

A Favor 421

Chapter 421

“Yes, sir. My investigation indicates that he is quietly buying up Mr. Del Mundo’s sausage business, acquiring shares in small increments. He’s now in the process of finalizing the paperwork to transfer everything into his name. The company is in a difficult position, and Mr. Del Mundo still owes that man’s father a considerable debt. They were planning to use a one-million-dollar loan to leverage the situation against the old man.”

“How much does Mr. Del Mundo actually owe them?”

“I don’t have the exact figure yet, but my sources suggest it’s around thirty million. The good news is that she has already managed to pay the first ten, so roughly twenty million remains.”

“Good God! What happened to all that money?” I gripped my phone tighter, frustration spilling over.
“That’s an obscene amount.”

“Most of it went toward settling his other debts with banks in Bologna. The rest was spent on new machinery and equipment for the factory.”

I drew a slow breath as I took in the grim reality of the old man’s situation.

“There’s something else, Mr. Kelley. They’ve been pressuring Mr. Del Mundo to repay the full debt before the year is out. If he fails to comply, they intend to seize the company as collateral.”

“What kind of trap is that? How is he supposed to pay back twenty million dollars in six months when the business barely generates that in an entire year?”

My body tensed. I got to my feet and slammed both fists on the desk, feeling the fury rise through my chest like fire.

Barely five seconds after the call ended, my phone rang again. My investigator.

I frowned but answered anyway.

“I forgot one crucial detail, Mr. Kelley.”

“Now what?”

“It concerns your wife.”

My back went straight. I took a slow breath, trying to settle the sudden pounding of my heart. I didn’t know why fear gripped me so quickly. “What about my wife?”

“You asked me to find out why she left her family and why she left Italy.”

"I remember. Tell me."

"She was sexually assaulted, sir. It happened nearly seven years ago."

"What did you just say? What happened to her?" Every part of me went cold.

"She wasn't fully violated, but she was assaulted and forced. The incident occurred seven years ago."

My legs gave way and I dropped into the nearest chair. I didn't know how to absorb what I had just been told. The room seemed to tilt around me, and a crushing weight settled on my chest, leaving me breathless as I tried to grasp the pain she had been carrying alone all these years.

"Mr. Kelley, can you still hear me?"

"Yes, I'm here," I managed, forcing my voice to hold steady. I clenched my jaw and pressed on, unable to hold back any longer. "Tell me who did this to her. Who was it that tried to hurt my wife?"

"It was her former fiancé, Félix..."

"I swear to God I will kill that bastard!" I shouted, past caring who heard me, as a wave of pure rage tore through me.

Chapter 422

“I spoke with people who used to live near them. A neighbor confirmed that Félix De Luca assaulted her in his room just one week before their wedding. Sophia and a friend of hers tried to file a report against him, but her own father refused to support her. Worse still, the neighbors say that Mr. Del Mundo received a substantial bribe from the De Luca family to keep the case quiet and protect his son.”

Anger and regret churned together inside me until I realized my hand was throbbing — I had gripped the pen so tightly it had snapped in two.

But the sharp pain in my palm was nothing compared to what she had endured: the betrayal, the judgment, the harsh words I had hurled at her when she needed me most.

“What happened to the case after that?”

“It disappeared entirely, sir. Even her friend deleted every social media profile she had. No one was able to reach either of them.”

“What do you mean, it disappeared? And who was this friend who stood by her?”

“The evidence was wiped clean, Mr. Kelley. With enough influence and money, every trace of news about the assault was erased. And on top of that, someone was hired to hack into Mr. Delgado’s accounts and frame him for a crime he didn’t commit.”

“Wait — did you say Mr. Delgado? Sophia’s friend?”

“Yes, sir. Bryan Delgado. He was the only one who stayed by her side throughout everything. He currently runs his own detective agency in California.”

Hearing that, I sank even further into my chair. I had been wrong about him, wrong about Sophia, and wrong about nearly everything that mattered — except for the love I still felt for her. That part had always been real. Everything else was a wreckage of my own making.

Sophia’s Point of View

I was sitting at my desk, looking over a news article about a national dance competition launching across the country the following day, when my phone began vibrating on the other side of the table. An unknown number. I hesitated and let it ring until it went quiet without answering.

Whoever it was didn’t give up. The phone started again moments later, more insistent this time.

Frowning, I drew a slow breath, picked it up, and answered. “Hello?”

Only silence greeted me. I waited, but all I heard was a deep sigh from the other end.

“Hello? Is someone there?” I asked, my confusion growing. I checked the screen and brought the phone back to my ear.

Still nothing.

“Look — if you called me, at least say something. I don’t have time for this kind of thing. I’m going to hang up—”

“No, sweetheart, it’s me.”

“Dad?”

“No, darling — it’s me. It’s your father.”

That voice stopped me cold. I didn’t know whether my mind was playing tricks on me, or whether the past had simply reached out to pull me back. When he spoke again, the uncertainty broke, and my hand tightened around the first paper within reach on my desk — the attendance list Craig had given me that morning.

“How are you, my Belle?”

“How did you get this number? Where did you get it from?” A storm of old memories and pain swelled inside me, making it hard to breathe. I had to force the words through my teeth.

“I reached out to a friend of yours. He gave it to me.”

“Which friend? Was it Bryan?”

“Yes. But please, don’t hold it against him. He only wanted to help.”

“Hold it against him? Why would I hold anything against the one person who stood by me? He was the only one who ever truly believed in me and never walked away when things got hard.”

“Belle...”

“What is it? Why are you looking for me now? Why are you calling after all these years? Is this another scheme? Are you about to put me in another deal, another arrangement?” My voice shook with anger, but he cut me off before I could finish.

“I’m sorry.”

Those two words landed with more weight than any insult ever had.

“I am so sorry, my little girl — for everything I put you through. I made mistakes, far too many to count, and I want you to know how deeply I regret all of it.”

A laugh broke from me before I could stop it — sharp and fractured, the kind that carries seven years of pain, longing, and disbelief. Hearing him ask for forgiveness for the very first time felt unreal, almost absurd.

“You’re asking for my forgiveness? And for what exactly? What finally pushed you to say this?”

“I never meant to hurt you, my little girl.”

“What did you just say? You never meant to hurt me?” My fingers curled into a tight fist.

“I love you, my darling—”

“Stop. Please don’t say that.” I closed my eyes, willing the tears to stay where they were — but they came anyway, steady and relentless.

“I feel the pain I caused you. I know I failed you. I believed you when you told me what he did to you. It’s just that—”

“It’s just that you took his money, didn’t you? Millions, maybe more. Enough to silence me, enough to keep me from pressing charges against his son. What kind of father does something like that? You actually chose his money over your own daughter—”

“I acted out of fear. I didn’t know what to do. I panicked—”

“You were afraid? And what about me? You watched me come running down with my clothes practically torn, out of my mind with terror, and instead of protecting me, you turned on me. You pretended not to see anything, pretended not to hear anything. You walked right past my suffering.”

“My Belle, let me explain. Please. I regret everything I did — most of all the way I treated you.”

“I don’t need your apologies. I don’t want to hear any more explanations from you. As far as I’m concerned, whatever bond we had ended the day I left Italy. We are not family anymore. I severed those ties myself.”

“Don’t say that, Belle! I am still your father!”

Chapter 424

“Is that what you think? What makes you believe you’ve earned that title? When Mother left, you went cold on me. You stopped caring about anything that wasn’t your business or your deals. You became a stranger in our own home — more interested in your profits and playing the part of a great man than in being there for me. Stop calling yourself my father. You stopped acting like one years ago. You never once showed up at my school, never came to a single performance, not one dance competition — you didn’t even bother to ask how I was.”

Tears blurred my vision as I fought to hold myself together, my voice trembling but firm.

“You never asked me what it felt like to survive what I went through. You never tried to find me after I left. Instead of standing up for me, you sided with that monster, helped cover up what he did, and let everyone blame me. You are not my father anymore. A real father protects his children, fights for them, makes them his priority. You never did any of that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’m not sorry for saying all of this. And I mean every word. Don’t call me again — I’ll block your number the moment we hang up.”

“They threatened to take the company. They said I had to repay the money I borrowed.” He let out a long, exhausted sigh before continuing.

“So that’s what it comes down to, isn’t it? The company, the money, all those deals — they have always mattered more to you than your own daughter. You chose all of that over me. I hope it was worth it.”

“No, Belle! If the threats about the company were all they had against me, I would have let it go. I would have lost everything if it meant keeping you safe—”

“But you didn’t. You chose differently.”

“I only did what I believed I had to do. You are my daughter. I would give up everything for you—”

“That is not what happened. You never sacrificed anything for me. You turned your back on me and let them destroy me.”

“They threatened to kill you.”

For a moment, I had no words. My mind went blank, stunned by what I was hearing.

“They swore they would take you, Belle. That they would kidnap you, use you to ruin me. They said they would strip me of everything, and I told them none of that mattered. But then Nicholas De Luca looked me in the eyes and promised he would have you killed if I didn’t stop you from filing charges against Félix. I was terrified. Your mother was already gone, and you were all I had left. I couldn’t risk losing you too...”

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“Belle...” He sounded shaken, as though he hadn’t prepared himself for my refusal.

“Why now? You had years to reach out, years to find me. Why did you stay silent for so long? Why are you calling after all this time? What changed?”

“I’m so sorry, Belle.”

“You’re sorry?” I repeated, letting the bitterness seep into my voice. “Well, let me offer you my apologies too — because no matter how sorry you are, you can’t give back the years you failed me. I barely remember what it feels like to have a father.”

The silence stretched between us. Not a breath, not a word. I was on the verge of ending the call when what he said next struck me like a blow.

“I’m dying, Belle.”

Chapter 425

He said it so quietly, but the words reverberated in my ears.

“I have stage-four lung cancer. My doctor has given me four to five months at most.”

The anger and disappointment had lived inside me for years, but I had never once wished this on him. Not once.

“What did you say?”

My throat locked, and the words I tried to form wouldn’t come. I wanted to shout, to demand answers, to sob into the phone — but nothing came out.

"It took me six years and five months to find you. After watching you compete at that international dance event, I knew I had to try. I needed to see you again. I needed to talk to you. But how was I supposed to do that? What could I possibly say when I stood in front of you? Should I have led with the truth — that I'm sick and have barely four months left?"

It was a good thing I was already sitting down, because I knew my legs would have buckled under the weight of that news. My fingers trembled in my lap, my thoughts spinning so fast I could barely remember how to breathe. I felt pinned to my chair — stunned, unable to move.

"My sweet girl, forgive me." "I'm so sorry for failing you so deeply." "I let you suffer through it all alone." "I let fear silence me when I should have fought for the justice you deserved." "My courage failed you at the moment you needed it most." "Please forgive your foolish father, Belle."

Tears rolled down my cheeks until the room blurred around me, but I stayed silent.

"Nothing I do can rewrite your past, and no wish can give back the years I wasted." "I know I have no right to ask for your forgiveness when I abandoned you in your darkest hour, but before my time runs out, there is only one thing I hope for..."

A muffled sob escaped me at those words, and I pressed my hand over my mouth as another threatened to follow.

"Please don't cry, darling." "I've made peace with this ending — it's the price I pay for failing you and your mother." "I wish I could go back to the day you were born..." "I remember holding you, so small and still, and promising that I would protect you, love you, and give you everything good that I could." "Instead, I failed in every obligation I had. I failed your mother as a husband and I failed you as a father, Belle."

Finding my voice felt impossible. Every word lodged in my throat, the shock keeping me completely still. Hearing him speak this way hurt more than I had been prepared to bear, and the pain spreading through me kept erasing every thought I tried to form.

Chapter 426

“Before my time runs out, I want only one thing. I want to see you again and hold you the way I used to when you were my little girl. I love you, Belle. And if God gives me another chance at life, I pray I can be the man your mother deserved and the father you needed.”

The call ended so abruptly that my whole body jolted. Only then did something inside me break. I screamed, needing the sound to tear my chest open wide enough to let the pain out. My strength gave way, and the phone slipped from my fingers, landing on the floor with a dull thud.

A raw, wrenching cry left me.

Why did life keep punishing me? All I had ever wanted was a family that stayed together. A mother who would hold me when I stumbled, a father who would stand between me and the cruelty of the world, and someone who would love me with the tenderness I had always dreamed of.

“Sophia! Talk to me — what’s wrong?”

The door flew open, revealing Craig’s alarmed face, and just behind him stood the last man I had any strength to face: Daniel Kelley.

“Sweetheart, what happened?” Craig rushed toward me, arms already open, panic flooding his voice.

“My love—” Daniel began, stepping forward as well.

Fresh tears streamed down my face as I turned to look at him. I raised my hand in a firm, silent gesture — not one step closer.

“Don’t you dare come near me. And stop calling me that — I mean it.”

“Sophia?” Both of their voices overlapped — Craig’s and Daniel’s — both equally stunned.

“What are you doing here? What do you want from me now?” I clenched my jaw, eyes fixed on Daniel.

Just seeing him at that moment, so soon after everything my father had said, felt like a fresh wound. My heart hammered, and a dull ache expanded through my chest. The memory of him that morning — barely covered by a towel — struck me with enough force that my knees nearly gave way. Craig caught me, gripping my arms before I could fall.

“Sophia, please. Let me talk to you. Give me the chance to explain what happened.”

“Explain? For the love of God — how many people am I supposed to forgive in a single day? Two isn’t enough? Five? How many apologies does it take before people stop hurting each other?”

“Sophia, please — just let me say what I came to say. I need you to listen to me...” He tried again.

“We are done, Daniel Kelley! I don’t want to hear another word from you. Leave.” I cut him off without hesitation. “I already sent you the divorce papers. Isn’t that what you always wanted? Just leave me alone. I cannot deal with you right now.”

“If you won’t talk to me, then at least listen.”

“No! I can’t take any more. Go. Right now. I need you to leave, Daniel.”

“Sophia, please...”

“I told you — I want you gone.” I pointed at the door, my voice sharper than it had ever been. “Go, Daniel!”

“No, Sophia. You have to hear me out. I’m not going anywhere until you give me the chance to explain!”

Chapter 427

I looked at him steadily, a thin, humorless smile on my lips. “You’re really going to stand there and refuse to leave?”

He held his ground stubbornly, arms crossed over his chest.

Beside me, Craig kept glancing between us, caught in the middle of our confrontation.

“Fine! If you won’t go, then I will!” Without looking back, I walked to the door and left them both behind.

“Sophia!”

Both voices followed me, but I kept walking. I reached the elevator, stepped inside, jabbed the ground floor button hard, and let the doors close between me and everything I was leaving behind.

The crying had stopped, but the storm inside hadn’t calmed at all. I pressed my hand against my chest, wondering how much heartbreak a person was supposed to survive in a single day.

Once in my car, I struck the steering wheel with both hands, my voice cracking. “What have I done to deserve this?”

“Well done, Sophia. What a spectacular mess you’ve made of your life,” I answered myself, striking the wheel again for emphasis.

A moment later, I watched Daniel emerge from the building. He scanned the parking lot, and his eyes locked onto my car before he broke into a run.

“Oh, come on,” I muttered, fumbling clumsily for my keys as he threw himself in front of my bumper, arms spread wide to block my escape. I slammed on the brakes.

Daniel ran to the passenger door and yanked at the handle, but it was locked.

“Open the door, Sophia! We need to talk!” His voice came through the glass, loud and urgent.

“Sure. Talk to my shadow, Daniel Kelley,” I murmured, pressing down on the accelerator.

In the rearview mirror, I watched him run after me, his voice fading into the night. I had no intention of stopping — not tonight, and not ever again. Nine months playing the role of devoted wife had been more than enough for a lifetime.

Bryan’s agency was just across the street, but I couldn’t bring myself to get out of the car. I sat behind the wheel with my head resting back, watching strangers pass along the sidewalk.

Nothing in my life had prepared me for loneliness this deep. My fifth-grade teacher’s old lesson drifted back to me: “Blood is thicker than water.”

My father never fit the mold of a good man. The decisions he made tore our family apart. My mother left because she could no longer bear his anger. I left because it seemed to me that I had simply stopped mattering to him — that greed had clouded everything else until I became invisible.

Right now, I couldn't even untangle my own feelings. The anger was still there, smoldering, and I had said things I hadn't meant to say. They were only careless words, but if you looked past the surface, you would see how much I still loved him and missed him. I had just been drowning in disappointment and pain for a very long time.

Chapter 428

He would always be my father, whether I liked it or not. It was enough for me to know that he was out there somewhere — even if we never spoke again — rather than pretending he didn't exist at all.

Frustration rose inside me when I remembered what he had said about Félix De Luca and his ruthless family. What kind of father threatens to have someone's child killed in order to cover his own son's sins? That was the kind of man Nicholas De Luca was — heartless and dangerous.

My thoughts were still churning when a sudden knock on the window made me jump. A man peered in at me, and a jolt of nerves ran through me.

"Why are you sitting out here? Why haven't you come in yet?" Bryan crouched down, frowning through the glass.

"I'm fine out here. The quiet helps me think."

“Right, sure. Next time, come up with a more convincing excuse, all right?” Bryan flashed a lopsided smile, nodding as though he were in on a joke only he understood. “Come on, let’s not stay out here. I’m sure you have plenty of things to ask me.”

A sigh slipped out as I thought of how he had given my father my number without even a warning.

“You’re right, Bryan. I do need to ask you something.” I closed the car door behind me, already rolling my eyes at the whole situation.

It was ten in the morning in Seattle.

I ran up the steps to my mother’s house, barely containing my excitement at seeing her and Steven. I hadn’t told either of them I was coming — I wanted it to be a surprise.

In the end, I was the one who was surprised. Suitcases were stacked beside the living room sofa.

“Sis?” A voice came from the kitchen.

Steven stepped out.

“Brother!” I couldn’t help the wide smile that spread across my face as I pulled him into a hug.

“You should have told us you were coming.” He frowned gently and led me to the sofa.

“I wanted to catch you and Mom off guard, but it looks like the tables have turned.” I nodded toward the three bags near the door.

He simply sighed.

“Where’s Mom?”

“She’s upstairs in her room, packing the last of her things.” Steven lifted his shoulders slightly.

“Packing everything? Are you two moving? Looking for somewhere different?”

“It’s not just about finding a new place. We’re leaving Seattle. Mom wants to go somewhere else entirely — another country.”

His words stunned me.

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about, Steven? Are you saying you’re going abroad? What does that mean?”

“She got a call yesterday. After that, she told me we’re going back to Italy.”

“What do you mean?” I asked before I could stop myself. The surprise must have shown plainly on my face. Steven looked at me carefully, his brow creasing with concern.

“Belle?”

We both turned toward the voice and found Mom standing in the doorway.

“Mom!” I jumped up and ran to her, wrapping my arms around her tightly. But even in that embrace, I couldn’t ignore the heaviness in her eyes.

Chapter 429

“Mom, what’s going on? Why are your things everywhere?” I looked over her shoulder at the clothes and bags scattered around the room.

“Belle, your brother and I are moving back to Italy.”

I sat on the edge of the bed, searching for the right words. All I could do was look into her eyes, reading the sadness there for answers.

“I want your brother to know his father.”

That single word unleashed a flood of memories from our last tense phone call. Tears pricked my eyes and I quickly looked away, not wanting her to see me in such a vulnerable moment.

“Why now? After everything he put you through, you’re simply going to forgive him?” I forced myself to meet her gaze. “You used to tell me how he treated you — that you left because he couldn’t control his anger, that the gambling and the business turned him into someone you didn’t even recognize.”

“I haven’t forgotten any of that, Belle.”

“Then why go back?”

“Belle...”

“Steven, you said Mom got a call yesterday. Was it him?”

She nodded silently.

“Mom!”

"I can't help it, Belle. No matter what happened between us, I never stopped loving your father."

"After everything — you still love him?"

"He's sick," she said at last, sidestepping my question.

"So that's why you're going back? Just because he's sick?"

"It's not only that."

A faint smile touched her lips, but her eyes remained sad. She moved closer and sat beside me, taking my hands in hers.

"He called me yesterday, Belle. He apologized for all the pain he caused, for every mistake he made, and he asked me whether I could find it in my heart to forgive him — whether both of us could."

Her hands trembled in mine, and that was when I noticed the mascara stains trailing down her cheeks.

"Finding out how ill he is affected me more than I expected. To be honest with you, Belle — he was my first love. The first person to break my heart. The one I experienced everything with for the first time. I know he made so many mistakes. We all do. He was never a hero — he never was — but I loved him then, and I still love him now."

Instead of wiping her own tears, she used her thumbs to gently dry the ones rolling down my face.

“I want to offer him the forgiveness he has been asking for all these years. I want him to know that I still care — and I wish I had never left.”

“Mom?”

“I feel like I failed, Belle. I broke the promise we made to each other — that we would stay together no matter what. I grew tired. Loving him exhausted me, and I wish I could take that back.”

“You only left because he was hurting you. You don’t have to feel guilty for reaching your limit. You weren’t the one who broke that promise — Dad was. He forgot what he promised you the very first time he let his temper win.”

Chapter 430

This time, I tightened my hands around hers.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. If I had stayed, perhaps you wouldn’t have had to go through so much pain.”

“Mom, let’s leave that behind us. It’s over now.”

“That’s all in the past, Mom.”

“I want to do things right, for once in my life. I want us to be together again — a real family.” My mother smiled, but it trembled in a way that only deepened my confusion.

“Your father needs us. I want him to know he isn’t facing this alone, that we’re still here for him, in spite of everything that happened. And if you can, I hope you’ll find it in your heart to forgive him too. When the time finally comes to say goodbye...”

The words caught in her throat, and she broke down, tears running freely down her cheeks as she struggled to go on.

“Mom...” I couldn’t bear to see her so shattered. I pulled her close and held her, pressing my cheek to her shoulder.

“We’ll find a way through this, Mom. I promise we’ll do everything we can to fight this illness.” I rubbed her back as I spoke, not entirely sure whether I was trying to comfort her or convince myself.

“There’s nothing more to fight, Belle. He already has stage-four lung cancer. The doctors say he has about four months left, if we’re fortunate. All we can do now is be present and make the most of the time he has.”

The breath left my body and everything inside me went cold. “But he told me the doctors gave him five months...”

“He only said that because he doesn’t want you to be sad for him. He’s frightened. Every night he wonders whether he’ll make it to the next morning.”

A wave of anguish tore through me and I covered my mouth as loud, broken sobs forced their way out. The pain in my chest was immense, my heart feeling as though it had been split in two. “Does Steven know?”

“No. I don’t know how to tell him,” she answered, her eyes filling with sorrow.

I closed my eyes, overwhelmed. The grief in my mother’s expression was more than I could hold. If my own pain was this sharp, I couldn’t begin to imagine how much more she was carrying.

Daniel’s Point of View

What the hell am I doing?

The beer bottle slipped from my hand just as Andrew burst into the office, his eyes wide with disbelief.

“Seriously, Daniel? Since when did you turn your office into a bar?” He snatched the bottle before I could even react.

“What’s your problem?” I shot him a look, irritation seeping into my voice.

“Oh, I think I’m the one who should be asking questions here, Daniel Kelley. What is going on with you? Why are you throwing back beers before breakfast?” He glanced at his watch, checking the time.

“Do you realize it’s barely past nine in the morning? Are you actually doing this in your office?”