

A Favor 201

Chapter 201

She bit her lip. I caught the quick glance she shot at Daniel, who stood behind her with a frown he didn't bother to hide.

"Do you know each other?" he asked.

"You know him?" I asked her, flicking my gaze between them.

"Well... he's my brother."

"Ooooh..." I said as surprise flooded through me.

The world suddenly felt so small. My fiancé—the man I would marry soon—was the brother of one of my closest friends from college. The friend who knew every secret I had was the younger sister of the man I was going to marry.

Silence fell after that. No one seemed willing to say anything until Daniel finally looked at us with a brow arched.

"How did you meet?"

Rian answered before I could even think. She smiled and laced her fingers with mine.

“We went to the same university. She was my mentor, and she’s the one who introduced me to my band.” Her tone lifted at the end, and her smile carried something else—something close to sarcasm.

“Mentor?” Daniel asked, frowning.

“Yes. It’s a long story, Dani. And don’t ask me how or why, because I know you don’t care.”

She’d called him Dani, which surprised me. But it wasn’t her tone that settled in my chest. It was the way she said he didn’t care. I understood what she meant without needing it explained.

I watched the way they looked at each other—the weight in Daniel’s stare, and how Rian ignored it like it meant nothing. She turned to the man standing behind her brother.

“Honey, she’s the dance instructor I told you about last time.”

She held onto my hand, unwilling to let go.

“Oh, really?” the man she called her husband asked. Warmth flickered in his eyes when he looked at her, a sweetness that made their connection obvious.

“Yes. Honey, this is Belle—my wonderful singing mentor and now my dance mentor too. And Belle, this is Alex, my husband.” She smiled as she introduced us. Daniel stayed behind her, watching in silence.

“Wow. You’re very talented, Belle. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Alex offered his hand. I took it with a polite smile. “Thank you. It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Alex.” I gave him a warm smile to show my appreciation.

“Belle, welcome to my family,” Rian said, smiling as she hugged me again.

I recognized that smile. It was genuine, without a doubt, but there was something else behind it—something curious. As if she were filled with questions.

“Why do you call her Belle?” Daniel asked. No one had been speaking to him, but he cut in anyway.

Rian rolled her eyes, then gave him a smile made of pure mischief.

“Oh, my sweet big brother. You know nothing. I call her Belle because that’s her real nickname. Do you even know her full name? It’s Sophia Ysabelle Del Mundo.” She finished with a sweet smile.

I couldn't help the smile that curved my lips. The way she handled her brother was simply brilliant. I was about to add a few teasing comments when my phone vibrated. A message from Craig flashed on the screen, asking how the party was going. I didn't bother replying. I just slipped my phone back into the pocket of my dress.

"Belle, do you like SpongeBob too?" Rian asked suddenly.

"What?" I blinked, caught off guard. Her voice had risen loud enough to draw attention. The men nearby—especially Daniel and Alex—turned to look at her.

"Hmm... yes. It's cute," I replied, even though I had no idea what she meant.

"SpongeBob... yes, it's cute."

I laughed when I saw the expressions on both men's faces. What was their problem with SpongeBob?

"Belle, can I talk to you alone for a moment?"

Even though I had no idea why she suddenly wanted to pull me aside, I nodded.

"Sure."

"I have a secret. And I want to tell you first."

The moment she said it, both men turned to her again. Alex's expression tightened as if he'd just tasted something bitter, and Daniel looked genuinely horrified.

"All right, then. Let's go."

She took my arm, but she didn't lead me far. Both men called her name at the same time.

"Rian!" her husband shouted.

"Arrianna Angela!" Daniel exclaimed, using her full name like a warning.

She turned with a frown, both hands on her hips. "What is the problem now, boys?"

"I just want a private conversation with my sister-in-law. Can't I? If it bothers you that much, maybe you should go find a TV and put on your favorite SpongeBob episode. It might improve your mood."

A laugh escaped me before I could stop it. Jack and Andrew joined in, and for a moment, the tension eased.

We went into one of the rooms and stepped out onto the terrace. We sat at a small coffee table outside, facing each other, with the evening light falling between us.

“Rian, why did you want to talk to me?” I asked, though part of me already knew what she was about to bring up.

“Belle,” she said with a long sigh. “I had no idea you were my brother’s fiancée. You didn’t say anything when we saw each other last week.”

“I know,” I said with a small smile. “I remember you mentioned you had a brother, but I never imagined it was him.”

“Yeah. It’s Dani. Daniel Kelley.” She paused and took another deep breath before continuing. “Belle, can you tell me why you accepted this arrangement? Why are you going to marry my brother?”

I blinked and looked away. Doubt crept back in. I wondered if agreeing to marry her brother really was the right way to ensure Félix ended up in prison, or if I’d only convinced myself it was.

“Rian...”

“Is this about something from your past?”

I bit my lower lip and looked her straight in the eyes. "Is this about Félix?"

I closed my eyes the moment she said his name. The memory hit me with the same force as it had six years ago, as if no time had passed at all.

"Belle, tell me the truth. Is it because of the man who tried to rape you six years ago?"

Oh, God.

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I nodded without opening my eyes.

"Yes. It was because of him. That disgusting monster," I said, my jaw tight as the words spilled out.

"Oh." Her voice carried a stronger shock than she meant. "Why didn't you tell Daniel?"

"No, Rian," I said quickly, shaking my head.

"But why? He should know everything about you. He has a right to know what you've been through."

I let out a small laugh—not because anything was funny, but because the ache climbing into my chest had to go somewhere.

“Do you really think he would care, or even listen to anything I say? No, Rian. He doesn’t even know my full name. It’s like nothing can touch him.”

“No, Belle. Trust me. When you spend time with him, you’ll see he isn’t always that cold.”

“He never smiles. He only gives me a sarcastic smirk, looks at me like I’m a problem he has to solve, and insults me every chance he gets.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that. It’s rare to see him smile. You have to work hard to earn even one. But, Belle, you’re about to live with him. You’re getting married. At the very least, you need to tell him the truth and try to meet him halfway.”

I shook my head hard. “No. I accepted this arrangement for a reason. Your mother told me your brother needed a wife to secure that contract with his main investor. And I needed somewhere to hide while I gathered proof of what that man did to me. He deleted all the security footage from that night. The only witness was the employee who caught him, and she disappeared before I could find her.”

I clenched my fists until my knuckles nearly turned white.

“Last month I saw him at the mall. After six years, he still found a way to get under my skin, Rian. I thought I’d buried everything he did to me. But then he showed up in front of me, and all the nightmares I worked so hard to forget came rushing back.”

“Wait... how did my mother end up involved in your engagement to Dani?”

“She was taking classes with me. She signed up for my Zumba sessions. By coincidence, she saw everything the day he cornered me in the parking lot. She saw him grab me and try to scare me again. She ran over with the bodyguards and got me out of there. I didn’t even know she was your mother. She asked what happened, and I told her the truth. I told her about my life after leaving Italy, what he did to me, and how long I’d been struggling just to stay afloat. She was the one who offered to help me.”

“And that help turned into you marrying my brother?” she asked softly.

“Yes. I needed a powerful last name to protect me—something strong enough to keep Félix at a distance. Once he learns I’m your brother’s wife, he’ll think twice before coming near me again.”

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“Belle...”

“Can I ask you a favor?”

“Yes. Anything.”

“Can you keep everything you’ve known about me to yourself? I mean my past—and the real reason I agreed to marry your brother.”

“Please, Rian. At least until I resolve this. Okay?” I took her hands and placed them carefully on the table so she’d see how serious I was.

“But you need help. Why didn’t you tell Dani? He would help you.”

“No, Rian. You don’t understand. If Félix finds out this marriage is only an arrangement, he won’t stop until he forces his way back into my life.”

“Still, Dani is going to be your husband. If you tell him everything, he’ll listen.”

“No.” I shook my head, firm and unyielding.

“Then why don’t you go to the police? They could—”

I let out a bitter laugh. “The police? You think they’d listen? That they’d believe me? I don’t have any proof to show them, Rian. He erased it all. All he left me was the memory of his hands on me. His saliva on my skin. And the only person who saw everything vanished without a trace. She disappeared the same night it happened, and I still have no idea where she went.”

My vision blurred and tears gathered again—stubborn and painful.

“Belle...”

“And how does your brother treat me? He judges me every time we talk. He thinks I’m marrying him for his money. Why would a man like that believe something so awful? Even my own father refused to believe me. So what could I expect from anyone else?”

“I believe you. I believed you the second you told me. And my mother believes you too.”

“Because you and your mother aren’t like him. You understand because you’re women. You understand fear. You can imagine it and put yourselves in my place.”

“Ysabelle...”

The simple way she said my name broke something open inside me. The tears finally spilled, sliding down my face without stopping. I wished someone had stood by me the way she did. I wished I’d had a mother like hers. A brother who defended me. A father who hadn’t turned his back when I needed him. My father was the only person I had left, and he was the same man who left me to fight my nightmares alone.

An arm wrapped around my shoulders, and a gentle hand rubbed my back—steady and warm.

“Promise me, Rian. Please?” I looked at her through my tears, clinging to the thin thread of hope she offered.

“I promise. But I hope one day, when you’re ready, you’ll share this with him.”

I watched as she and Alex kissed, surrounded by friends and strangers alike. I let out a long breath and silently wished this wedding would bring me freedom and peace—anything that could loosen the grip of the memories that haunted me. A tear slid down my cheek, and I didn’t bother to wipe it away.

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With my eyes still stinging from tears, I didn’t notice Daniel until he stopped right in front of me. He wiped the tear away with a gentleness I didn’t expect, and before I could react, he took my hand and guided me toward the center of the room.

He passed his glass to a nearby waiter, and suddenly the crowd’s attention locked onto us. Without a word, Daniel dropped to one knee. My breath caught when he held out a white diamond ring that glittered beneath the chandeliers.

“What... what is this?” I whispered, too stunned to breathe.

“Sophia, I know what we have right now is a complicated story. But I don’t want you to leave. Not now. Not ever.”

Wow. What an impressive performance you’re putting on tonight, Daniel Kelley.

“My beloved,” he continued.

My beloved? Where did that come from? If I kicked you where it hurts most, would you still call me that?

“Will you be the mother of my children someday? Will you be my partner in everything? And will you give me the honor of becoming the happiest man in the world by marrying me?” He finished with those words.

I looked up at him, expecting the usual coldness or a cutting remark. Instead, he smiled at me. It was real—warm and almost tender—and it caught me completely off guard. Even though I still believed this was all an act, my thoughts raced.

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s acting. This whole event is nothing more than a performance, a spectacle for everyone watching,” I told myself.

“Say yes, please!” his parents exclaimed. Their voices were full of hope. I almost laughed when I looked at Daniel. He stayed perfectly still, but I could practically feel the irritation simmering beneath his calm expression.

“Yes, my love. I’ll marry you,” I replied with the same sweetness he’d used on me.

That smug little smile returned to his face.

There it was. Proof. This was all a sham.

He slid the ring onto my finger with slow precision, then rose. I thought he would step back or turn to the crowd. Instead, he leaned in before I could react and pressed his lips to mine.

The world started spinning in my head. A suffocating heat swept through me—wild and unexpected. My stomach flipped uncontrollably, and I clutched his shoulder because my knees felt weak.

His arm tightened around my waist, pulling me closer, and his hand slid to the small of my back as if he had every right to touch me like that. He lifted my hands and placed them around him before he finally pulled away.

He drew me into a soft embrace, and his breath brushed my ear as he murmured, low and calm, “I’m guessing that was your first kiss, my love.”

“Damn it,” I cursed silently, eyes wide, stunned into silence.

“I’m guessing that was your first kiss, my love.”

His words hit me so hard I cursed silently. My eyes widened, and when he noticed his parents approaching, he pulled me closer as if he meant to keep me there.

I tried to step back, but he tightened his hold just enough to keep me in place. If it weren't for the four-inch heels bringing me closer to his height, I wouldn't have been able to lean in the way I did.

"Let's put on a show together, Mr. Kelley. You wouldn't want me to shove you away in front of everyone, would you?" I slid my arms around his waist, one hand gliding up to his shoulder. Then I rose onto my toes until my lips were near his ear. His muscles tensed beneath my touch as I pressed soft, teasing kisses along the side of his face. Only then did I murmur, light and playful, "Mmm... sorry, darling, but that wasn't the first. Maybe the second, though."

He leaned back slightly, watching me with a look that shifted between curiosity and disbelief.

"So you're not a vir—" He never finished. His mother cut in with a delighted squeal.

"Congratulations! That was wonderful, son. So romantic!" Mrs. Kelley hugged us both. She even winked at me, fully aware her son was watching.

"It was part of the act, Mom," he muttered, his face pulled into a tight grimace.

"Where are you going?" she asked as soon as he released my hand and stepped back.

"I have to call my secretary about tomorrow's meeting."

“For God’s sake, Daniel! This is your engagement party, and all you can think about is work!”

“Mom, I already did my part. I gave her the ring. That’s all anyone needed from me.” He kissed his mother on the forehead and walked away without bothering to look at me.

“I’m sorry, dear. I know he can be a bit inconsiderate.”

“It’s fine, Mrs. Kelley. There’s nothing to apologize for. He’s right about one thing—he put the ring on my finger, showed up to the party, and did his part of the agreement.”

“Sophia,” she whispered, taking my hand gently. “Don’t let him discourage you. I may be his mother, but I didn’t offer you this arrangement only for his sake. I offered it because I wanted to help you, too. If you ever need anything, don’t hesitate to call me. You already have my number.”

I returned her kindness with a small nod. “Thank you. Truly.”

“You’re welcome, dear.” Her hand brushed my left cheek tenderly. “Remember, you’re part of this family now.”

“Mom... Belle!”

“My daughter!”

We turned to Rian, beaming as she hurried over and hugged us both warmly.

“Congratulations, Belle,” she said, squeezing my hand.

I tried to smile, but it came out a little strained.

“Why do you call her Belle?”

Rian and I exchanged a glance before she broke into another bright smile.

“Mom, her name is actually Sophia Ysabelle. We’ve been friends since college! Did you know? I had no idea she was engaged to Dani.”

“Really? What a wonderful surprise.” Mrs. Kelley’s eyes lit with genuine excitement.

“Of course, Mom. I’m thrilled you chose her. I finally have the sister I’ve always wanted,” Rian said, clapping her hands, unable to contain her joy.

“Do you know everything?” Mrs. Kelley leaned in a little closer, her voice tinged with worry.

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Rian's smile softened as she nodded. "Yes, Mom. I know everything. What happened to Belle six years ago. What happened at the mall a few weeks ago. I promised I'd help her. I'll help her look for Layla—and while I'm at it, I'll work on softening Dani's heart of stone." She winked mischievously.

"That's true. His heart has never been broken. I don't understand why he's become so distant."

"Mom, we both know that beneath all that seriousness, Dani is one of the sweetest people in the world."

She nodded thoughtfully and looked at me. "Sophia, when you really spend time with my son, you'll understand what we mean. He isn't cold with the people he cares about. In fact, he becomes incredibly protective."

I gave them a polite smile, swallowing everything I actually wanted to say. If I could be honest, I would've told them how badly he treated me every time he crossed paths with me.

After the party ended, Mrs. Kelley insisted her driver take me home. Daniel never came near me again after that unexpected proposal. He left me alone to deal with his family, his friends, and half the city's social elite. He only appeared again when the last guests were saying their goodbyes and heading for the doors.

"What? He kissed you?"

Craig's eyes nearly popped out of his head the moment the words left my mouth. He'd begged me to tell him every detail, not letting me rest until I'd told him everything that had happened from the moment I stepped out of the car to the exact second Daniel's lips met mine. His reactions had been nothing but squeals, gasps, and exaggerated expressions.

I nodded and rolled my eyes.

"Oh my God! Then tell me—how did it feel to be kissed by one of the most eligible bachelors in Los Angeles? And wait, was it your first kiss?" he asked, practically bouncing as we sat in my bedroom getting ready for bed.

"And what did he say after the kiss? Sophia, tell me! I'm dying over here—tell me more!"

I couldn't help laughing at the dramatic way he clutched his chest. "Well... he knows," I admitted, biting my lip, remembering exactly what Daniel had whispered.

"Knows what?"

"That it was my first kiss! Craig, how did he know? How could a man tell that?"

"Sophia! Of course he could tell! He's a man! They notice those things. It was obvious from the way you reacted to the kiss."

“Ah!” I groaned, smacking my forehead.

“And what did you say when he told you? Did you admit it? How did you react?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then what did you do?”

“I denied it! I wasn’t going to give him the satisfaction of knowing it was my first kiss. I didn’t want that man teasing me about it for the rest of my life. Absolutely not!”

Craig burst into laughter. “And how did you manage to say that without your face giving you away?”

“I told him he was wrong. I acted like it wasn’t a big deal. I knew it would feed his ego, but I refused to let him think he’d figured me out.”

“So... did he believe you?”

“I think so. He got annoyed and left right after his mother congratulated us.”

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“Seriously? Good. I’m glad Félix didn’t steal your first kiss back then. Your future husband beat him to it, and he didn’t even hesitate.”

“Yes! I hope that bastard is suffering wherever he is,” I spat, clenching my fists as I imagined crushing his face between my fingers.

“And what’s next? When’s the big day?”

I exhaled hard, trying to release the tension that had been building in my chest.

“Next week. I asked them to keep it simple. No cameras. No journalists. No spotlights.”

“All right... so tell me. How did your wonderful fiancé help you with the wedding preparations?”

I gave him the most sarcastic smile I could manage.

“You’re asking if he helped? Not even close. He did absolutely nothing.” I emphasized the last word with all the weight it deserved.

Craig laughed. “Well then, he’s definitely on his way to winning Husband of the Year.”

I laughed too. "It would take a miracle."

"Just make sure you don't accidentally fall in love with him."

My smile vanished instantly. "Of course not. I'd rather die than fall in love with that man."

"My God, Sophia. Careful. You might end up eating those words."

"It won't happen," I said with complete certainty. "Never."

Daniel's POV:

"Mr. Daniel!"

I looked up at the knock on my door. Denise's voice came from the other side, firm and familiar.

"Come in, Denise."

She stepped inside and greeted me with the same polite smile she always wore at work.

“Sir, a letter arrived for you. It’s from Attorney Relagio,” she said, placing a sealed white envelope on my desk.

“Relagio?” I repeated, frowning. The name didn’t sound familiar.

“Yes, sir.” She gave a slight shrug.

“I’ve never heard of that attorney. Thank you. You can get back to your tasks.”

“You’re welcome,” she replied before leaving and closing the door behind her.

I leaned back in my chair, staring at the envelope with a mix of suspicion and curiosity. I tore it open, wondering who on earth would send something like this to my office.

My teeth clenched the moment I realized what I was holding. Inside the envelope was a short letter and a carefully prepared prenuptial agreement—already signed by Sophia Del Mundo. My fiancée.

The nerve of that woman. She’d actually sent me a prenuptial agreement. I should’ve been the one to decide when a document like that would be presented. Irritation burned through me as my hands curled into fists and I reached for the intercom.

“Sir—”

“Andrew, get to my office now.” I ended the call before he could ask anything.

Andrew barged in only seconds later.

“Why do you look like the world is on fire?”

I didn’t bother answering. I shoved the documents across the desk.

“A prenup between you and Sophia? Why would she send something like this?”

“What do you mean, why? I didn’t ask for it.” I stared at him.

“Oh. So it came from her.”

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“Exactly. Tell me where she got the nerve to send me this. I would never touch anything that belongs to her. Not a coin. Wasn’t she the one who wanted to marry me for my money? So what is she trying to say with this? I should’ve been the one to send her this document—not the other way around.”

“If you think about it, this is better for you. You’re the one who keeps insisting she wants your money.”

“And I still insist on it.”

“Then you shouldn’t care who prepared it first. At least she’s showing you she doesn’t want anything that belongs to you. Not your properties. Not your accounts. Nothing.”

He lifted the prenup and began flipping through it before reading aloud.

Andrew cleared his throat and continued. “It says here that the husband—you—retains full ownership of his assets. The wife can’t claim any part of them, nor can anyone related to her. If the marriage ends, she can’t ask for spousal support or try to take anything that belonged to you before or during the marriage.” He lowered the page and looked at me directly. “Man, this practically proves she doesn’t care about your money.”

“It’s all an act,” I ground out through clenched teeth. The more I thought about it, the more it irritated me.

“Oh, enough,” he groaned, dropping onto the sofa, exhausted by the conversation. “Why can’t you at least consider the possibility she’s telling the truth? Why don’t you ask her why she agreed to this whole marriage? I bet there’s something else.”

He suddenly sat up, eyes wide. “And now what?”

Then his face lit up even more. “Maybe she’s in love with you! It has to be that. She’s in love with you!”

For a moment, I couldn’t even form a response. I stared at him like he’d grown a second head—then a sharp laugh burst out of me.

“Go to hell, Andrew. That’s impossible. And even if it were true, I wouldn’t fall in love with her. Not now. Not ever.”

“Oh. Now I’m terrified,” Andrew said, though his laugh said otherwise. “Maybe you should stop sealing your own fate before you end up swallowing every last word.”

“That’s never going to happen.”

“What? No. I didn’t say that. I was just describing what literally everyone at that party noticed.” He raised both hands, as if expecting me to lunge across the desk. “Why would I fantasize about her? She’s your fiancée,” he drew out the last word, but I refused to take the bait.

“Don’t even think about her that way, Andrew. No one should look at her like that while we’re married.”

“So you’re telling me once you two split up, I can have a shot? I could date her? Maybe even marry her?”

My hands clenched into fists beneath the desk. “You know that decision would be yours,” I said, forcing myself to look at him directly. “And what kind of question is that, Andrew? We’re not even married yet, and you’re already imagining we’ll split up?”

“Hey, that’s not what I meant.”

“We were talking about the prenup she sent me. Not ending anything.”

“Okay, okay,” he muttered. I barely caught the first words—something about how I clearly didn’t want to talk about a separation.

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“Call that attorney. Set up a meeting as soon as possible. And contact my lawyer too.” I straightened, letting my voice return to the controlled tone I used at work.

“Yes, sir. And Sophia? Should I contact her as well?”

“No. I’ll handle that later.”

“Understood. Anything else?”

“That’s all. Get back to work.”

I closed my eyes and leaned back in my chair. This only made me more curious about Sophia’s true intentions for marrying me. I’d never even considered a prenuptial agreement—not even when I suspected she might be after my money.

Sophia’s POV:

I took a long breath before stepping onto the red carpet that stretched down the aisle. I kept telling myself this marriage was nothing but a contract—an agreement between him and me—and not something real. And yet, my heart wouldn’t stop pounding in my chest.

The music inside the church had swelled so loudly that the wedding melody nearly drowned beneath it. Rian was singing “This I Promise You,” and I slowly lifted my eyes toward the altar. My future husband waited there in a dark blue suit, smiling in a way I still couldn’t decipher. I didn’t know whether it was sincere or something he put on for the crowd.

I held my purple bridal bouquet close as I forced myself to look away from him. I kept my focus on the carpet beneath my feet because I didn’t want to slip or lose my balance at my own wedding. The thought of falling in front of everyone twisted my stomach into a knot.

Craig and Mrs. Kelley waited for me halfway down the aisle. Besides my mother-in-law, I had chosen Craig to walk me down, even when Daniel disagreed. I still didn't know why it mattered to him, and I ignored it without a second thought. He hadn't offered a single opinion during the wedding preparations, so I saw no reason to listen to him now.

"You look absolutely stunning, Sophia Ysabelle," Craig said as he leaned in and kissed my cheek. Mrs. Kelley did the same.

"Yes, you look lovely—wonderfully beautiful, dear," she added, offering me a warm smile before hugging me tightly in the middle of the aisle.

I wished I could go back in time and rewrite my past so my mother would be the one saying those sweet words, and my father would be walking at my side. They would pull me into a warm embrace before placing my hand into the hand of the man who would be my partner for life. But that wasn't something I—or anyone—could change.

I couldn't change the fact that my mother had abandoned me when I was little, or that my father had refused to believe me when I told him I'd been raped. He chose to trust strangers over his own daughter—especially the man who had nearly destroyed my life and left me with memories I would carry until I died, unless justice finally caught up with him.