

A Favor 461

Chapter 461

A bitter laugh escaped me as I shook my head and pulled my hand away from his. "I've already said those words to you, Daniel. Don't you remember? But you rejected me. You told me I didn't know what it meant to love and not to say it to you again."

"I'm sorry, my love. It was just jealousy, nothing more."

I blinked, taken by surprise. Jealousy?

"I thought you still cared about him. I let myself believe you'd married me just to get his attention. I convinced myself you'd leave the moment our arrangement ended and go running back into his arms."

"For God's sake, Daniel...", I began, but he cut me off.

"I know, I know. I was wrong. I let my insecurities take over. I didn't give you the chance to explain. I didn't listen..."

"No, you never did. Not once. I tried to tell you the truth and you never let me."

"You're right. And I'm sorry for all of it." He looked at me, his eyes shining with regret. "Please, can you forgive me? I want to make things right."

He squeezed my hand and, his voice trembling, said, "Marry me, Sophia. Let's start from scratch. Let me be your husband for real this time. We can build something new together, the way it always should have been."

"We have nothing to start over, Daniel," I said quietly, pulling my hand away once more. "There was never a beginning for us. We never really existed as a couple."

"But I love you..."

"I know," I answered, my voice soft but unshakable. "But love alone isn't enough. A real relationship needs attention, time, and patience. It needs trust. It's not just about feeling something."

My smiling expression turned sad. "And between us there's only love. All the other pieces, the trust, the patience, the understanding, all of that is missing."

Daniel leaned in, hope shining in his eyes. "But can't we build those things, Sophia? Can't we start from love and make something real together?"

"We can't, Daniel."

"Why not? I thought you loved me, Sophia."

"I can help you with that, Sophia."

"No. I have to do it on my own. If things go well, maybe I'll be the one to come find you. But for now, we need to live our own lives. I can't stay with you until I figure out who I am, until I feel whole again."

"But, Sophia, we..."

"Thank you for today. And thank you for the cake. I need to go home, Dad's waiting for me."

"Let me go with you. I want to see him too." Daniel stood up at the same time I did, determination still shining in his gaze.

I nodded, and together we left the café.

Neither of us spoke during the drive home. The silence between us was thick, full of unspoken words. He kept his attention on the road and I watched the world blur past outside the window.

When we finally reached home, a sense of unease settled over my chest. We barely had time to get out of the car before Angie came running toward the gate, holding a bag and some of my father's belongings.

“Angie, what’s wrong? Where are you taking Dad’s things?” I asked as alarm surged inside me, running to meet her with Daniel right behind me, my heart pounding.

She stopped, her face bathed in tears, startled to see us there.

“Hey, Angie, why are you crying? What happened? Where’s my mother?” My voice trembled as fear crept down my spine, cold and sharp.

She tried to answer, but her words broke apart between sobs. “He... your father....” She gasped for breath and couldn’t finish.

“What’s wrong with Dad? Tell me what happened, please.” I grabbed her by the shoulders, gripping them harder.

“We had to take him to the hospital about an hour after you left.”

I felt everything around me collapse for a moment. “Oh my God,” I exclaimed, as the news left me frozen.

“Let’s go.” Daniel’s voice cut through my panic, his warm hand on my shoulder. When I turned, he took my hand, and his grip anchored me. “We have to get to the hospital,” he said gently, guiding me back to the car.

I nodded, unable to speak, and he opened the passenger door for me.

“Get in, Angie,” he called, holding the back door open as she hurried inside, clutching Dad’s things.

Daniel slid behind the wheel and, as the car sped off, I closed my eyes. Silent prayers slipped from my lips, lost in the flood of tears streaming down my face.

Why did life keep bringing me so much pain? Why did the suffering never stop?

Daniel rested his hand on my knee. When I looked at him, his eyes met mine, gentle but firm, before returning to the road.

“We’ll get through this, Sophia,” he said quietly, tracing slow, steady circles with his thumb to comfort me.

I nodded again, my throat too tight to speak. I leaned my head against the seat, closed my eyes, and let myself drift between hope and fear.

Everything happened very fast once we reached the hospital. The next thing I remember, I was standing beside my father’s bed, with the whole family gathered around, and the air heavy with grief.

“Be... Belle. Da... Daniel....” His voice was barely audible; he strained with great effort just to speak.

I rushed to his side, taking his frail hand, my face bathed in tears and marked by exhaustion.

“Dad....” My voice broke as he wiped my tears away with trembling fingers.

“Look at me, my Beleza.”

I looked at him with my swollen eyes, searching for strength in his gaze as he squeezed my hand with what little energy he had left.

“Don’t cry, my little one. This isn’t goodbye. I’ll always watch over you. I love you, my Belle.”

“I love you too, Dad. So much. Please, don’t go....” Fresh sobs shook me as I pressed his cold hand against my cheek.

“Da... Daniel...”

“Sir?” My voice trembled. I could feel his presence behind me.

“Just... call me Dad, son.”

“Dad.”

He took Daniel’s hand, and I stepped aside so he could come closer to the bed.

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“You made me a promise, son. I want you to take care of my girl when I’m gone.”

“I will, Dad, I promise.” I looked at Daniel, who nodded and gave my father a soft smile.

“Love her and don’t give up, no matter what happens. She can be stubborn, but she’s very tender-hearted.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but Daniel shook his head and signaled for me to hold back.

“I swear I’ll never give up on her, no matter how hard things get, Dad. She’s everything to me. I love her and that will never change.”

“Thank you, son.”

Those words hung in the air as his eyes closed. The only sound left was the flat tone of the machine beside him.

“Dad!”

Steven and I cried out in unison, but my mother kept her composure. I wrapped my arms around him, weeping silently. Angie stood behind her, sobbing quietly too.

Daniel’s hand settled on my waist before he pulled me into a tight embrace.

He didn’t say a word. He just held me against his chest and softly kissed my head.

A moment later, three nurses came into the room. They began disconnecting the tubes from my father’s lifeless body. We stepped out, leaving them to do their work.

Time lost all meaning for me after that. I didn’t know how long we were at the hospital, everything felt like a blur. I couldn’t even remember how we managed to get home, carrying my father’s ashes. His wish was clear: he didn’t want any ceremony, neither at our house nor at the chapel.

Through all of it, Daniel never left my side. When I headed to the music room instead of my bedroom, he followed silently.

He sat beside me on the piano bench. "Sophia, why don't you rest for a while?"

"I'm not tired." I pressed my fingers against the ivory keys. "He gave me this piano when I turned eight. It was the first thing he taught me to play."

Daniel leaned in and wiped away the tears I hadn't realized were running down my face.

"Come on, sweetheart. I'll take you to bed. You need to rest."

Without saying anything, I nodded and followed him.

"Are you leaving already?" I asked as he quietly headed toward the door. He'd waited until I was under the covers and only got up to leave when he thought I'd fallen asleep.

"I thought you'd sleep better if I gave you a little space."

I pushed the blanket aside and sat up. "Would you stay tonight? I don't know why, but I feel safer with you here."

"Sophia..."

“Please? Just for tonight.” I kept my voice soft.

“All right.” He let out a sigh and nodded, giving in. “Do you have an extra blanket somewhere?”

Confusion crossed my face as I looked at him.

“What do you need another blanket for?” I raised my eyebrows in curiosity.

He glanced at the sofa and pointed. “I thought I’d sleep over there tonight.”

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A teasing smile tugged at my lips. “And who said you had to sleep on the sofa?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Then where do you expect me to sleep?”

“Right here, in the bed.” I patted the spot beside me and smiled.

“Sophia, are you serious?” I almost laughed at how he tried to hold back his own laughter. He was struggling not to smile. What a goof.

“Of course I’m serious. Relax, Mr. Kelley. I promise I’ll keep my hands to myself.”

“That’s a shame, Mrs. Kelley. I was hoping you’d do the opposite.” He shook his head, laughter in his eyes.

“Daniel!” I shouted and threw a pillow at him. He dodged it easily, still laughing.

“Okay, I was just kidding.” Daniel picked up the pillow and sat down beside me.

“If you change your mind in the middle of the night, you know where to find me,” he added, throwing me a wink to top it off.

I rolled my eyes and replied, “Just get some sleep, Daniel.” I couldn’t help smiling as I said it.

Several minutes passed as we lay silently side by side, but I couldn’t fall asleep. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, trying not to get caught, and saw him staring at the ceiling, lost in thought. Wanting to break the silence just to hear his voice, I let out a sigh and kept my eyes fixed on him. In the end, I turned over, unable to calm my restlessness.

A heavy frustration weighed on me. I wished I knew what to do next. His closeness stirred a jumble of emotions in me that I couldn’t describe. I desperately wanted to fall asleep, but sleep wouldn’t come. And I also wanted to talk to him, to hear anything he might say, but the words wouldn’t come out.

Tossing and turning, I kept shifting positions, searching for comfort. I didn't realize he'd been watching me the whole time.

"Sweetheart, are you planning to rehearse a dance routine in this bed or are you going to try to sleep?"

"No!" I blurted.

"Really? I've lost count of how many times you've turned over trying to get comfortable. Maybe you should take a bow."

"I can't help it. I just can't sleep," I grumbled, flopping onto my back as I rubbed my forehead in frustration.

"Is it my fault? Am I keeping you awake?" He turned toward me.

"Maybe a little." I nodded, looking at him.

"If that's the case, I can move to the sofa."

"No." I grabbed his arm before he could get up. "Just stay here. Please."

The room fell silent. For a while, neither of us spoke. Then a childhood memory surfaced and a smile spread across my lips.

“Teddy bear.”

He turned his head to look at me, curiosity lighting up his face. “What was that? Did you say something?”

He moved a little closer, curiosity in his voice. “What are you thinking about?”

“You just said something.”

Turning to face him, I answered, “Teddy bear. Do you remember?”

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He tilted his head, playing along. “And does a teddy bear ring any bells for you?”

“Yes.” A smile spread across my face. “One night, after I’d had too much to drink, a very familiar teddy bear stayed with me until I fell asleep.”

“Oh, really? Are you telling me a man held you all night?”

“He wasn’t just any man; after all, he was only a teddy bear.” My smile widened as I watched him try to keep a straight face.

“Teddy bear, huh?” He lowered his voice, almost a whisper.

“Would you mind being my teddy bear again tonight?”

At first, his eyes clouded with confusion, but the smile he tried to hide quickly gave him away.

“You realized it was me the whole time?”

I nodded.

“Even if I’d been asleep, I would have known it was you. I’d recognize your cologne anywhere, even after a few drinks.”

He didn’t answer right away. Instead, he lifted his hand and gently brushed my cheek with his fingertips. I leaned into his touch, unable to hold back my question any longer.

“Could you be my teddy bear again tonight? Just for tonight.” My voice was barely above a whisper, full of hope.

Silence stretched between us. His lack of response made my heart sink, so I forced a small smile and tried to act like it was nothing. "Forget what I said. Good night..."

"Come here," he said softly.

Surprise flickered in my eyes when he opened his arms and guided my head toward his chest. Then he pulled me toward him, sliding my hand across his back while his own arm settled around my waist, anchoring me.

"I'll be your teddy bear whenever you need me, sweetheart."

I closed my eyes and let myself drift to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat. He gave me a soft kiss on the forehead, and I felt warmth blossom there as I held him tighter, breathing in his comforting scent.

Snuggling closer, I whispered, "Good night, my teddy bear."

I felt his smile against my skin, and his lips lingered there for a moment before he murmured, "Good night, love."

Sophia's point of view:

Every step I took toward the entrance of Bologna's public hospital sent a fresh pang through my heart. Barely an hour earlier, I'd been out shopping when a call from the hospital interrupted my day. A patient had asked to see me specifically.

For a moment, uncertainty kept me rooted to the spot. But the instant I learned he had survived a stroke and spent months in a coma, something shifted inside me. After everything that had happened, and with his son sentenced to life in prison for a long list of crimes, including what he did to me, I felt that coming was the right thing to do. Maybe this was the moment I'd been putting off for far too long.

"Sophia Del Mundo?" a nurse asked from the front desk, looking up.

"That's me. Here's my ID." I handed it over without hesitation.

"Come with me, please."

"Thank you."

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Her smile was fleeting, so I returned one just as fleeting.

Seven years... That was how long it had been since my life was turned upside down. Seven years since the last time I saw the father of the man who haunted my dreams and left me scars I could never fully erase.

“This is his room.”

“Thank you.”

“If you have any questions about his health, press the call button. I’ll be nearby.”

I nodded before she went back to her post, leaving me standing in front of the one door I had never wanted to open. Nicholas De Luca’s name was embossed on the plate, and seeing it sent a chill through me.

Instead of knocking, I grabbed the handle and pushed the door open.

Seeing him there, laid out in the hospital bed, took my breath away. His condition was far worse than my father’s. Nicholas De Luca... he was the most manipulative and selfish man I had ever known. Even now, with his face almost as pale as the sheets covering him, I couldn’t feel a shred of pity. No matter how weak or close to death he seemed, I could see him as nothing but a monster.

A colder version of me would have ended it all right then and there. I could have smothered him with a pillow or simply unplugged the machines keeping him alive and stayed to watch him die. The thought crossed my mind, chilling in its clarity.

But that wasn’t me... A heart still beat in my chest, a heart that wouldn’t let me cross that line.

“Be... Belle?”

I took a deep breath and looked at him head-on. “Nicholas De Luca.” My voice came out flat, devoid of emotion.

He made a weak attempt to sit up, but the tube in his mouth stopped him, so he settled for turning his head to fix his eyes on mine.

“How have you been, Be... Belle?”

I ran a hand over my head in frustration as I stared at him, a cold smile on my lips.

“You’re really asking me that, Nicholas? After everything you and your son did, while you’ve been free for seven years and I lived with the nightmare you made of my life, and now my father is gone. You want to know how I am? What do you think?”

“What? Your father... is dead?”

A bitter laugh escaped me. I blinked hard, fighting the burning in my eyes. “That’s right. He’s no longer with us. He died two weeks ago. Do you want to know why? Stage four lung cancer. If you hadn’t destroyed my life, if my family hadn’t fallen apart, maybe I could have found out sooner. Maybe I could have helped him. But you stole that from me too.”

Anger tightened every muscle in my body as I shouted, my hands clenched into fists.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know he was sick..."

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"You're sorry? And if you had known, what then? Would you have come down from your pedestal to help? You wouldn't have... Don't pretend you'd have acted any differently. Don't insult me by pretending you care..."

My voice trailed off when I saw tears rolling down his cheeks... For a moment, I was stunned... was he really crying?

"I'm so sorry... Belle. I apologize for everything, on behalf of my son..."

"No... You still can't accept the truth about your son, can you? Even now, you want to shield him from the consequences of his own actions... I think you should hear the truth from his own mouth..."

"I know..."

"You know he's already been sentenced, don't you?"

His expression crumbled as he nodded slowly, closing his eyes as if the weight of it were too much to bear.

“Belle... can I ask you something?”

I raised an eyebrow before I could stop myself. “Do you really think you have the right to ask me for anything?”

“I know I don’t deserve it. After everything we’ve done... I have no right... But this is the only thing I’ll ask of you... Please... Tell my son I love him.”

A snort of disbelief escaped my throat. “I’m not your messenger. Don’t you dare ask me for favors.”

His eyes pleaded with me. “I’m begging you... Belle. Please... Tell him how sorry I am for all the years he felt alone... Tell him I loved him, even though I never knew how to show it. Tell him that loving him was the one thing I never regretted... and that he was the greatest gift of my life...”

“Why are you saying this? Why don’t you go and tell him yourself, to his face?”

“I can’t... I don’t have much time left... And I don’t want him to remember me like this...”

“Wait... What do you mean you don’t have time left?”

“I’m dying, Belle...”

Those words drained the strength from me. They echoed with the same finality I had heard in my father’s voice when he called me that afternoon in Los Angeles.

How many more times would I have to endure this kind of pain? How many more times must I carry the weight... of someone else’s final confession?

I sank into the chair behind me, feeling my energy suddenly give out.

“The day I found out he was into drugs, I tried to set him straight... but I failed... I’ll never forget the afternoon I came home and saw you running down the stairs... In that moment I knew... that something terrible had happened. I saw it in his face and in your torn clothes...”

“So you knew everything? And you just stood by and let it happen?”

He looked away, his eyes full of regret... “I was desperate... He knelt down and called me ‘Dad’ for the first time in years... That was when I finally understood... that he needed a father, and I hadn’t been one...”

“You had every chance to do the right thing, but you didn’t. You robbed my father of the chance to be there for me, all because you put your own interests first. Look around you, Nicholas... Look at what your life has become... Can you honestly say you were ever a true father to your son?”

That moment marked the greatest failure of my life, both as a father and as a human being. If I could go back in time, I would rewrite every decision I made and become the man my son deserved.

But that was impossible, because he had chosen his path and given himself over to it.

“I’m sorry.” A lump formed in my throat when he took my hand. I tried to pull away, but seeing the tears welling up in his eyes stopped me cold.

“I know I’m asking for something I don’t deserve,” he said, his voice heavy with regret. “I have no right to ask you this, Belle, but I’m begging you.” His eyes reflected exhaustion, grief, and desperation. “I know I can’t undo what I did, but at least I can try to change my son’s future. He was an innocent child and I turned him into a heartless man.”

I finally pulled my hand away and tried to hold back my own tears.

“I’ll pass on your message,” I answered quietly, refusing to look him in the eyes.

“Thank you, Belle.” He managed a faint smile, though the tears never stopped falling. “I’ll carry this with me into my next life.”

“I need to go now. Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he gets your message.”

After his nod, I left his room without looking back.

I had only taken a few steps down the hallway when a group of doctors and nurses rushed past me. I stepped aside to give them room and froze when I realized they were all heading straight for the room I had just left.

I ran back down the hallway to see what was happening, and the scene I found left me cold.

Oh, God. My hand flew to my chest before I could stop it.

The doctors were leaning over Nicholas, moving frantically as they performed CPR on his motionless body. Seconds later, they all stopped. Every gaze shifted to the monitor as a sharp sound cut through the room and the line on the monitor went flat.

Time of death: 1:30 in the afternoon.

I barely processed what had just happened. Everything had happened too fast. How could he be gone already? Not even an hour had passed. Not even thirty minutes. I had been speaking with him just moments ago, and now there was nothing left.

I wanted to cry, but shock held me captive. My tears refused to come.

“Oh, look who’s here, my beautiful Belle.”

Félix’s voice greeted me the moment I walked into the waiting room.

That familiar crooked smile still curled his lips, playful and cruel in a way I knew all too well. If I hadn’t just witnessed his father’s death and heard his last words, I might have lost control at the mere sight of that expression.

“I didn’t come for you.”

“Then who did you come for? Your husband?”

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I let out a slow sigh and ignored the provocation. One question circled in my mind, demanding to be asked.

“Tell me something. How much did you really love your father?”

The effect was immediate. He frowned and that arrogant smile vanished as shock finally took hold of him.

“My father has nothing to do with this little game of yours,” he said, lowering his voice. For the first time, he looked away instead of holding my gaze.

“He asked me to tell you how much he loved you.”

“What are you talking about? When did you speak with my father?”

My throat went dry when he slammed his hands against the table and glared at me, but that wasn’t enough to stop me.

“He told me you were the greatest gift he had ever received. He wanted you to move on with your life, even after he was gone. He also told me not to waste your youth on lies and deceit, but to use your time well while you still had it.”

I grabbed my bag and rose to my feet, but his voice cut through the room again.

“What nonsense are you talking about?”

“He’s dead. He died this afternoon of cardiac arrest.”

“That’s not true. You’re lying. You’re saying this because you want revenge.”

"I wish it were a lie. I wish I hadn't seen him struggling to breathe. I wish I hadn't heard the doctor call his time of death. But unlike you, I'm not capable of making something like this up."

"No. That can't be true. He can't die. He can't leave me." He shook his head over and over, filling with disbelief.

"The hospital has already notified your father's only relative about the funeral arrangements. Whether you choose to believe me or not is your decision. I've already done what I came here to do."

"No! Dad!"

The cry escaped him as he fell back into his chair. Seconds later, his composure crumbled. Tears streamed down his face and he sobbed openly, like a child who had lost his anchor.

"Why, Dad?"

I stayed where I was, watching as the moment stripped him bare and shattered whatever armor he had been wearing.

Seeing him like that should have satisfied something dark inside me. It should have filled me with triumph, maybe even relief. And yet, I felt none of that. The source of his agony resembled my own loss too closely. The pain on his face was the same pain I had felt when my father died, and for that reason I couldn't rejoice in his suffering.

His cries rang out loud enough to draw attention. Two police officers rushed in, their faces concerned as they asked what was happening. I briefly explained Nicholas's death, and they were immediately shocked.

As I turned to leave the room, I heard a voice:

"Wait, Ysabelle!" he called, his voice cracking. I didn't stop, but kept walking toward the door until his next words left me frozen. Slowly, I turned around. Félix knelt down.

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"I'm sorry. I'm sorry for everything I did to you." His voice broke as he looked at me, tears running freely down his face.

"I know none of it can be excused, and I don't expect forgiveness. I just needed to say it. I lost my father without ever telling him I loved him. I never apologized for the pain I caused him either. I just wanted him to know I was still here. Even after losing our relationship, even after everything we broke between us."

His shoulders trembled. "Now he's gone and I'll never have the chance to say those words to him."

Nothing he said erased the harm he left behind. The pain, the fear, and the long nights haunted by the memories he created stayed with me. He took years from us that could never be given back. Moments that should have belonged to our family were lost forever, and now we were on the verge of losing even more because our father was gone.

When I got home, my head throbbed relentlessly. The stress and hours of crying had worn me out, leaving my body heavy and aching. The De Lucas had been the source of too many wounds in my life, ever since my father first brought them into it, and that truth never changed.

I was about to head up the stairs when a rough voice stopped me:

“Where were you?”

I closed my eyes the moment I recognized his voice. I took a slow breath before turning around, already exhausted just at the thought of explaining everything that had happened in a single day.

“Sophia, where have you been? I’ve been calling you for almost three hours and you haven’t answered once.”

“I just got back from the supermarket.”

“The supermarket? I got back from there an hour ago. Angie said she saw you there.”

I hesitated for a moment. “I stopped at a café nearby after I finished shopping.”

“So you sat in a café for three hours?”

“Yes,” I answered quietly, avoiding his eyes.

“And what if I told you I stayed at that café for twenty minutes just to see if you’d show up?”

My mouth fell slightly open, but no words came out. I had no idea how to respond.

“Tell me the truth, Sophia. Where had you gone?”

“I went to the hospital.”

“The hospital? What were you doing there? Did something happen? Were you feeling unwell? How did you feel afterward?”

“I’m fine. I didn’t go for myself, I went to see someone.” I held out my hands to stop him, keeping him from checking my neck and forehead. The worry in his eyes was plain to see.

“You went to see a friend,” he said slowly, nodding as if trying to make sense of it.

“The hospital called me earlier. They said someone wanted to talk to me, so I went straight there.”

“And who was this person you went to see?”

“Nicholas De Luca.”

His eyes went wide, and I couldn’t tell whether his reaction came from surprise or anger.