

A Favor 551

Chapter 551

Craig gave a strange little smile, as if he could not believe this was finally happening. “I am telling you. I knew the truth three months ago, before Daniel ever decided to chase after you to Italy.”

I stared, completely stunned, my mouth hanging open as I glanced from Craig to Daniel in disbelief.

“You seriously kept this from me?”

“That’s what makes it a secret. If I’d told you, it wouldn’t have been a secret anymore, now would it?”

“Unbelievable! I can’t believe you pulled that off!”

My reaction set everyone off, laughter rippling around the room. There was no denying it—I adored Craig. Honestly, I really did.

Catching Rian’s awkward smile when I turned her way made me chuckle.

“So this is what you meant by your friend’s big surprise engagement?”

“Yep! I told you it was a surprise. Surprise!” She threw her hands up and practically shouted the word for the entire room.

I just rolled my eyes and smiled as she wrapped me up in a hug.

“Blame that man over there, girl. He’s the genius who orchestrated everything.”

Hearing Daniel’s easy laugh from behind me made my heart leap. I had to bite my lip to keep from squealing out loud, happiness fizzing through me.

But when the excitement died down and everyone drifted back to their own conversations, a strange nervousness started to grow in my stomach.

“There’s still something special planned for you, sweetheart. But first, I need you to promise you’ll hear me out, no interruptions. Can you do that for me?”

“Um... sure.” I nodded, more confused than ever.

He took my hand and led me into the living room, motioning for me to sit. Then he disappeared behind the couch and reemerged with a microphone stand in one hand and a guitar in the other.

“What exactly are you planning with those? Seriously, what’s going on?”

“Shhh. Stay right there.”

He gave me a reassuring look, then settled onto a chair, his fingers brushing lightly over the guitar strings.

Music had always been my thing. I’d dreamed of picking up an instrument myself, maybe guitar like him or Rian, but mastering chords and notes that quickly always seemed impossible. Still, he gave it his all.

“Go easy on me, love. I’ve never played or sung in front of anyone before.”

The lines of worry on my face faded when I caught his mother whispering to my father-in-law just behind me.

“Oh my goodness! Did you know he could sing?”

“This is news to me too. I’ve never seen him touch a guitar, let alone step up to a mic.”

Then Daniel began to play, and his voice filled the room with a soft, tender love song—one confession wrapped into every note, telling me without words how much he loved me and how grateful he was to have me by his side. A round of applause broke out behind me, but I barely noticed. My face showed calm, but inside, my heart hammered wildly.

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Just hearing the warmth in his voice made my throat tighten, and I lost count of how many times I had to remind myself to breathe. The way he looked that night—if only he knew. Not that I'd tell him; the man already had more confidence than he knew what to do with.

When the last note faded, the whole room burst into cheers, but I just sat there, unable to move, watching as Daniel set the guitar gently aside.

Then he said my name—Sophia—making it sound like a secret only we shared. I held my breath, waiting for whatever would come next.

“Before we go any further tonight, before the party sweeps us away, I want you to hear these seven words I’ve carried with me ever since I came back from Italy.”

He locked eyes with me, and I found myself unable to look away. The room went quiet, as if the whole world had paused just to listen, and I felt a shiver in my stomach I couldn’t quite describe. Thank goodness hearts are tucked safely behind bone—if mine were any less protected, it would have leapt right out of my chest and landed on the floor.

“I’m sorry. Thank you. And I love you.” He paused, then went on. “Let me start by apologizing. I know I said this when we were in Italy, but I need you to hear it again—this time, in front of everyone we care about. I’ve been clueless, right from the start, and especially back when we first met. I’m sorry for every careless word, for every tear I made you cry. I can’t swear it won’t ever happen again, but I’ll do everything I can to make sure that if you cry, it’s only because you’re happy.”

He paused again, moving closer until he was right in front of me.

“Thank you. For your strength, for your wisdom, for never giving up on us, even when I made it hard. Thank you for helping me see what matters. And for teaching me what it really means to love and to be grateful.”

He reached for my hand, and even though my emotions were spinning, I stood up, letting him lead me to where he had been standing moments before.

“And I love you. I love you, Sophia Yzabelle Del Mundo-Kelley. I couldn’t say when it happened—maybe it was the day we exchanged vows, or the first time we kissed, or that time you tossed me in the pool and called me a pervert in front of everyone. I really can’t say. What I do know is that I love you now, and I’m going to take care of you for as long as you’ll let me. But first...”

A huge sigh escaped before I could stop it when he went down on one knee. Was this real? Was he actually doing this now?

“Sweetheart, when we tied the knot, there were no sparks, not even a friendship between us. We’d never had a single proper date. It all started with terms, signatures, and a contract. But I want to do things right this time. I want a new agreement—one that’ll last forever. But you know I can’t sign anything without your approval...”

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My breath hitched when he pulled a small purple box from his jacket. I covered my mouth as Daniel lifted the lid, letting a golden ring topped with a heart-shaped diamond catch the light for everyone to see.

“My love, will you let me be your Valentine every single day? Can I be your partner, your best friend, your husband—this time for real? Sophia Ysabelle Del Mundo, will you marry me again? Only this time—”

He never finished the question. I didn’t let him. I just grabbed him by the lapels and kissed him with everything I had, right there in front of everyone.

“Want to know why I jumped the gun?” I whispered. He had no idea how long I’d been fighting the urge to do just that ever since he dropped to one knee. “Yes! I’ll marry you, Mr. Kelley!” My grin was so wide it hurt.

“Wait—why didn’t you let me finish my proposal?”

“You were taking forever!” I blurted out, grinning as the room burst into laughter. I touched his cheek, smiling so hard my face hurt. “I love you, Daniel Kelley. I want to marry you—and yes, I expect you to keep that promise about being my Valentine every day.”

He caught my hand in his, a dazzling smile lighting up his face as he slid the ring onto my finger.

I could barely breathe. “Oh, bless it—my God,” I whispered, half to myself, my heart full to the brim.

“Oh God,” I murmured quietly.

I had promised her—not just on Valentine’s Day, but on her birthday, at Christmas, New Year’s, and every special moment we would share—that I would always be by her side.

For a moment, the world seemed to fall still. My heart nearly stopped as he leaned toward me, his face drawing close. He paused only a moment before he breathed out.

“I love you,” he said in a voice barely above a whisper. Then he closed the distance, and our lips met. I kissed him back, matching the heat and longing he offered.

Just as we began to lose ourselves, the sudden ring of a doorbell broke through the quiet. We pulled apart at once and glanced around, searching for the source of the sound, caught off guard by the interruption.

Within seconds, everyone scattered in different directions. I stepped forward, but someone caught my hand. When I looked around, I realized my husband was gone. In his place stood my brother, my mother, Rian, Craig, and Bryan, each one smiling at me.

“What is happening? Where did Daniel go?” I asked, confusion lacing my words. Most of the guests had already left, and I watched them slip away.

“Why is everyone heading over there?” I turned to the group, but no one answered me right away.

“Come along, sweetheart. You’ll understand everything soon. For now, you should change out of that dress. I doubt your husband wants to wait too long.”

“Wait a minute, Mom—what do you mean by that?” My brow furrowed in frustration, sure that even the world’s greatest artist couldn’t have captured my expression in that moment.

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Steven and Aira smiled warmly, while Bryan’s grin stretched so wide I could hardly believe it. What on earth was that about?

“Mom, we’re waiting for you outside.” Steven’s voice echoed from beyond the door.

“All right, son. We’ll be there in less than half an hour. Make sure everyone holds tight, okay?”

“Absolutely, Mom.”

“Oh God...”

“Let’s go, sis!” Rian broke in with a burst of energy, grabbing my hand before I could get my bearings. “We’ll fill you in later, but right now, you need to get upstairs and change!” She tugged me toward the staircase, breathless and determined, and for a split second, I remembered seeing Daniel coming down those very steps earlier.

“Wait—why is everyone in such a hurry? What’s going on, and why do I have to change?”

No one bothered to answer. They just kept moving along the upstairs hallway, their footsteps quick and sure, until they reached a set of double doors and pushed into a pristine white room. I knew at once it couldn't be Daniel's bedroom. If he had any say in the matter, the last thing he'd choose would be all white.

"Oh wow... this place is—"

"Belle, off with that dress!" Rian called out, suddenly holding up a stunning white gown.

"Why am I changing, and what's the dress even for?"

"Stop asking questions and get this on, now!" She shook the gown with urgency.

I started to protest, but Mom gently interrupted.

"Sweetheart, listen to her. Time's running out, and you don't want to miss your own wedding, do you?"

As those words sank in, my eyes went wide. I turned to Mom, searching her face for a hint that she might be joking, but she only smiled, calm and certain.

A wedding? Did she really say my own wedding? I spun to face my mom, confusion bubbling up. “What are you talking about?”

Wide-eyed, Mom glanced away as if she’d never uttered the word. “Wedding? Did I really say that?” She played innocent, her voice light.

“Yes, you did! You told me to hurry or I’d be late for my wedding!”

Nobody volunteered an answer. The room filled with awkward silence.

“Mom? Rian? Will someone please explain what’s going on?” Without waiting for permission, I took the dress from Rian, determined to get some answers. Her shoulders dropped in surrender.

“All right, fine! I’ll give you one hint, since you can’t sit still for twenty minutes. This really is your wedding. But I’m not saying anything more!”

“Hold on—”

“Nope, I said that’s all you get. If you want the rest of the story, you’ll have to wait for my brother to spill it.”

Just as I started to protest, a ringtone sliced through the tension. Rian brightened and answered her phone. “Hey, love.”

Internally, I groaned. After six years of marriage, she still acted giddy whenever he called.

“She’s got the dress on, and she looks beautiful! Are we really doing this?” Rian’s excitement was unmistakable. “Yes, we’ll be there soon... I love you too. Bye.”

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This time, the eye roll was impossible to hide. Her cheeks turned a shade of red as she hung up, clearly still smitten.

“Goodbye, my love,” I said in my best imitation, making sure to drag out the words just enough to turn her cheeks bright red.

“Keep teasing like that and I swear, you’ll get a taste of your own medicine!”

Once she tucked her phone away, I let out a long, slow breath.

“Are you both absolutely sure I’m not just dreaming all this?” I couldn’t help but ask, peering at our reflections in the mirror.

Laughter bubbled out of Rian, while Mom simply squeezed my hand and guided me gently to take a seat.

“This isn’t a dream, sweetheart. You’re right here with us, and it’s all real,” Mom assured me. “Daniel loves you more than you know. He went out of his way—spent his time, his energy, everything he had—just to put that smile on your face.”

“Mom’s not exaggerating. We’ve all seen how patient he’s been, waiting for you. The man would hop on a plane to Italy every week if it meant being close to you. So, Sophia Kelley, you’d better believe this isn’t just a fantasy,” Rian chimed in, giving my shoulder a supportive pat.

My gaze flickered up, catching hers in the mirror as her words sank in.

“Italy? Why would he need to fly to Italy? What are you not telling me?”

With a sigh, Rian picked up a tube of nude lipstick and gently brushed it across my lips, choosing to answer without words at first.

“All right. I guess it’s time to let you in on another secret. Do you remember when you left everything behind and went to Italy?”

“I did not run away. I only went back to Italy because my father needed me.”

“Say what you like,” Rian replied, a knowing smile tugging at her lips. “He called me just before he decided to chase after you. He wanted to know every little thing that might bring you some joy. He confessed how much he loved you—how desperate he was to make things right. Honestly, he was

terrified you'd never come back. That's why he kept dropping everything from Friday through Sunday to hop on flights to Italy. He even met with Mom to talk about the future he hoped you'd share together."

"Hold on—are you saying he's been flying out to Italy every single weekend these past months?" My disbelief must have shown, because she nodded. Then my eyes darted to my mother. "And Mom, you've been talking to him the whole time we were over there?"

"Yes, sweetheart. He called me all the time, always asking about you—how you were handling your father's passing, what you thought of De Luca, and if you ever spoke his name. He wanted nothing more than to see you, but he worried that if he showed up, you might push him away again. So he just watched over you from a distance, making sure you were safe and all right."

"Why didn't either of you tell me any of this?"

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"He asked me not to, darling."

If that's the case... does that mean he was pretending all along? Since the time I visited him in his office and saw him talking to his ex-girlfriend... Wait... Mom! Don't tell me he knew I was arriving that day?

She and Rian just shrugged.

Ugh! My face must have looked horrified, because I immediately covered it with my hands. I felt my cheeks turn completely red as I suddenly remembered the events of that day. "Oh, my God! This is so weird!"

“Come on, Belle, forget about it and think of this as just part of your journey! Your journey to a happy ending with your cold and arrogant man, who is now waiting for you at the altar.”

“She’s right, baby. We know you’re overwhelmed by the rapid sequence of events, but we can’t blame your poor man. He loves you, and believe it or not, he barely managed to sleep these past few days, just to finish the final touches on this house. He wanted to give you this on your wedding day.”

“Ahh... My God! Why didn’t these things occur to me?” I looked at them while biting my lower lip.

“He asked all of us to help plan this great surprise for you. He thought this would only be your engagement party, but he said he couldn’t wait any longer to be your husband...”

“But he is already my husband.”

“Yes, but we all know that was just a contract back then, and you only had to accept the arrangement because of Joseph De Lucca, right? So this time, it’s for real. No agreement, no contract. In fact, he called the pastor who officiated your first wedding to conduct the ceremony again!”

Her voice was filled with enthusiasm, and it was hard not to be affected as they clapped their hands. I smiled and then closed my eyes, unable to explain the mix of emotions washing over me at that moment. I didn’t know what to do. I wanted to scream with pure joy and happiness. I wanted to jump and kiss my mom, thank Rian, and hug them both, but the tears hit me and streamed down my cheeks before I could even move.

“Ahh... sis...” Rian immediately grabbed a piece of tissue from the box and wiped my face. “Now is not the time for tears to fall; you’re ruining your makeup. Ugh, it’s so hard to keep this on you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at her scolding.

“Duh! As if you were the one who did my makeup. You don’t even know how to use eyeshadow, let alone concealer.”

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“Ouch! You’re so cruel!” she said, rolling her eyes, but she gave me a warm smile before pulling me into a tight hug. “I miss these moments with you, Belle. I knew from the beginning that you were made for my brother. You’re the one who will bring a smile to his face and tame his arrogant, annoying side. Welcome to the family again.”

After a few minutes of hugs, compliments, and advice exchanged between us, we decided to leave the room and head to the wedding venue: the mansion’s backyard garden.

“Ahh...”

My hand immediately flew to my mouth as I took my first step into the garden. I had already been amazed by the mansion and its luxurious living room, but the wedding venue nearly took my breath away.

White roses and purple tulips lined the aisle in the most beautiful arrangements, their fragrance filling my senses. Lanterns hung everywhere, casting a soft, romantic glow over the whole scene. And, of course, there were the faces of the people I loved most—my mother, my siblings, my best friend—and my handsome man, waiting for me at the end of a red carpet strewn with rose and tulip petals.

He was smiling at me, his eyes shining with a love and emotion I had never seen in him before. I bit my lip before returning his smile, and it softened into a quiet laugh as music began to drift through the garden, carried by a voice I knew all too well.

It was a love song, tender and full of longing—one that spoke of finding someone unexpected and knowing, in that instant, that she was meant to be his forever.

I didn't need to look far to know whose voice it was; he had slipped away from my side only moments before.

I swallowed hard, understanding the meaning behind every word. Like my mother, I felt tears begin to slide down my cheeks. Thinking back on all the pain I had endured, all that I had been through, I wondered—who would have imagined that a simple woman like me would meet a man so chivalrous and yet so arrogant, and that he would become my partner and best friend for life?

Who would have imagined that after everything that had happened between us, after every word spoken and every wound caused, we would still arrive at this moment together?

Taking a few steps toward him, I finally understood what people meant by “a blessing in disguise.” Everything happens for a reason—or perhaps several reasons. Sometimes life leads us down a path we never intended to take, yet it turns out to be exactly the one we needed. There were clashes, cracks, and obstacles along the way, but in the end, they had shaped me into who I was now—standing in the arms of the man who loved me, the man who was made for me.

When we reached the altar, my mother hugged me tightly before placing my hand in my future husband's for the second time. Not a word passed between us as he laced his fingers through mine. And unlike the romantic scenes in movies or novels, there were no sudden sparks, no jolt of electricity at his touch. I remembered what my mother had once told me back in Italy:

Chapter 558

"Marry a man who loves you more than you love him. If holding a man's hand makes your heart race until you feel dizzy and breathless, walk away—he is not the one for you. But if a man's hand makes you feel warm, safe, and protected, hold on to him. That is the man you will marry."

And now, I felt it—the warmth of his love and the security of his touch settling over me, lifting every burden, every insecurity, every worry I had carried.

"Your hand is sweating," I whispered, frowning slightly.

"I'm sorry, darling, I couldn't help it. I'm very nervous right now." He shrugged, giving me a sheepish smile, and it took me a few seconds to hold back my laughter at his reaction.

I never knew a man like Daniel Kelley could feel nervous too. Of course I knew he was human, but given how cold and arrogant he could be around others—especially in front of his colleagues—I never would have imagined seeing him like this.

"Nervous? Really, my love?" I asked, unable to hide my smile.

“Argh! You’re mocking me, aren’t you?”

“Of course not! Why would I do such a thing?”

Then a mischievous smile suddenly appeared on his lips.

“All right! Rest assured, that won’t be your answer once I give you the punishment you deserve later.”

Raising an eyebrow, curious, I asked another question. “And what punishment would that be?”

“Ahh! Nothing to worry about, dear. It’ll just be a small punishment that will keep you in bed for the entire week.” He gave me a wink.

“Huh!”

I choked a little, but his answer couldn’t stop my imagination, which ran wild in anticipation of what he had planned for after the wedding party. Of course, his provocative words also made me want to tear off my veil and pull him in for a passionate kiss right then, but unfortunately, I wasn’t allowed to do that.

“Hmm...” I shrugged, feigning indifference. “Then I’ll be waiting, darling,” I whispered softly, making sure to sound alluring.

“Sophia...” He didn’t have the chance to finish what he was going to say, as we were interrupted by the pastor’s loud voice in front of us.

“Beloved, we are gathered here in the presence of God, and in the presence of these witnesses, to unite Daniel and Sophia in the sacred bonds of matrimony. Marriage was instituted by God, regulated by His commandments, blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, and is to be honored by all men.”

I had to bite my lower lip to stifle the laughter rising in my throat.

I felt Daniel’s hand squeeze mine, but I didn’t look at him, trying instead to focus on what the pastor was saying.

As the ceremony progressed, I couldn’t help but compare today with the one we’d had a year ago. My memories kept drifting back to our first engagement party, when Rian had teased me, asking what would happen if our fake marriage turned real over time. Remembering how strongly I’d denied that idea made me smile. But look at where we were now—she had been right.

Chapter 559

“The vows you are about to take should be made in the presence of God, who judges all and knows all the secrets of our hearts. So, to express that your hearts are united in love, please hold each other’s hands before making your vows.”

I noticed how Daniel took a deep breath before taking my hand. It was the first time I’d seen him this nervous, and of all days, it was on our wedding day. My heart was silently screaming with joy, because I

could swear this moment—this rare side of Daniel he so seldom showed—would be worth remembering forever. I would look back on it fondly once all our dreams and promises had been fulfilled.

“Hi, beautiful.” (Whistles and laughter rose from the people behind us.) “The moment I met you, I didn’t know you were meant for me. As I’ve always said, I was arrogant, ignorant, and insensitive to you and your feelings. I apologize for all of that. But as time went by, I started to notice something. The more I got to know you, the harder it became to hide my feelings. Still, I always tried, and I always failed.

“Because of you, I dare to dream. I became a better person—I laugh, I smile, and I dare to dream again. And on this special day, or rather, this special night, in the presence of God and before our family, I take you, Sophia Ysabelle Del Mundo, to be my lawful wife, knowing in my heart that you will be the only woman I will love and care for the rest of my life. I promise to be your loyal partner and best friend for life. I will always listen to all your stories, watch you dance and sing all day long, without a single complaint. I promise to hold your hand, hug you, and kiss you every day, even if you haven’t showered or brushed your teeth.”

(I didn’t know how to react to his vows, especially with all the guests nearly dying of laughter at his words.)

“I promise to protect you, trust you, and respect you, and I vow to keep you safe by my side. I will share your dreams and support you in your efforts to achieve your goals. I will help you whenever you need me and keep my distance when you don’t. Everything that is mine is now yours. I give you my hand, my heart, and my love from this moment on, for as long as we both live, until death parts us. I love you, my dear.”

As he placed the ring on my finger, I took a deep breath, filling my lungs with air in an attempt to muster courage. Not because I hadn’t thought about what to say, or because I had nothing to say, but because the excitement was overwhelming, and I didn’t know where to begin.

I swallowed my nerves and looked into his eyes. Then I swallowed them again. Phew. I promised myself I'd pinch his nose after the ceremony.

Chapter 560

"Hello, handsome!" (Just as it had happened during his turn, the garden filled with applause behind me.)

"Honestly, I don't know where to begin with this vow. Maybe I should just start by saying thank you. Thank you for being my support, my shield, and my protector in times when I needed someone to lean on.

"You have no idea how much I thank God every day since I realized I'm in love with you. I'm grateful He brought you into my life and chose you to be my companion. I know I might not be the perfect wife—that I have fits of rage, mood swings, and that I'm stubborn sometimes..."

(He interrupted me at this point.)

"Indeed. I completely agree."

(Everyone laughed, including me.)

"It's true, I'm stubborn most of the time, but I want to wholeheartedly thank you for accepting me as I am, for helping to bring out the best in me, and for being by my side. Thank you for following me everywhere, especially for coming with me to Italy and showing me how fortunate I am to have someone like you as my husband. You are the greatest blessing God has given me. It's a dream that's turned into reality.

“As this is our second vow—our true vow...” (I paused and winked at him, and he responded with a gentle laugh.) “I accept you, Daniel Kelley, as my lawful husband, and I vow, in the presence of God and our families, to honor you and be faithful to you, and only you. From this moment on, I promise to be your partner, your teammate, the one who will make you smile in times of sadness and comfort you in moments of anguish.

“I know we won’t be a perfect couple—no one is—but I want you to know that I’ll be by your side every day of our lives. I belong to you and only you, with all my heart. I can’t imagine what my life would be like without you. I will love you, take care of you, and promise to be by your side all the way until we grow old, until death parts us. I love you.”

As I spoke those last three words, tears began to stream down my face. My hands trembled slightly as I slipped the ring onto his finger, my sobs threatening to break free.

“May the blessings of life, the joy of love, the peace of truth, the wisdom, and the strength of spirit be your constant companions, now and always, as husband and wife...

“I know you’ve kissed each other a thousand times before, perhaps even more.” (Daniel scratched the back of his neck, drawing laughter from everyone.) “But today, the feeling is new. You now go from being simply partners and best friends to becoming husband and wife. You may now seal this union with a kiss.

“Daniel, you may now kiss the bride.”

This was what everyone had been waiting for since the ceremony began—my husband and I included, though I couldn’t explain why I suddenly felt nervous as he lifted my veil.

He gave me a smile.