

A Favor 441

Chapter 441

“I apologize for receiving you like this,” he said in a lower voice once we were by ourselves. “I have stage-four lung cancer. Every day is a struggle just to move. I don’t want to leave this world without securing my family’s future.”

The shock ran through me and I very nearly let it show. I forced myself to stay composed — the last thing I wanted was to make him feel pitied or uncomfortable.

“Did you come alone?”

“My wife came with me. She just stepped away for a moment.”

I nodded politely and couldn’t help noticing how his expression softened the moment he mentioned her — warmth and quiet pride filling his face. It was exactly what I felt every time I introduced Sophia as my wife.

“You’re not Italian, are you?”

“No, sir. I’m American. From California.”

"I see," he replied, nodding thoughtfully. "Then let me ask you this. What made you interested in buying the company? It's no secret we've been struggling. Do you plan to keep things as they are, or do you intend to expand beyond the charcuterie business?"

"I have other plans."

"Hmm."

"My love."

A voice came from behind us, and we both turned. A woman was approaching, walking directly toward him without initially noticing me. The moment their eyes met, they shared a quiet, unhurried smile full of affection. I didn't know what had kept them apart all those years, but the way they looked at each other now made one thing plain: real love doesn't fade, and distance cannot break hearts that are meant to be together.

"Darling, I'd like you to meet the new owner of the company." He had barely finished the sentence before she stopped short at the sight of me.

"Mr. Daniel Kelley?"

"Good morning, ma'am," I said with a polite smile, uncertain what the appropriate greeting was in that moment.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, disbelief crossing her face as her eyes moved between us.

“Do you two know each other?” Mr. Del Mundo looked from me to his wife and back again, clearly confused. “My love, I was just about to introduce you. He’s the one who bought the company.”

“You’re the buyer?” Her eyes went wide as the realization settled. “Why would you do this, Mr. Kelley? What reason could you possibly have?”

“Wait a moment. Someone needs to explain this to me. How exactly do the two of you know each other?”

All attention turned to him.

“My love — the man who bought your company is also your son-in-law. He’s married to your daughter.”

The change in his expression was immediate, and what crossed his eyes was too layered to put into words.

“So you are my daughter’s husband?”

“Yes, sir,” I replied, meeting his gaze without flinching.

Silence took hold of the room. The only sound was his labored breathing, and I couldn't tell whether it came from shock or irritation.

"When I learned the company had been sold, I felt relief and grief at the same time. Relief, because my family wouldn't be left with that burden when I'm gone..."

"My love—"

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"It's true, my love. But I also failed you. I broke my promise. The company is no longer in my hands — it belongs to this man now. I don't particularly care what he plans to do with it, but since he is married to my daughter, I need to understand why he chose to buy it in the first place."

"Believe me or not, Mr. Del Mundo — my intention was to help."

"To help?"

I nodded once.

"We didn't ask for help, Mr. Kelley."

“Sir—”

“Then explain this to me. Because we both know you are not truly my son-in-law.”

His directness stopped me cold. He hadn’t softened the truth or dressed it up. In that moment, I finally understood where Sophia got her particular brand of honesty.

“My daughter told me everything. She said your marriage was built on an arrangement. That means there is no real obligation between you.”

“That’s true. We married under a contract meant to last one year. But somewhere along the way, I fell in love with her. I learned to love her.”

Both of them fell silent. A weighted look passed between them — wordless but full of meaning.

“Do you truly love her?”

“My feelings for your daughter are real, sir. I love her deeply.”

“Then why did she believe you didn’t return her feelings?”

“Because I never said it out loud. I never allowed myself to be honest. The truth is I was afraid. I acted like a coward, and in doing so, I hurt her.”

I stood from my seat and knelt in front of him. Surprise registered on both of their faces, but I pressed on.

“If you’ll allow it, sir, I want to make things right with your daughter. I want to stand by her side the way I should have from the beginning, and ask her to marry me — not as part of any arrangement, but as her husband. I cannot promise perfection. I will make mistakes. But I can promise to love her, to respect her, and to remain by her side for the rest of my life.”

“As her parents, nothing would make us happier than to see that happen, Mr. Kelley. But that decision isn’t ours to make. You’ll have to ask our daughter,” Mrs. Del Mundo said gently, resting a hand on my shoulder.

“Then tell me,” Mr. Del Mundo said slowly, his gaze steady on mine — serious, yet warm. “Did you truly buy my company just to win my daughter’s heart?”

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“No, sir!” I shook my head and looked him straight in the eye. “As I told you before, my intention is to help you both—you as well as my wife.”

“What are you getting at? We don’t ask for charity, Mr. Kelley!”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said with a sigh. I told him everything I had uncovered: the trouble with Sophia, every detail I had dug up about De Luca.

“Mr. Kelley...”

“Please, call me Daniel.”

“All right, Daniel. Sit up straight and listen: I have no interest in talking business anymore. The company is no longer mine—it’s yours, and you’re free to run it however you see fit. As for what happened between De Luca and my daughter, bringing it up again would only reopen old wounds. She has already been through hell, and I did nothing but make it worse. If you want my opinion, I’d rather we let the past stay buried and let her heal. That’s all she wants.”

“And what about Mr. De Luca? Are we going to let him get away with it after what he did?”

“We have no real proof. Seven years have passed—no one will believe us now.”

“Then let me handle it, sir.”

“What do you suggest we do?”

“I have solid evidence against him. All I need is your blessing to reopen the case, and I swear I’ll make sure he pays for what he did to my wife.”

“You’ll have to ask Belle about that, Daniel.”

“I will, sir.”

After exchanging a glance, Mrs. Del Mundo rose from her seat and sat down beside me. To my surprise, she reached out and took my hand.

“I don’t even know how to thank you for everything you’ve done and the way you care for our daughter. There’s only one thing I want to ask of you, Daniel.”

I waited, curious and a little nervous.

“Promise me you’ll love her and stay by her side for the rest of your days.” Then she let out a laugh, her eyes bright with warmth. “I know it’s no small request—especially considering how stubborn she can be at times!”

Her candor made me laugh too.

“You needn’t worry about my feelings for Belle, Mrs. Del Mundo. I know she’s stubborn, and more than a little headstrong, but I’ve never been more certain of anything than of loving her. If she’ll have me, I’ll marry her that very instant. I’ll keep her so close she won’t have any reason to complain.”

We all laughed, Mr. Del Mundo included.

“Why don’t you join us for dinner tonight, Daniel?”

“Sir?” The invitation caught me off guard. I hadn’t expected it at all.

“Yes, why don’t you stay for dinner tonight so we can talk to her about her plans?” Mrs. Del Mundo chimed in, her voice warm and welcoming.

“It would be a pleasure, ma’am. Thank you.”

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Sophia’s Point of View:

“Do you need help with anything, Mom?” I asked as I walked into the kitchen, thinking she’d already started making dinner.

“No, sweetheart. Angie and I have everything under control.” She looked up with a smile, picked up a sandwich from the counter, and handed it to me.

“Thanks, Mom—but are you sure you don’t need help?”

“No! Go upstairs and get ready. We’re having guests tonight.”

“Guests?” I repeated, chewing the sandwich she’d given me.

“That’s right, so take your time and get yourself ready, Ysabelle.”

I frowned. “Wait, who’s coming? Why do I have to get dressed up?”

“Just trust me, sweetheart. You’ll meet them soon enough.”

I wanted to argue, but she was already halfway to the door, tossing one last instruction over her shoulder. “Come on, get ready and make yourself pretty!”

She stopped, as if remembering something important, then turned back with a searching look. “Tell me honestly—do you still love him?”

“Mom? What do you mean?”

“Your husband. Do you still love him?”

“Mom, why are you asking me about him now?”

“I just want to understand, that’s all.” She gave a light shrug, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. “You never explained to me why you decided to leave him.”

My gaze dropped to my hands, fidgeting nervously in my lap.

“Well? Do you still love him?”

“We broke up. I told you before, it was never anything more than an arrangement...”

“That’s not what I asked you, Belle. Do you still love him?”

A heavy sigh escaped me, and at last I nodded.

“I never stopped, Mom. I tried to move on, but it’s almost impossible. No matter how many times I tell myself to let him go, my heart refuses to listen.”

“And if he showed up and told you he felt the same, would you give him another chance?”

For a moment, I couldn't find my words. Then I let out a small laugh. "You know, you're the fifth person to ask me that lately."

"And what did you tell them?"

"That it's impossible." I shrugged, forcing a small laugh. "If he'd ever felt the same about me, he would have told me long ago."

"And if he showed up and confessed that he still loves you?"

"Mom, I already told you—that's the last thing he'd ever do."

"Why not? When a man truly loves, he's capable of moving mountains for the woman who means everything to him."

I couldn't help but laugh. "Mom, those fairy-tale lines don't suit him at all. Besides, we're in Italy, not in a fairy tale."

"And what if we are?"

“When we lived together, I left home for two whole weeks. I stayed at Bryan’s, and he never came looking for me—he didn’t even call. And now you think he’d get on a plane and travel for twenty hours just to tell me he loves me? Please, Mom... I’d rather lock myself in my room and play the guitar all day than start believing in impossible things.”

“But Belle...”

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“And Mom, even if by some miracle you were right and he really did feel the same, I couldn’t accept it.”

“Why not?”

“Because we were never meant for each other. For a relationship to last, you need more than love—you need trust and real communication. That’s what makes it strong, what holds it together. But what we had was only love, and nothing more.”

For a while, neither of us said anything. In the end, she left my room, insisting once more that I stay put and make myself pretty before the guests arrived.

I looked at myself in the mirror and offered a small smile. Maybe I wasn’t beautiful to the man I loved, but I was beautiful in my own way—and that was enough.

Sophia’s point of view:

“What’s wrong? Why have you stopped there?”

My brother’s voice sounded puzzled as he saw me standing motionless at the top of the stairs. A familiar scent drifted up to me, rattling my nerves and making my heart race. No, it couldn’t be...

“I’m fine. Did you change your cologne?”

“No, I’m wearing the same as always. Why?” He stepped closer and offered me his shirt as proof.

“It’s nothing. I just thought I smelled something familiar, that’s all.” I shrugged, trying to play it down.

“Maybe it’s one of our guests. I heard they just arrived.”

“Already? I had no idea they were here.”

“Yeah, they’re in the dining room, waiting. And guess what: I heard one of them is the guy who bought Dad’s company.”

“Really?” The news caught me off guard.

Curiosity took hold of me, stirring up a desire to meet the mysterious new owner.

I headed toward the kitchen, and my brother followed. For some reason, my heart pounded harder with every step that brought me closer to the dining room.

“Ow, Sophia! Why did you stop dead like that?” My brother rubbed his chin, still wincing from banging it against the back of my head. I’d felt the impact too, but I was too dazed to move or even apologize.

There, sitting in our dining room, was the last person I expected to see: Daniel Kelley. He was across from my mother, laughing easily with my father and Andrew, while Angie, our housekeeper, chimed into the conversation from my mother’s side.

“There you are... What happened to you, son?” Mom started to greet us, but she stopped when she noticed the annoyed look on my brother’s face.

“Sophia stopped all of a sudden in the middle of the hallway and I hit my chin on the back of her head!” he complained, in the tone of a spoiled child.

“Oh, you poor thing, come here,” Mom said, pulling him toward her while the rest of the table burst out laughing.

But laughter was the last thing on my mind. I stood rooted to the floor, unable to look away from the man who could steal my breath with a single glance. The noise around me faded away. All I could focus on was how my heart hammered against my chest when Daniel's eyes met mine.

What was he doing here? Had he really bought my father's company? Why would he do that? My thoughts swirled, confused, as I tried to make sense of it all.

"Belle, come on, we've saved you a seat next to your father."

"Huh?" I murmured, snapping back to reality when I felt my mother's hand squeeze my arm.

"Come sit down, dear. Dinner's about to be served."

Mom guided me gently toward my seat, but when I saw it was between Dad and Daniel, I stopped short and insisted on sitting beside her.

Even so, the moment I settled into the chair, regret washed over me. Daniel was directly across from me, leaving me no possible escape.

My father sat at the head of the long table, with my mother to his left and Steven to his right. I ended up next to my mother, with Angie on the other side. Daniel was across from me, and Andrew beside him.

Daniel's gaze fixed on me the instant I sat down. I wanted to greet Andrew, to do something normal, but the words wouldn't come. Tense and silent, I waited for my father to speak first.

"Belle, aren't you going to say hello and introduce us to our guests this evening?"

I blinked, looking at my father, caught off guard. "Dad?" I asked, not understanding what he expected me to say.

He smiled, and his tone turned playful. "And why did you decide to sit next to your mother instead of beside your husband, dear?" He winked at me.

His words made my eyes go wide. I turned to Daniel, my heart racing.

"I... I thought you'd introduce the guests," I stammered, unable to look away from him as he watched me with an unreadable expression.

"Well, I'm sure you already know that the man sitting across from you is the new owner of our company. There's hardly any need for introductions tonight."

My confusion only grew. "Then why are you asking me to introduce him if everyone already knows who he is?"

“Because you know him better than any of us. Besides, aren’t you going to introduce your husband to your father?” Dad pressed, staring straight at me.

“Dad?” The word escaped me in a whisper, disbelief written all over my face.

“I told you I wanted to meet your husband...” But before he could say any more, I cut him off.

“Excuse me, can I speak with you for a moment in private?” I asked, standing up and addressing Daniel.

“Ysabelle, whatever it is, you can talk about it later. Sit down now and let’s have dinner.”

“I’m sorry, Mom, I’m not hungry anymore.”

Andrew watched with wide eyes, letting out a sigh.

“All right...”

“Come with me,” I said to Daniel, and without waiting for his answer, I headed toward the living room, ignoring the stares that trailed after us.

“Ysabelle...”

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“It’s fine, sweetheart, let them talk,” my father replied, reaching out to squeeze my mother’s hand, signaling her to let us go.

The moment we reached the living room, I snapped, “What the hell are you doing here...?”

But before I could finish, his lips caught mine in a kiss that was soft and demanding, so hungry it left me breathless.

His hand slid around my waist, pulling me firmly against his body. Part of me wanted to push him away, but my body refused to obey and surrendered to the heat of his kiss. The world spun around me and my heart melted at the feel of his desperate lips claiming mine, as if he feared I’d vanish the moment he let go.

Suddenly my knees buckled and I nearly fell, but he held me steady, guiding my arms up around his neck.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered between kisses, in a voice so low I thought I’d imagined it.

“God, I’ve missed you more than words can say,” he murmured. Then he pulled back just enough to press his lips to my forehead.

This caught me by surprise. I remembered why I'd dragged him here: not to lose myself in his arms, but to demand answers. Forcing myself to take a breath, I stepped back and slapped him.

I felt ridiculous, like a scene out of a movie: the damsel in distress, breathless from the kiss, comes to her senses just in time to slap the hero she'd just surrendered to.

If this had been any other moment, I probably would have burst out laughing at the panic in his eyes; maybe I would have thrown myself at him and kissed him over and over. But that wasn't us, not anymore.

"Why are you here? What are you doing in my house?" I asked, in the coldest tone I could manage.

"Please, darling, just let me explain." He tried to come closer, but I took a step back.

"Darling?" I let out a dry laugh. "Do you even hear yourself, Daniel Kelley?" I went on.

"All right, Sophia, just listen to me. I owe you the truth, please, listen."

I scoffed and crossed my arms, speaking sarcastically. "Of course, Mr. Kelley, do explain! Why did you buy my father's company? And what the hell got into your head to introduce yourself as my husband in front of my entire family?"

“Because I am. I’m your husband...”

“No! We’re only pretending, remember? In case you’ve forgotten, let me remind you: this marriage was just an arrangement, nothing more. We made it clear there were no strings attached!”

“Then to hell with our arrangement!”

His sudden outburst caught me off guard.

“And to hell with anyone who says we’re not a real couple. We stood at that altar, Sophia. We signed that contract and sealed it with a kiss. Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten. Or do you need me to kiss you again to refresh your memory?”

I clenched my jaw, glaring at him with a look that could cut steel.

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“You still haven’t answered me! Why did you buy my father’s company, Daniel? What are you trying to prove here? Wasn’t it enough to hurl your words, your judgments, and your insults at me? Did you have to show off by buying my family’s business too? Are you trying to prove your power to me? Or are you just trying to rub salt in the wound?”

“Sophia, I swear that was never my intention when I stepped in...”

“Please, Daniel. Honestly, I don’t care what drove you to do this. What matters now is that you back off and leave my family out of your plans.”

“I told you that’s not why I did it!”

“Then why? What could possibly justify all of this?”

“I wanted to help. I wanted to keep your father’s company and your family afloat.”

I laughed; it was a sharp, hollow laugh. We both knew that wasn’t the truth.

“Nobody here is asking for your help, Daniel. And for God’s sake, can’t you see my father is ill? Please, don’t give him false hope and don’t make him think we’re still together. They already know what’s really going on, so I’m begging you: stop pretending and go back to Los Angeles.”

“I’m not pretending, Sophia. I just want to help. Everything I told your father came from the heart.”

“Oh, really? And what exactly did you tell him?”

“That I’d be by your side and take care of you for as long as I live.”

I stared at him for a long moment before letting out a laugh, unexpected and a little bitter.

“Have you completely lost your mind, Mr. Kelley? First you go behind my back and buy my father’s company, then you parade around as my husband without telling me, and now you spout this nonsense!”

“Call it whatever you want, but the truth is that from this moment on I won’t leave your side. I’ll stick to you like a sticker, no matter how hard you try to get rid of me.”

For a moment I was so thrown by the turn our conversation had taken that I didn’t even know what to say.

“Let me help you reopen the case.” He turned serious and looked me straight in the eyes.

“What case?”

The silence between us stretched out, the tension thick in the air as I waited for the bomb he was about to drop.

“The case you filed against Félix De Luca seven years ago.”

There it was, the explosion I’d been bracing for. Not because he’d brought it up, but because it forced me to remember all the terrible things he’d said the last time we talked about it.

“Wait, let me get this straight,” I said, my voice heavy with disbelief. “Are you telling me this whole helping thing is about reopening that case?”

He started to answer, but I stopped him, pressing the palm of my hand against his cheek.

“I remember hearing you say you didn’t care about any of that. That you didn’t believe me, that I was nothing but a slut for sleeping with my ex-fiancé’s friend before our wedding. So what’s with this sudden change of heart, Daniel? Why help me now?”

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“I need to say this. I was wrong. I didn’t see the whole picture and I judged you unfairly. I acted like an idiot and I’m sorry.”

“Now you’re apologizing? Do you really think saying sorry can undo what you did to me?”

“I know it can’t. But I still had to say it.”

“Then drop it already and leave us in peace. I don’t want your help. My family doesn’t need it either. What happened back then is behind me now, and I’ve already buried it. Do you have any idea what I’m trying to erase from my life right now?”

He looked at me, devastation written across his face.

“You.”

“No.” He moved toward me, but the look I shot him made him stop instantly.

By that point, I had forced myself to forget even the details of his face.

“Sophia.”

“Craig was right. The past should stay where it is, and nothing we do now can change it. Don’t drag me back into that darkness, Daniel. If Félix wants to live however he pleases, let him. All I care about is that he stays away from me.”

I turned to leave, but suddenly he grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the stairs.

“What the hell are you doing, Daniel?” I demanded, startled. I tried to break free, but his grip was iron, immovable.

“Tell me where your room is. I think it’s about time you saw this.”

Oh, God.

My eyes went wide at his words. What exactly was he planning to show me? Was he really about to...?

Absolutely not!

My heart hammered in my chest as he dragged me down the hallway, never loosening his hold on my arm. Before I knew it, we'd reached the top of the stairs and were already halfway to my room.

"Sophia, just trust me. I need to show you something important. Once you see it, you'll understand."

For God's sake, what could it be? Some kind of trophy? A secret? His... naked body?

He didn't need any directions; he stopped right in front of the matte pink door, the one to my room.

"Go in. Let me show you."

"No! If you want to show me your thing, I don't want to see it!"

"What?" He stopped with his hand on the doorknob and turned to face me, genuinely confused. "What do you mean, your thing?"

"I don't want to see that of yours!" I let out a frustrated groan and pointed my finger at his crotch.

His jaw dropped in surprise, but then he burst out laughing, almost doubling over as he clutched his stomach and tried to catch his breath.

"So this whole time I was dragging you down the hallway, you thought I wanted to show you my 'thing'?" He practically sang the word, drawing it out just to tease me.

"Well, yeah! You said you had to show me something important!"

He grinned, biting his lip, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

"I never realized you spent so much time fantasizing about my body, sweetheart, especially my thing." His tone was dripping with sarcasm.

"Excuse me..."

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He leaned forward and lowered his voice to a husky whisper. "In case you didn't know, all you have to do is ask. Just say the word and I'll give you a night you'll never forget."

He took my hand and pressed it against his chest, with a smile full of mischief and passion.

“What’s wrong with you, Daniel? You’re shameless, arrogant, and completely disgusting!” I yanked my hand back as if it had been burned.

“Why? What’s the problem? We’re married, aren’t we? Isn’t this normal between husband and wife?”

I rolled my eyes and shoved him. “Enough already! Seriously, you’re insufferable and a total pervert!”

“Sweetheart, you’re the one who thought about my ‘thing’ in the first place.”

His laughter only grew louder as my glare intensified.

“I told you I had to show you something important, but I never said it had anything to do with my ‘cucumber.’” He shot me a smug grin before flinging the door open and pulling me inside.

“I need to use your computer,” he said, closing the door behind us.

That’s when the worst thought occurred to me.

“Oh my God, Daniel Kelley! Don’t tell me you’re going to put on porn, you pervert!”

“For God’s sake, Sophia Ysabelle Kelley!” He looked at me in disbelief, a mix of horror and exasperation on his face. “What kind of person do you think I am? I don’t want to show you anything like that!”

The way he said my name sent a shiver through me, even though I wanted to strangle him.

What is wrong with me?

“Honestly, where do you get these ideas?” He shook his head, looking at me as if I’d grown a second head. “You’re driving me crazy.”

He crossed over to my desk, opened my laptop, and for a moment I thought he was finally going to drop the whole thing, but then his words caught me off guard.

“You have no idea how much I’ve wanted to touch you, to make you mine. But I always held back, because I know you’re not ready and I never want to push you into anything you don’t want. Still, God, your lips and your wild imagination are going to be the death of me.”

“Excuse me, sir, I haven’t done anything to you.” I masked my nervousness by staring straight at him, lifting my chin and arching an eyebrow in defiance.

He growled and ran a hand through his hair. "Honestly, I need you to sit in that chair, my love, before I lose control and pounce on you."

He gestured for me to take a seat in front of my laptop.

"What's going on?" I asked, finally settled into the chair.

He let out a slow sigh, and his playful mask vanished, replaced by a somber look.

"I know you said you didn't want to go back to the past or reopen the case, but I need you to watch this video. Maybe it'll change your mind. And if it does, I promise I'll be with you every step of the way. Whatever you need, I'll help you get through it."