt like I had stepped right into the middle of a starlit frenzy. For a moment, I thought the heavy smoke would be the worst of it, but the blinding light from dozens of cameras quickly proved me wrong. Completely overwhelmed, I clung to Rian’s arm.

“Stay calm, sis. Don’t stress, they’re only here to snap a few photos. They’ve been paid well to keep their distance and not bother any of the guests.”

“Seriously? That actually works? I mean, their whole job is to dig up stories and stir things up, isn’t it?”.

“Just ignore them, Sophia. Smile for the cameras, enjoy the night, and let everything else go.”

“All right.” With no other real option, I nodded and let out a quiet sigh. “I’ll try.”

As I looked past the crowd, dizziness swept over me, not because of the number of people, which I’d already anticipated, but from the sheer size and extravagance of the living room. Every detail screamed luxury, from the elegant furnishings and shimmering silver accents to the soft purple touches and the grand painting that commanded attention from one wall. Even the lamps and the enormous sputnik chandelier added to the sense of opulence.

My brow furrowed as I realized just how familiar everything looked. The arrangement of the furniture, the bold abstract painting, even the chandelier above us, it all echoed memories I couldn’t quite place.

Who would have thought the owner here shared such a taste for abstract art?

I was just about to comment on it when I felt Rian’s hand tugging me forward again. I turned to her, and she simply offered a knowing smile.

Walking deeper into that lavish living room made my stomach drop even more, because the entire space looked like it had been drowned in lilac and gray. What was going on? Every guest around me was wrapped in white, lilac, or soft gray tones.

Hold on... lilac and gray?

“What did this mean?”, I wondered, and my hands moved instinctively to my own dress. Plum purple and broad shoulders. Bold enough to stand out like a bruise against the room. My brow tightened as I slowly looked around.

Every single person inside matched the theme perfectly.

The women were all in lilac. The men wore warm gray suits, as if someone had planned it down to the last detail.

Still confused, I turned my eyes toward Rian. That was when the strange feeling turned sharper. She was wearing lilac too.

Not the dress she had picked out with me earlier at the store. Not the one that had matched mine. This was something entirely different.

“What’s wrong?”, she asked, putting on a wide innocent look. She tried to hold back a laugh, but the corners of her mouth betrayed her.

"Rian, you are not wearing the dress you bought with me," I said flatly. There was no teasing in my voice. No smile.

"No... I'm not." After a second, she nodded like she had no choice but to admit it.

"Why?".

"Because I did not feel like wearing it. So I picked something else."

"Oh. How nice."

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"Did you seriously just choose not to wear the dress? Now look at me. I am the only one standing here in the wrong color."

I barely had the chance to breathe after that, because something suddenly brushed against my ankle. Then came a sound I knew too well.

"Meow... meow... meow...".

My eyes snapped downward in disbelief.

“Goodness... what a silly cat,” Rian muttered under her breath, though it was clear she had noticed too.

“A kitten?”.

Was I imagining this? A cat... at a party?

Another quiet “meow” came, and the tiny creature pressed her head against my leg again, circling me like she belonged there. My heart nearly stopped. She was real.

“Oh my God... my kitty!”.

The words burst out of me far too loudly, and I did not realize until it was too late that the entire room had turned to stare. It felt like they had been waiting for me all along, only pretending they had not noticed my entrance.

I ran my fingers over the kitten’s soft head before lifting her into my arms like I could not believe she was really there. The stares around me did not matter. I forgot the entire room even existed.

“So you’re here too, Pussy. What are you doing in a place like this?”, I said softly, leaning down to kiss the top of her tiny head.

After a few seconds, my body went still.

The words I had just spoken finally caught up to me.

I stared at her little outfit again, then searched her eyes, forcing myself to be sure.

What if I was wrong? What if she belonged to someone else?

That was such a ridiculous thought.

No, there was no mistake. I knew exactly who she was. She was mine. My cat, Pussy. There was not a doubt in my mind. Still, I couldn't wrap my head around why she would show up here, of all places.

A tightness gripped my chest as I turned toward Rian. She was trying not to grin, and that unreadable look made me wonder whether she was hiding a secret or just feeling mischievous.

I swept my eyes over the gathering. For a second, I had to blink, thinking maybe I was seeing things. My in-laws stood only a short distance away. Then I noticed Alex, right there among his friends, cradling little Jona. Dino lingered nearby, and Rian flashed me a smile. I could not make sense of any of this, but when Jona smiled up at me, I managed to smile back.

Hold on a second. Alex is here? That can't be right. Rian told me Alex had a meeting and wouldn't make it tonight. She asked me to come instead. Was that the truth? Or had she made it up?

"Rian, what's going on?" I shot Rian a look, searching for answers. She only shrugged, as if the explanation wasn't worth sharing.

Suddenly, my pulse raced. Bryan was with Aira, standing close together in the crowd. A moment later, I spotted my mom. Then Steven showed up, too.

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Before I could think, I blurted out, "W-wait, did they all get an invitation too?"

Nobody offered an explanation.

I was left standing there, thinking this had to be a party for one of your friends. My voice faded when I noticed a couple dressed in matching gray and lilac. "Nanay Emily! Tatay Berto... Craig?"

The last name slipped out louder than I meant.

The tension was too much to handle. I put Pussy down, ignoring the curious glances coming my way, and walked straight to my assistant, my best friend, with Rian trailing after me. At that moment, I just wanted to hear something that made sense.

“Is that why you wouldn’t answer my calls this afternoon?”.

He didn’t bother to reply. Instead, he wrapped me in a tight hug and leaned close, whispering something that sent my thoughts spinning all over again.

“Congrats, girl! Looks like you’ve hit the jackpot tonight!”.

“Craig, what are you talking about? I don’t get it. What’s going on?”. Confusion spilled into my voice as soon as he let me go.

“This night belongs to you! Everything here is for you,” Craig responded, grinning.

A surprised, half-incredulous laugh escaped me.

“You’re joking, Craig Castello, right? If this is your idea of comedy, I’m sorry, but you’re terrible at it.”

“He’s serious! This whole celebration is for you, sis!”. Rian chimed in before he could answer.

Hold on, none of this is making sense! Could somebody just tell me what’s really happening here? My voice came out louder than I intended. Every nerve in my body wanted to shout, but I forced myself to keep it together.

Maybe I was dreaming. Maybe this was all just some wild scene playing out in my head. Someone needed to wake me up. Actually, I needed to wake myself up, right now.

“Belle, look around! This whole thing is for you. Someone very dear to you spent weeks putting everything together. It’s all a surprise, just for you.”

I couldn’t find the words. My thoughts bounced from Rian to Craig, searching for something to hold onto, but nothing felt real.

Am I still dreaming? The question echoed inside my head. I squeezed my eyes shut, desperate for a break from this chaos, but as soon as I opened them, a pair of arms wrapped around me.

“Congratulations, Anak. You deserve all of this, and every bit of happiness life can bring,” said Nanay Emily, her tears slipping down her cheeks before she brushed them away.

Hearing Nanay Emily’s voice made my chest ache with emotion.

Tatay Berto stood beside her, pulling her closer with a gentle arm, his smile as warm as ever.

“B-but... why was I the only one who didn’t have a clue?”. The words tumbled out as I turned to Rian. “You told me we were going to a friend’s engagement party. That’s what you said.”

“And that’s exactly what this is.” She grinned and jerked her chin toward the decorations.

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“Then how is this even possible? Why is everyone here, my mom, my brother, Tatay Berto, Nanay Emily, and right in the middle of everything, you, Craig?”

“Tonight is the engagement party for someone very dear to me, my own brother. You guessed it before, remember? You said his bride was the lucky one, but I think he’s even luckier to have you by his side.”

Words failed me completely. Every emotion swirled together, surprise, disbelief, a touch of pride, and something softer, warmer. Was it really happening?

There was no way this was a dream. I was wide awake. I felt every bit of it.

“You’re not dreaming.” My head turned in Rian’s direction.

The words startled me. Had I actually spoken that thought? She just nodded, mischief flickering in her grin, that playful look she always gave when she was about to reveal a secret.

Before I could pinch myself or beg for proof that all this was real, she gestured behind me. “Go on, look over your shoulder. The man who made this all possible is right there. He’s the one with the answers, and I know he can’t wait to tell you everything.”

I turned with a slight frown, and I froze the second I saw him. A man was coming down the staircase, the one made of polished wood and clear glass that connected every level of the house. He looked unreal in a soft gray suit, and his plum-colored tie matched my dress so perfectly it felt planned.

My breath slipped away the instant our eyes met.

Something in me completely gave in. A shiver rushed down my spine, and all my logic disappeared. My heart pounded so hard it felt reckless, like it was trying to break free from my chest. I could not move. I could not speak. I just stood there, stunned, watching him take each step until he finally reached the bottom.

Then he smiled. Everything else faded so fast it was almost frightening. The room, the lights, the air around me, none of it mattered anymore. All I could see was him as he walked toward me, slow and steady, like time itself was bending around him.

My world stopped entirely when Daniel stood right in front of me.

“Hi, beautiful.”

Oh God.

I stayed silent, only managing to swallow as my breath caught in my throat. His minty breath brushed across my face, and his eyes shone with something deep and real. Those honey-colored eyes that had owned my heart for far too long.

“H... hello.”

Seriously. It was one word. Why did I sound like I had never spoken before?

“You have no idea how gorgeous you look tonight, darling.”

Then he reached for my hands and placed a bouquet into them. White and purple tulips. For a moment, I could only stare. Where on earth had he gotten these?

“Where have you been?”.

That was the only thing left in my mind. Every other question I had planned to throw at him disappeared the second he smiled at me like that.

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“I have no idea what you put me through. I was worried sick. I didn’t know where you were. You ignored my calls, and you never answered a single message.”

He must have seen the tears gathering in my eyes, because his entire expression shifted. The sharpness faded, and his gaze softened as he let out a slow breath.

"I'm sorry, darling. I never wanted you to feel that way. One of our engineers had an emergency on-site, and I had to go over there to make sure everything stayed under control."

"On-site?", I repeated, completely thrown. "You mean there was construction happening?"

"I'll tell you everything later. But right now, I want you to enjoy tonight. Let's not ruin the party with work talk."

"And... wait." I looked around, overwhelmed. "What is all of this? Why is everyone here? Why are our families here too? What does this party even mean?"

"Rian didn't tell you?", he asked, gesturing toward the crowd as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"No. She told me we were going to some friend's party. Then she suddenly claimed this was for me."

"And that is exactly why I adore my little sister. I can always rely on her."

I rolled my eyes immediately, especially when he winked past me at Rian, who was standing nearby looking far too pleased with herself.

“Of course you can count on her.”

“So can you finally tell me what we’re doing here, Mr. Kelley?”.

“This is why I’ve barely been around these past couple of days. I’ve been wrapped up in this place. I wanted every last detail finished before tonight. I wanted it to be ready. My gift to you.”

“But it’s not my birthday.”

“I know it isn’t.” A soft laugh escaped him, warm and almost teasing. “But since when do gifts need a birthday attached to them? Especially when they’re coming from me.”

“This house is yours,” he murmured. “This purple house. All of it, Sophia.” His hand found mine again, steady and sure.

That was when Rian’s words from earlier crashed back into my mind. This is all yours, Belle!

Everything you see around you is for you.

A very special person planned all this for a month just to surprise you.

“But this isn’t just some house. This is a whole mansion, Daniel. This is insane.”

“I know. And I want you to understand something. Starting now, you’re going to live here with me. This is our home. You deserve every inch of it. You deserve everything I have. And you deserve all of my love, Sophia.”

“If this is about money, you know I don’t want...”.

“I know,” he cut in gently. His finger brushed against my lips, stopping my protest before it could even form.

“But you don’t get to refuse,” he continued, his tone turning playful. “Sophia Ysabelle Kelley, you married one of California’s most powerful billionaires. You’re stuck with me.”

He winked, and the smug look on his face made my hand twitch with the urge to smack him.

“So you’re really telling me you own this entire place?”.

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“We do, my dear. We are the owners of this mansion.”

Daniel’s emphasis on the word “we” made my breath catch.

Something inside me shifted, and the jealousy I had felt earlier, the silly comparison I had made in my head, started to fade like it never mattered at all.

“But... can you explain more? I still don’t understand. My mind can’t even process what’s happening. This place... this purple mansion... it doesn’t feel real.”

“Shhh. Slow down, my dear. One step at a time. We have forever ahead of us. And I have the rest of my life to tell you everything you want to know. But before that, I need to share something with you.”

Here we go again.

“A secret?”.

He nodded as if it was the most serious thing in the world.

“Yes. Read the card.”

“The card?”.

My gaze dropped to the bouquet still resting in my hands. Only then did I notice the small piece of paper tucked between the tulips, something I had completely missed because all I could focus on was him.

With a slight frown, I pulled it out. The card was purple. I opened it carefully, and my eyes fell on the words inside.

“My love, from the moment I met you, something in me finally made sense. You became the piece I didn’t know I was missing. You changed me, softened me, made me better without even trying. I fell for you completely. For every word you speak, for every little thing you do, for everything that you are. In your eyes, I found peace. In your heart, I found home. And in your soul, I found the person I want beside me for the rest of my life. Thank you for stepping into my life. I love you always and forever.”

T.M.

“T. M.?”, I asked, lifting my gaze to him. “Those initials... That’s the same name signed on every bouquet that’s been showing up at my studio. Craig and Rian acted like it was obvious, but I never understood. What is this? Who is T. M.?”.

“Yes.”

My brows shot up instantly. “Wait, do you know who that person is? Do you have something to do with him?”.

Before he could explain, Craig’s voice rang out behind me, loud enough to cut through everything.

“For the love of God, man. Have you ever learned how to take things slow?”.

I spun toward him with a dry, amused smile. Seriously. Did he have to stress that last word like it was a performance?

A laugh slipped out of Craig, sounding far too entertained.

I turned back to the card, staring at the letters again. My mind worked frantically, piecing everything together. And then it hit me. My breath stopped and my mouth fell open.

“Don’t tell me... That you... Daniel, are you T. M.?”.

He didn’t speak, but the smile on his face said everything.

“This is real?”.

He nodded. A stunned laugh burst out of me.

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“So this whole time... You were acting jealous and irritated over my so-called secret admirer, when you were the one sending the flowers?”.

“Yes. I was pretending, darling. I’m the one behind it. I’ve been the one sending you flowers every day. Your secret admirer was always me.”

“But how? Why? Why would you do that? Why pretend? And why send me flowers when you spent so much time telling me you couldn’t stand me, that I wasn’t your type, Mr. Kelley?”

Daniel lifted a hand to the back of his neck, suddenly looking almost shy.

He rubbed the back of his neck, and a hesitant smile tugged at his lips.

I had already buried those words too many times, had I not? He held my gaze for a long second before finally speaking.

“I love you. But every time I wanted to say it out loud, I lost my nerve. You are so sharp and intelligent that sometimes it feels like you could tear me apart with nothing but a few words.”

Seriously?

“And you are acting like I am the difficult one? You have been the one with the harsh mouth, not me.”

"I know. And I regret it. I was arrogant and overbearing because I did not know how else to stand in front of you without falling apart. You scared me. You always knew exactly how to shut me down, how to put me in my place. And every time you did, I panicked. I kept pushing my feelings away because I was terrified that if you ever realized the truth... you would walk away from our marriage."

"So that is why you pretended to be some secret admirer?". He nodded once.

"I could not handle the idea of you rejecting me. The thought of losing you was eating me alive."

"But then explain this. How did you end up with the initials T. M. when your name does not even match them? Your initials are D and K."

A faint smile crossed his face. It was the kind of smile that made my stomach twist like something dangerous was unfolding.

"You should already know what they mean," he murmured, his voice turning smooth. "My wife."

"M... my wife? Do you even know what that means?", I repeated, my eyes widening.

"Yes, sweetheart, I know exactly what it means," he said, his voice warm with amusement. "So then you should already be able to figure out what T. M. stands for too."

“Oh my God,” I blurted, the shock written all over my face. For a second, I wanted to throw myself at him, wrap my arms around his neck, and celebrate the fact that he finally understood Italian.

Mia moglie. I repeated it silently, letting it settle deep.

My wife. The words spun through my head as I stared at him. He is my husband.

“Mia moglie” meant “my wife.” And in Italian, “my husband” would be mio marito. Initials, letters, clues... my mind kept racing in circles. M. That was him. Marriage. My husband. But then what was T. M. supposed to mean?

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Ugh, why was I taking so long to understand something so simple?

“It is okay, beloved,” he said with an amused laugh, watching my frustration. “I am your husband, so T. M. means...”.

The answer finally slammed into me like lightning.

He barely had time to react before I reached up, grabbed his collar, and pulled him into a kiss that poured out everything I had been holding in. It was sweet, desperate, and full of relief. When he kissed me back, warmth flooded through me so fast I almost felt dizzy.

A few people nearby gasped and murmured, clearly shocked. I did not care. I ignored every single one of them and stayed exactly where I wanted to be.

The man who'd been sending flowers and gifts for months was the same one standing in front of me.

The question that haunted me all this time finally had an answer.

"Good heavens, sweetheart. What was that supposed to be?", he asked, still looking slightly stunned.

"Your husband," I replied simply, my smile turning playful. "T. M. means 'Your Husband.' That was it all along, was it not, Mr. Kelley?"

"You got it exactly right, Mrs. Kelley," he replied, sounding almost proud.

My eyes flicked toward the crowd, searching until I found my mother. She stood with her hand over her mouth, tears slipping down her cheeks as she watched us. I smiled at her. It was the kind of smile that carried everything I could not say aloud, the kind only she would understand.

I had kept my promise to her and to Dad, and I had fought for the man I loved until I somehow won.

The same man who once looked down on me, who had made me feel invisible, who had turned my life into something painful and exhausting...

And yet, he was also the one who changed everything. The one who stood beside me when I fell apart. The first person who truly held my heart. The reason my life now held laughter and tears and warmth all at once.

My mother nodded, then lifted her hand slightly, as if sending I love you into the air.

When I looked back at the man still holding my hand, memories rushed forward in sharp pieces.

Had any of it been real, the morning he suddenly began ignoring me, the argument we nearly had, that board meeting he claimed he could not miss, or the phone call from Chloe?

"I know you will explain everything later, but I need to ask one thing right now." I hesitated, suddenly aware of how many eyes were on us. "You really did have that meeting. When I brought up... you know what I mean."

I lifted one shoulder in a small shrug, fighting the heat rising in my cheeks, but the quiet smile he gave me only made the embarrassment worse.

"No, my love."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I did not have a board meeting that day."

"So... you lied to me."

"I did. I am sorry."

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"Then what about that phone call? I went to your office with lunch, and your secretary told me everything changed the moment Chloe Enriquez called you. She said you canceled everything and rushed out to see her."

I raised an eyebrow, the jealousy slipping through no matter how hard I tried to hide it.

Instead of answering right away, he pulled me into his arms, and a laugh spilled out of him against my back.

I pressed my lips together, caught off guard, feeling the warmth of his chest and the steady shake of his amusement.

"No, my love. Of course not."

When he finally released me, that teasing glint was still in his eyes as he gently held my face between his hands.

“Even though I was tempted to mess with you, the way you were glaring at me made me feel like I should surrender immediately. The person who called me that morning was one of my engineers. He had an accident on the way to the site, so everything had to change at once.”

“But your secretary told me...”.

“I told her not to. I did not want anything slipping out if you showed up or called.”

“So it was not true at all. Why would you make sure no one told me the truth? You seriously wanted me to sit there worrying, did you not?”.

“No, sweetheart. I did not want you scared. I wanted you jealous.”

I let out a long sigh, rubbing my forehead. “Oh my God. You are unbelievable. So that was the whole plan?”.

“Yes.” I blinked, then gave a slow, resigned nod of my own.

“So you wanted to see me jealous,” I said again. Then I tilted my head, voice turning sharper. “And if I told you I actually was jealous... and that I wanted to chase your ex-girlfriend out of your life for good... would that make you happy?”.

His laughter came instantly, loud enough that a few nearby guests began laughing too as they listened in.

“Happy? I would be thrilled. At least now I know you care enough to want me all to yourself.”

Then he gave an exaggerated wink.

“But wait... there is still more to this, is there not?”.

My head turned toward Nanay Emily, then to Rian, and finally Craig.

“Nanay Emily, do not tell me you knew about all of this too.”

She answered with a simple nod.

“Oh my God,” I murmured, completely stunned. “That explains everything. Your behavior these past few days was so strange. And you. What about those flowers Daniel kept sending me every single morning? Do not tell me you knew about that as well. You knew he was T. M., did you not?”.

"Uh..." , he muttered, biting his lower lip like he was trying to decide how much trouble he was in.

"Craig Castello," I warned, my tone turning deadly.

"I found out before your husband even followed you to Italy."

"What?". My face twisted in disbelief. "That makes no sense at all. What are you talking about? Explain yourself properly."