

A Favor 431

Chapter 431

“Just leave it alone, Andrew. Give it back.”

“Not a chance. You’ve already had four of those.”

“I said leave me alone! If you’re not going to stop interfering, go back to your office and cancel everything on my schedule today!” My fists struck the desk hard, but he just stared at me as though I were speaking another language.

“So it’s the beer that matters to you. Interesting.” Andrew raised an eyebrow, a mischievous smile tugging at his mouth.

He darted off to the bathroom, only to return seconds later holding up an empty bottle.

“Are you kidding me, Andrew?” I sat still, fists clenched, my voice flat and cold.

“Yes, what is this, hmm?” he mimicked my indignation, shaking his head with a teasing grin. “What are you going to do — hit me for pouring out your drinks?”

I closed my eyes, leaned back, and drew a deep breath. I hadn’t noticed him position himself directly in front of me until I opened my eyes and let out a slow, heavy exhale. After a long pause, I covered my face with my hands.

"You're right, Andrew. I ruined everything."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I was wrong about her. Seven years ago, that bastard Félix De Luca tried to assault her. She was telling the truth the whole time, and I refused to believe her. I ruined everything."

Andrew let out a long, slow breath, rubbing his brow as he watched me unravel.

"How did you finally put it all together?"

"I kept investigating until I found the truth."

"So what's your next move?"

"I'm going to help her find Layla Angeles." I hadn't even finished the sentence when Andrew let out a short laugh.

"And you honestly think she wants your help? What if she tells you she's already given up, that Layla doesn't matter to her anymore, that she's willing to let it all go?"

“What are you talking about?”

“She already told me she’s exhausted, Daniel. She said she doesn’t want to fight anymore.”

“No. She can’t walk away from this. Félix De Luca cannot be allowed to get away with what he did.” I dropped my gaze to the pile of files in front of me, missing the bitter, knowing smile that crossed Andrew’s mouth.

“And who are you to decide when she’s had enough?”

“I’m her husband. That’s reason enough.”

Andrew laughed quietly. “Her husband, is it?”

“I’ll do whatever it takes to make Félix De Luca and his father answer for what they did to her. I don’t care about the consequences. If that bastard ever tries to go near her again, I won’t hold back. I’ll end him.”

Andrew’s lips curved with a flicker of amusement before he composed himself into something more solemn.

"I already have a team working on the De Luca company in Italy," I added, a cold satisfaction settling into my words as I thought of the plan already in motion.

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"Hold on — what exactly are you planning to do with their company?"

I didn't answer. Instead I settled further into my chair, arms crossed, and let the silence stretch between us.

"I'll fill you in when everything is in place."

"You're unbelievable."

Before either of us could say another word, a knock came at the door and Denise's voice drifted in from the hallway.

"Come in, Denise."

"Good morning, Mr. Kelley." Denise stepped inside, only to wrinkle her nose in distaste. "Why does it smell like beer in here?" Andrew burst out laughing. "Best question I've heard all day, Denise."

I shot him a look that could have frozen fire.

“Is there something I’m missing, Mr. Petterson?”

“Don’t look at me — ask your boss.” Andrew shrugged, the picture of innocence.

“You’d better get out of my office before I decide to fire you!”

“Oh, you beat me to it.” Andrew got to his feet, tossing Denise a shameless wink as she rolled her eyes at his antics.

“These are the files you needed from yesterday, sir.”

“Thank you, Denise. Just leave them there and get back to your tasks.” The moment she was out the door, I reached for my phone.

I called my lawyer and waited for him to pick up.

In the middle of our conversation, Andrew came back in — this time carrying three thick folders in different colors. I waved him toward the left drawer without paying much attention. Then he straightened up holding a small white box, and I frowned.

That was when it came back to me. Denise had mentioned a delivery that had arrived weeks ago, one I had never opened. I had forgotten it entirely.

“What’s this supposed to be?” Andrew asked again, and since curiosity had gotten the better of me too, I told my lawyer I would call him back.

I hung up and looked at Andrew, a mix of unease and puzzlement settling over me.

“I have no idea,” I said, shrugging.

“How long has it been sitting there?”

“About three weeks, I think. Denise mentioned it, but I never got around to opening it.”

That had been a deliberate choice. I had been convinced Sophia sent it, and the thought of what might be inside had terrified me. The idea kept circling in my head. What if it was her wedding ring?

“For God’s sake, Daniel. After three weeks you still haven’t bothered to open it? What if it’s a bomb or something that could go off?”

“Andrew, I’m not an idiot. I know what a bomb looks like. And if that box were dangerous, do you really think I’d let you stand there holding something that isn’t yours?”

He let out a long sigh, rolled his eyes, and set the box on the desk in front of me.

“Then open it and see what’s inside.”

Instead of picking it up, I slid it back toward him.

“You do it.”

He stared at me as though I had lost my mind.

“But you just said it isn’t mine.”

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“I know. Open it anyway.”

“Fine.”

Andrew took the small box and carefully removed the white wrapping. I looked away, refusing to watch, bracing myself for whatever was inside. The moment he spoke, I lifted my head.

“What the hell? A USB drive?”

“What did you say?”

He held up a small green object. I had heard him correctly. A USB drive. Relief washed through me when I realized it wasn't Sophia's ring — but confusion rushed in just as quickly to fill the space.

“Who on earth would send you a USB drive?”

It was exactly what I had been asking myself.

“Why don't we plug it in and see what's on it?” He started moving toward my laptop, but I stopped him at once. “No. Don't connect it to my computer. We have no idea whether it contains a virus or something that could compromise our network.”

“Then what do you suggest we do with it?”

“Take it straight to the IT department.”

Andrew's Point of View

"That filthy bastard!" Daniel shouted.

"Hey — where do you think you're going?" I grabbed Daniel by the arm and hauled him back inside the office before he could storm out.

"Let go of me, Andrew! I'm going to kill him! How dare he lay his hands on my wife!"

He was shaking with rage. The veins in his neck stood out and his eyes had a look in them that frightened me. He fought to break free, but I held on.

"Daniel, you need to calm down."

"Calm down? You want me to calm down? He tried to violate her!" he shouted. His eyes bore into me like a blade.

"I know. I saw it too. Believe me, I saw all of it. But you have to calm yourself and think before you do something you can't take back." I dragged him to a chair and forced him down into it.

Even so, the impact of what we had just seen had hit me hard as well. I had never seen him like this. The rage was shaking his entire body — his hands trembled, his eyes were bloodshot and burning with a fury that was genuinely frightening.

The USB drive had contained security footage from nearly seven years ago, recorded inside the De Luca residence. The timestamp alone was enough to turn my stomach.

The video showed Sophia arriving at the house and speaking with a middle-aged woman whom Daniel had identified as Layla Angeles. Nearly thirty minutes passed before the events of that day began to reveal themselves. Félix appeared, followed by another man, both of them pursuing Sophia through the sitting room. What came next pushed Daniel past his breaking point. He screamed, picked up two monitors, and hurled them to the floor.

“What are you doing?” I asked when he grabbed his phone. He didn’t answer — he was already dialing.

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I had no idea what was going through his head, but I was fairly certain I wasn’t going to like it.

“Find him.”

That was the first thing he said into the phone.

“I don’t care how you do it. Do exactly what I tell you and find him.”

"Find who?" I asked the moment he ended the call.

"The bastard. Who else would I mean?"

He headed for the door with me right behind him. When he stopped without warning, I walked straight into his back, and for a fraction of a second we were far too close.

"What the hell, Andrew?"

"I wasn't expecting you to stop dead like that."

He clicked his tongue with irritation. "Take the USB and lock it in the safe in my office."

"Understood." I patted my jacket pocket to show him I had it.

Daniel's Point of View

"Clear my entire schedule, Andrew," I ordered the moment we stepped back into my office.

“Where exactly are you going?” He paused midway, already turning toward the safe.

“I need to see her,” I said with finality, lifting my jacket from the back of the chair.

“But you told me she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

“I know. And if I have to get down on my knees to get five minutes with her, you can be certain I will.”

“All right.” He let out a long breath. “Just promise me you won’t do anything reckless.”

I stayed quiet, because I knew exactly what he was referring to. He had heard the call I made. I exhaled sharply. “I can’t make that promise.” I shook my head. “I’m not going to sit here with my arms folded. If I have to search every corner of Los Angeles — or the entire state of California — I will. I won’t stop until I find that bastard.”

The rage was still burning inside me, fed by the thought of what might have happened if he had gotten what he wanted, and by the certainty of what I would do the moment I came face to face with him again. And God help him if he ever puts his hands on my wife again.

Andrew kept talking, but his words faded to a distant murmur as I walked away, unable to hear anything beyond the fury hammering inside my head.

Daniel’s Point of View

“Craig,” I called out the moment I walked into the studio. He was standing in the center of the dance floor, fully absorbed in his students, giving instructions without even glancing my way.

“Craig.”

I raised my voice and tried again. This time he finally looked up. He frowned when he recognized me, excused himself from his students, and walked toward me with a puzzled expression.

“Mr. Kelley.” A polite smile crossed his lips. “If you’re here to see—”

“Where is Sophia?” I cut him off.

“That’s exactly what I was about to tell you before you interrupted me. She’s not here. In fact, she hasn’t been back since the day you followed her to the parking lot.”

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“I need to speak with her.”

He studied me for a moment, then sighed.

“Does it always start this way when you come here? Do you want to speak to her, or have you suddenly decided you need to speak to her?”

“Craig, please — this is important. I genuinely need to see her.”

He let out a short, tired laugh.

“I’m being straight with you, Mr. Kelley. She’s not here. I didn’t ask when she’d be back because she’s been under a great deal of pressure lately.” He raised an eyebrow. “If you’d like, you’re welcome to check her office yourself. She may have stopped by.”

And that was what I did. I went straight to Sophia’s office, only to find it empty. The room felt hollow and still, and its purple walls and decorations did nothing to warm it.

“Was she in there?” Craig asked when I came back out. I didn’t answer. Instead I sank into the nearest chair. He followed and stopped a few steps away, arms crossed over his chest.

“Why do you keep trying to see her? I thought everything between you two was already settled — the marriage, the arrangement, all of it.”

“This has nothing to do with that.”

“Then what? If it’s not about your arrangement, what do you want now?”

“It has to do with Félix De Luca.”

“No, no.” He raised both hands, cutting me off before I could go on — which caught me off guard. “I’m sorry, Mr. Kelley, but you should know that she has already stopped pursuing justice. She decided the fight was too much.”

“She can’t just walk away from this.”

“She did. She chose to stop living in the past and move forward with her life — alongside her mother and younger brother.”

“Wait — you know about her brother?” “Yes. How do you know about him?”

“It’s not something I can explain quickly, Craig.”

“Is it? Or is it that you were telling the truth when you said you hired a private investigator to look into her past?”

I let out a long sigh. I had no idea how to put any of this into words.

“You don’t have to explain yourself — please don’t force it, Mr. Kelley. What matters is that she’s doing well alongside her mother now.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“She really is. She finally feels comfortable being herself again. She learned to stop living in yesterday and to let go of the resentment she carried toward the people who hurt her, judged her, and spoke to her harshly.”

I looked away when he emphasized that last part.

“I crossed a line. I spoke without thinking, and I know my words cut her deeply. I regret it. I’m prepared to apologize for as long as it takes.”

He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “She’s safe, she’s happy, and she’s with her family now.”

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“What do you mean by that? I know her mother and brother were here. Her father is still in Italy,” I said, frowning.

“She left,” he said plainly. The answer only confused me further.

“What do you mean, she left?”

“She’s gone back to Italy — with her mother and her brother.”

“No.” The news hit me like a blow, and my eyes went wide. “She can’t go back to Italy.”

“And why not, Mr. Kelley? She was born there, and she’s free to return whenever she chooses.”

“I understand that, but Félix De Luca is also there—”

“Enough.” He raised a hand between us, stopping me mid-sentence. “As I already told you, she no longer wants anything to do with that case. What concerns her right now is her father’s condition — not that man. She’s not alone either; she has four bodyguards with her at all times, so you can stop worrying. It isn’t necessary.”

“I want to help her, Craig. I know what she went through. I found out the truth. He assaulted her seven years ago, and I won’t stand by knowing that. I want him to answer for what he did to her.”

The anger surfaced when I said De Luca’s name, but when I looked at Craig, his expression remained unreadable. A moment passed before he sighed.

“Are you serious, Mr. Kelley? What exactly do you believe you can offer someone who has already chosen to walk away from that fight?”

“Someone sent me a package a few weeks ago—”

“And how is that supposed to help my friend?”

“It’s a USB drive, Craig.”

“A USB drive?” A short, disbelieving laugh.

“Yes — it contains evidence of everything Félix did to her.”

“Wait, I don’t understand. You mean—”

“Security footage. From the night it happened.”

“When Sophia went to that house and—”

“Yes,” I answered with a nod when he couldn’t finish the thought.

“But who would send you something like that after seven years? Who would go to the trouble of holding onto that evidence all this time?”

“That question has not left me alone since the moment I saw it.”

“Let me see it.”

Without waiting for permission, he turned and walked directly into Sophia’s office, expecting me to follow.

A few minutes later.

“That disgusting bastard!”

He shouted it the moment the recording ended. It was his first reaction, raw and unfiltered.

“You’re right, Mr. Kelley. She can’t simply walk away from this. You have to find her. Go to Italy and show her the video. Even if she refuses to go after Layla, this is solid evidence that can be used against him.”

“I agree. It’s the only option left. I’ll go to Italy, stay close to her, and make sure she’s safe. And I swear to you, Craig, if he lays a hand on her again, I will kill him.”

He didn't respond immediately. Instead he rose, walked to the door, and for a second I thought the conversation was over — but he stopped before opening it and turned back to face me.

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"Are you absolutely certain that keeping her safe is the only thing you intend to do once you follow her to Italy, Mr. Kelley?"

"Yes, and I'll also help her pursue the case."

He studied me for a moment. "And what about how you feel about her?"

"What?" The question caught me off guard, and the words lodged in my throat.

"When are you going to say it out loud? When will you finally admit that you love her? Time moves faster than we think, Mr. Kelley. One day you'll wake up and find there's no longer room for hesitation. Don't wait for that day. Act now."

He moved toward the door, then stopped and turned once more. This time, there was a smile on his face.

“Tell her the truth. Let her see the parts of you that are afraid — the parts you hide, the words you’ve been holding back. Show yourself to her exactly as you are, and make a decision today. Waiting only leads to regret.”

I didn’t know how long I sat there after he left. The seconds and minutes blurred together before I realized the room had gone quiet. I blinked, took a slow breath, and reached over to Sophia’s computer. Carefully, I removed the USB drive.

He was right. The decision couldn’t wait any longer.

I had to face everything standing between us, because the truth was simple: I loved her. And I was not going anywhere. Not now. Not until she looked me in the eyes and told me she no longer loved me.

Sophia’s Point of View

Regret struck me without warning.

My gaze drifted to my father, seated quietly while my mother guided him toward me.

Two days had passed since we returned to the place we had once left behind. Calling it our old house no longer felt right — it had become home again. Seeing him there for the first time, all three of us had been speechless. He could no longer hold himself upright on his own; he sat in a cold metal chair with large wheels on either side. A wheelchair. Even now, that word felt unreal.

I had never imagined life would bend this way. I had never believed our family would reach this point. The man who had once commanded boardrooms, ruled our household, and raised us with an iron hand had become so fragile, so vulnerable. He now depended on the very people he had once pushed away.

The anger was still alive in me when my mother persuaded me to come with her. That old wound had never fully healed — time had closed it over, but left a scar. Seeing him again had torn it open.

Yet the moment I took in his condition, something shifted. I watched Steven accept his embrace without hesitation. I watched my mother collapse against his shoulder. All of it washed over me, and without warning, the weight I had carried for years simply loosened. The bitterness released its grip. What replaced it surprised me.

Chapter 438

For one brief moment, I felt as though I had slipped back into childhood — back to a time when my mother was still with us, when my father seemed invincible and warm, when our family was whole, with my brother at my side.

“I’m sorry for all the times I made you cry, my little girl.”

His voice broke through my thoughts, and I raised my hand to touch my own cheek. Only then did I realize it was wet. I had been crying without noticing, lost in memories of those distant days that still echoed far too loudly inside me.

“Belle, I’ll leave you two for a little while. I’m going to help Angie with dinner.”

I nodded and smiled softly. I watched my mother until she disappeared from the porch, then turned back to my father. Slowly, I guided his wheelchair to the wooden bench beside the railing.

“How are you feeling, Dad?” I asked, taking his right hand in both of mine.

He drew a long breath, then looked at me with a fragile smile that carried more sadness than warmth.

“I wanted to tell you how glad I am. Glad that you and your mother came back, and that your brother is here too.” His voice trembled and he paused.

“Dad?”

Instead of answering right away, he lifted his eyes to the night sky. The stars burned brightly, borrowing their glow from the moon, and I realized I couldn’t summon a smile that felt honest.

“I’m happy, Belle. So happy it frightens me. I don’t have much time left. Maybe months. Perhaps even less. And I don’t know how to show you how much I love you in whatever time remains. I regret every moment I wasn’t there for you. I became selfish. I turned into someone I no longer recognize, and—”

“Dad.”

I stopped him the moment his eyes filled with tears, because I couldn’t bear to watch him break apart any further.

That chapter was closed, and we were here now — together again, as a family. I told him it made more sense to look forward than to stir up moments that still hurt. I told him we would build new memories from this point on, and I refused to let him speak of leaving us.

“Belle—”

“No. From this moment on, you are not permitted to speak about your illness or what comes after. We are starting fresh as a family. You don’t have a choice in that. You will play the piano again. For me. For Mom. For Steven. That is an order. Do you understand?”

A soft laugh escaped him — one I recognized instantly. It was the same quiet laugh he used to give when I was small and he would gently correct the position of my fingers on the piano keys.

“And we are not going to reopen the past. We will talk only about our family — you, Mom, me, and Steven.”

“Of course. And once we’ve finished talking about family matters, we can move on to your love life.”

“Dad.”

My back straightened instinctively and my eyes went wide.

“Or perhaps your future married life?”

“Dad!”

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He simply shrugged and gave me that familiar smile — the one that used to make me want to disappear — and heat rushed to my cheeks.

“Why the hesitation? When were you going to tell me?” He clicked his tongue several times, clearly entertained. “I already know you’re married, Belle. Relax. Your old man isn’t offended that you kept it from him.”

“Dad?”

The moment he saw the color climbing into my face, he burst into laughter. All I could do was keep saying his name, which only made him laugh harder. I dropped my head in an attempt to hide my expression, which amused him even more.

“I want to meet him.”

“What?” I turned to him so fast I forgot to breathe. The seriousness of his expression made my stomach drop.

“Your husband. I want to meet the man you married, Belle.”

The words left me frozen. How was I supposed to explain the truth? That Daniel and I had been bound by necessity, not love. That Félix was at the center of everything. That the marriage was nothing more than a signed agreement, meant to end within the year.

“I’ll listen. And whatever your reasons for marrying him, I’ll understand them.”

I stared at him as though time had stopped. Somehow, he already seemed to know everything.

“Hmm... Dad...”

“Hmm?”

It had all started as a practical arrangement. I walked him through it step by step, but somewhere along the way, what I felt for Daniel simply slipped out.

He was quiet for a moment, and then he caught me completely off guard.

“You fell in love with him.”

I looked up, unable to say a word. He wasn't asking. He was stating it as fact, because he already knew.

A quiet laugh left him. "My little girl has grown up. I still remember when you were five years old and asked me what boyfriends were — and why your cousin had one and you didn't."

A smile found its way onto my face as those old moments came back to me.

"And here you are now. Married. It may have started as a marriage of convenience, but it's still a real marriage. And since you're in love, I don't need to explain why you never had a boyfriend. You already have a husband."

"Yes, I love him. But he doesn't feel the same way," I admitted quietly, lowering my head.

"What if he does? You decided he doesn't because that's what you've wanted to convince yourself of."

I shook my head, choosing not to mention Daniel's cutting words or the way he had judged me.

"I suppose that's all there is to it, Dad." Silence settled between us.

"Belle — the company has been sold."

“What? That quickly?”

“Yesterday I told you about the crisis and my intention to sell rather than let it fall into the hands of the De Lucas. This morning, Benjamin called me. Someone scheduled a meeting to sign the documents, and the money has already been transferred to my account.”

Chapter 440

Benjamin was his closest friend and most trusted assistant, which made the news all the more surprising.

I frowned as he spoke. Barely a full day had passed since the sale was made public. It wasn't a large company — it was barely keeping itself afloat — which made the sudden interest all the more baffling. I couldn't understand who would rush to buy a struggling business that was no longer turning a profit, let alone do it with such speed.

What possible plans could anyone have for a modest little sausage factory like ours?

When no logical answer came, I let out a slow breath and lifted my eyes to the sky, letting the uncertainty drift away without me.

Daniel's Point of View

“Daniel, are you completely certain this is a good idea?” Andrew asked through the phone.

“I’m already here. I’m in the Del Mundo lobby, at his company.”

“Well. All right. And what are you going to tell Sophia when she finds out what you’ve done?”

“I won’t hide any of it from her. I’ll tell her everything.”

“Good luck, then,” he said, and then added with exaggerated drama: “Not with her — with her father.” Andrew let out a ridiculous groan before laughing at his own joke.

He and I had taken the same flight to Italy, but I had sent him back to the hotel. This was a conversation I needed to have with Del Mundo alone.

“That’s enough, Andrew. You’re making everything worse,” I said, jaw tight.

“Can you believe it? The legendary Daniel Kelley is nervous about meeting his fake father-in-law.”

“You should start packing. Be ready to fly back to California tomorrow.”

“Oh no — you wouldn’t leave me behind like that. Ha. I know you care too much about me.”

I was about to respond when a movement caught my attention. A man was approaching from across the lobby, being pushed in a wheelchair by a private nurse. I straightened up the moment I recognized him.

“What do you mean by that—”

“I’m going to hang up. Talk later.” I ended the call before Andrew could say another word. I got to my feet as the man came to a stop a short distance from me. He appeared to be in his fifties.

At first glance, he reminded me of Sophia. The resemblance was unmistakable — even in the shape of his face — though his eyes were clearly his mother’s.

“Good morning, Mr. Del Mundo,” I greeted him with a warm smile and a slight inclination of my head.

“Good morning. And you are?”

“Daniel Kelley.”

“Good morning, Mr. Kelley. Do you speak Italian?”

“No, sir,” I admitted with an awkward smile.

“Then we’ll speak in Portuguese,” he replied naturally. A smile appeared on his face as he extended his hand. “Thank you for purchasing the company. I may not understand your reasons, but I’m grateful.”

He gestured for the nurse to wheel him toward the nearby sofa, then quietly asked her to leave us alone.