

A Favor 471

Chapter 471

“You went to see the father of the man who assaulted you?”

“Yes, but...”

“And what if he’d hired someone to follow you?” His voice rose sharply, and panic broke through. “Or worse, what if he’d tried to kill you?”

The force of his words rang out like a shout, and I instinctively stepped back.

“Are you absolutely sure? He’s still a businessman, Sophia. People like him are always several steps ahead when something like this happens.”

“I understand. But I’m telling you there was nothing more he could do.”

“And how were you supposed to know that? Him being in the hospital is no guarantee of anything.”

“He passed away.”

Those words cut through him, stopping everything cold.

“What do you mean he passed away?” he asked slowly, confusion written across his face.

“He died. He left this world. He stopped breathing right in front of me. Before that, he told me his final wish was to tell his son how sorry he was and how much he loved him.”

“All right. I understand. He died this afternoon and entrusted you with a final wish. What did you do after leaving the hospital? Don’t tell me you went to...”

“I did. I went to see him. I went to see the son of the man who died before my eyes, to carry out his last wish.”

“What were you thinking? Sophia, what went through your head? He’s a criminal. Didn’t I warn you not to go near him again?”

“There was nothing wrong with honoring a dying man’s wish, Daniel. I know you were worried, but I came back safe and sound. He finally took responsibility and apologized for what he did.”

“Really? So he asked for forgiveness and that’s it? Does that mean we’re suddenly going to drop the case because he apologized?”

His words hit me hard and a wave of frustration surged up from my chest.

“What are you even saying? Yes, he apologized, but I never said I accepted his apology, and I never said I’d drop the charges. What part of that is so hard to understand? His father died and asked me to talk to him. That was all. Nothing more.”

“Even so, you should have told me. You should have asked me to go with you. Do you have any idea how worried I was? I waited almost five hours for you.”

I looked at him, forcing myself to stay calm, but the next thing he said was the last straw.

“Is it really so hard to share something so basic? Is it so hard to follow a simple request and not go see him alone? Why are you always so stubborn? You didn’t even answer the phone. For God’s sake, can you try to act like a mature woman for once, Sophia?”

That was when I snapped.

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“Is this really about maturity? Tell me, Daniel, did I ever ask you to call me? Did I ask you to wait and worry about me? And most importantly, did I ever ask you to follow me here or to step in and fix things for me? Did I say any of that? Did I?”

“Sophia...” His eyes met mine, confusion and surprise reflected in his face.

“So don’t lecture me about how a grown woman should act. I already am one. I never asked you to stay, but you insist on inserting yourself into my life.”

“I stayed because I love you.”

“Love doesn’t judge, Daniel. If you can’t accept who I am or accept me with my stubbornness, then you should leave. I didn’t ask for your help and I never asked you to stay.”

“Sophia...”

“I do love you, but I can’t walk this path with you right now.”

“Then I’ll wait.”

“No, Daniel. I don’t want you to wait for me. I want you to go back to Los Angeles. My family matters are my business, not yours, so please, go.”

“I won’t leave you.”

“Daniel, please. Let me fight my own battles.”

"I promised your father I wouldn't abandon you."

"I know. But the man you made that promise to is gone. He can't hear you anymore. So please, go now."

He stayed silent, standing there, looking at me. I turned my gaze away because I couldn't bear the pain in his eyes.

"All right. I'll go for now. That doesn't mean I'm going to break my promise. I'll wait until the day you're ready to accept me. I'm sorry for bothering you. I have to go."

I nearly called out to him, but I stopped myself and stood there, watching as he walked toward the door until he disappeared from my sight. The tears refused to come even though my chest ached. It hurt to watch him leave. It hurt to follow every step he took toward the exit. It hurt.

"Aren't you going to go after him?"

I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder, followed by my mother's voice.

I let out a long sigh and shook my head. I hadn't even realized she'd witnessed our argument.

Thirty minutes had passed since Daniel opened the door and walked out, and during that same half hour I had been standing exactly where he left me, frozen at the foot of the stairs.

“You’re right. Love doesn’t judge, but it also doesn’t keep score of mistakes.”

“Mom, why is falling in love so hard? We’re always arguing. We can’t stop raising our voices at each other. Ever since we met, it feels like there’s this huge wall between us, and every time we try to get closer, we end up fighting. One of us always ends up hurt.”

“Loving someone is harder than people think. Do you know why you always end up hurt? Because you’re both stubborn. Sometimes your pride is so big that it blocks out everything else.”

“Mom...”

She smiled at me and guided me toward the living room.

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“You have to try to understand him, Belle, just as he needs to understand what you’re going through. Yes, that marriage started because of an arrangement, but he’s still taking it seriously. He cares about you. He loves you.”

“I know,” I murmured, lowering my head as another silent sigh escaped me.

“So you’re really not going to call him or try to stop him from going back to Los Angeles?”

"I'm not," I answered, shaking my head. Her frown deepened more and more.

"Why?"

"Because right now I need to focus on healing. I don't think I can offer him anything worthwhile until I've fully recovered."

"If that's what you truly want, I'll support you. Whatever you need, I'll be here. Always. I love you, my child." She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around me.

"I love you too, Mom," I answered, smiling weakly as I returned the embrace.

One month later.

"So is this how you relax now?" Her voice reached me from behind and I turned toward her. It was already past nine at night, but I'd decided to stay out on the porch a little longer, letting the night air clear my thoughts.

"Mom, you're not the first person to ask me that," I murmured with a calm sigh and a tired smile.

“Oh, really?” she replied, a spark of interest on her face.

I nodded and she took a seat across from me at the wide round table.

“And who else has asked you?” she inquired, raising her eyebrows with unmistakable curiosity.

Even without my answering, I knew she already had a good idea.

“It was him,” I said quietly. “I heard it from him.”

“Hmm,” she replied slowly. “And who exactly is this person you’re referring to?”

“Mom, you know perfectly well who I’m talking about.”

“I don’t,” she replied, barely holding back her laughter.

“Fine,” I sighed, rolling my eyes. “It was Daniel.”

“Oh. You mean Daniel Kelley. Your husband?”

“Mom!” I exclaimed, pouting at her, but she just laughed, thoroughly amused.

“What’s wrong with asking? There are plenty of people named Daniel. How was I supposed to know which one you meant?” She shrugged indifferently.

“Oh, really?” I mused.

I clicked my tongue. What a ridiculous question.

“Do you miss him, sweetheart?”

I studied her face, expecting that teasing smile again, but it was gone. She was asking me sincerely.

After a deep sigh, I nodded.

“Then why don’t you go find him, sweetheart?”

“It doesn’t work that way, Mom. It’s not that simple.”

"All right. So what exactly is your plan? To stay here and wait for your father to climb out of his coffin and come visit you?"

"Mom, don't talk like that."

"I'm serious, Ysabelle. It's been two months since your father passed away, and a whole month since you let your man go. No, let me rephrase that. Since you threw him out of your life."

"I didn't throw him out."

"Fine. You didn't throw him out. You just told him to leave and never come back."

I bit my lip as I looked away, unable to meet her eyes.

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"Steven and I are thinking about selling this house, Belle." After a brief silence, she spoke again.

"Selling it? And where are we going to live? Are you planning to buy a smaller house?"

"It's not that. I'm thinking of going back to the United States."

“Why now?” I asked. “Why so suddenly?”

“It was actually your father’s idea. He mentioned it before he died, and since then I’ve had time to think it over. He was right. This house is full of memories of him, both the good ones and the painful ones from when we left. I don’t want to stay trapped in that forever.” Her voice softened. “Your father may be gone, but our lives don’t end with him. Our dreams don’t disappear. We still have to move forward. We still have to build a new beginning together.”

“Were you thinking of going back to Seattle?”

“There’s nothing left for us there. I already sold the house.”

“Then where are you planning to settle?”

“Your brother and I decided on California. Bryan bought an old property and plans to renovate it into an upscale restaurant.”

“And he wants me to be involved in running it, with Aira’s help.”

“And me? Are you just going to leave me behind? Where am I going to live?” My question came out childish, and my mother laughed.

“Of course not. You already have a place in Los Angeles.”

“Mom, what house are you talking about?”

“The one you share with your husband, of course.”

“Mom...”

“Belle, maybe it’s time to stop letting pride control your life.” She leaned over the table and took my hands; her tone turned serious. “You’ve waited long enough. You’ve sacrificed enough. You’ve fought so hard trying to figure out who you are, but all you’re doing now is hurting yourself. You love him and he loves you. How long are you going to stay here, hiding from happiness?”

“And what if he’s already with someone else?”

“No, don’t even think it. You shouldn’t even be asking yourself that now. If you were worried about that possibility, you should have thought of it before telling him to leave and go back to Los Angeles.” Her tone had a dismissive edge, almost scornful.

Since her words were painfully true, I swallowed and fell silent. She was right. The weight of my decision finally settled over me, and a stinging thought crossed my mind right after.

What if he really had met someone else?

“Wait,” my mother said suddenly. “Don’t tell me you actually took what I said to heart.”

I nodded and she burst out laughing.

“My Belle. How can you doubt how much that man loves you? It’s only been a month. Do you really think he’s already replaced you?”

“I don’t know,” I answered with a shrug. “What if he has?”

“Then what? You’ll just stay here, calm and comfortable, while he flirts with other women? Are you really going to sit back and let someone steal your husband?”

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My eyes went wide and my mouth fell open when she emphasized that word.

“No,” I blurted.

“Then what are you waiting for?” she said without hesitation. “Get up. Start packing. We’re flying to Los Angeles tonight.”

The moment those words left her mouth, my eyes filled with tears. I wiped them away quickly and stood up, already heading to my room.

“You’re right, Mom. I won’t let anyone take my husband. I won’t let anyone steal the man I love away from me. He’s mine and I’ll protect what belongs to me.”

“That’s my girl! Come on. Hurry up.”

I was already halfway up the stairs when something suddenly occurred to me and I stopped. “Wait. We haven’t even bought plane tickets.”

“Who said anything about buying tickets?”

“What do you mean by that?” I turned around, completely confused.

“Before talking to you, I called your brother,” she explained calmly. “I told him we’d be going back to Los Angeles and he said he’d send your private jet along with the pilot to pick us up tonight.”

“So you’d already planned all of this before asking me?”

“Then how did you know I’d say yes?”

“Because I know you. You love him. Every time his name comes up, your eyes give you away. I never doubted for a second that you’d choose to go back.”

“Thank you, Mom.”

I crossed the room and hugged her tightly.

“You’re welcome, sweetheart.”

“You really are the best.”

Sophia’s point of view:

Wait. Were my eyes playing a trick on me?

That was the first thing Andrew said when he saw me standing in the lobby of Kelley International Corporation. He even slid his glasses down to the tip of his nose and squinted as if he needed confirmation.

“Sophia? Are you really here?”

His voice echoed throughout the lobby, drawing the curious stares of several employees.

“Hi, Andrew,” I said, unable to hold back a smile. “How have you been?”

“When did you get back?” he exclaimed. “No, wait. What are you doing here?”

I barely had time to react before he grabbed me by the arms, then held my face in his hands and gently shook my shoulders, as if he were afraid I might vanish. The surprise on his face was almost comical.

“You’re really here,” he repeated, his eyes wide. “This is crazy. Are you here to see your husband?”

“I just want to talk to him. Do you know if he’s busy?”

“Busy or not, that doesn’t matter. The moment he sees you, he’ll drop everything. I guarantee he’ll run to you and hug you until you can’t breathe.”

I burst out laughing as he grabbed my arm and practically dragged me toward the elevator. I had no idea why he was so happy to see me.

Little did I imagine that the question circling in my mind would be answered the moment the elevator doors closed.

“Ah, Sophia, you’re an angel fallen from heaven. Thank God you’re here. You’re finally going to rescue me from a life of suffering.”

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I didn’t understand what he was talking about, but his tone made me laugh anyway.

“Rescue you from what exactly?”

He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “You have no idea what your husband has put me through these past few weeks. Ever since we got back from Italy, I’ve become his personal slave and full-time drinking buddy. Every night, Sophia. Every night he calls me to go out for a drink.”

He leaned in closer and lowered his voice, as if confessing a tragedy. “At one in the morning. Sometimes at two. Other times, even at three. Just to sit at Jack’s bar and drink. Can you believe it?”

“He’s been drinking that much?” I asked. “That’s not like him. He’s never been much of a drinker.” I frowned in disbelief.

“He’s always getting drunk. Honestly, I don’t know what happened between the two of you in Italy. He never explained why he suddenly wanted to rush back.”

“He never told you the reason?”

He shook his head.

“No explanation. Nothing. He just shut himself off. Since he wasn’t talking, I assumed something serious had happened. Then he told me to call his pilot so we could fly back immediately. And I knew I wasn’t wrong.”

His expression softened as he sighed.

“And since he was so depressed and got so drunk, I ended up talking to a glass of wine as if it were you.”

“What did he say?” I couldn’t help my curiosity.

“He called himself an idiot. He said he’d been a bastard and a fool for not seeing how important you were from the start. He kept repeating that he’d treated you badly and took too long to admit he loved you.”

I let out a silent sigh and returned the sad smile he gave me.

“What else?”

“Besides getting drunk and turning into a nightmare, he works nonstop. Normal hours are eight in the morning to five in the afternoon, right? Well, that’s not for your husband. He gets in at six sharp and doesn’t leave until nine, sometimes ten at night.”

“That’s absurd. Doesn’t he ever get tired?”

“That’s what I mean. And on top of that, he always shows up smelling of alcohol. Then he had the audacity to suggest I start coming in as early as he does. I swear that man is driving me crazy.”

His frustration was so dramatic that I couldn’t help laughing.

“Look at this.”

He pointed under his eyes.

“What am I supposed to be looking at?”

“The dark circles.”

I pressed my lips together to hide my smile. “Those bags under your eyes are your own fault.”

“No, they’re your husband’s fault. He sleeps three or four hours a night at most. Saturdays are the worst: he makes me get up early just because he stays working all weekend. I swear, Sophia, you’re the only woman who’s managed to turn my best friend into a total tyrant.”

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He clasped his hands together in a pleading gesture. “You’re my last hope. Please, get back together with him. Save me. I’m begging you to free me from this nightmare.”

“But how am I supposed to help you?”

“It’s simple. Tell him you love him. Tell him you want to fix your marriage with him. The moment he sees you, he’ll go back to being a normal person. I can’t survive being his full-time slave again. I just want one night of peaceful sleep and maybe some energy to go find the love of my life.”

A soft chime sounded, signaling that we had arrived.

We both looked up as the elevator stopped on the fortieth floor, the executive area.

“Do you really think he’ll forgive me for everything that happened?” I asked as we stepped out.

“Sophia, he’ll go wild with joy when he sees you. Trust me. His misery wasn’t something I was told about, I saw it with my own eyes.”

I sighed slowly and gave a slight nod.

I opened my mouth to greet her, but Andrew beat me to it.

“Hi, De...”

“Hi, handsome.”

I blinked, surprised by the exchange of looks between them.

“Well,” I said slowly, glancing from Andrew to Denise, “have I interrupted an office romance?”

That was when Denise finally noticed me.

“Oh my God! Mrs. Sophia, you’re back,” she exclaimed, brimming with excitement. “Thank heavens.”

“That was exactly my reaction when I saw her downstairs,” Andrew said with a chuckle, nodding.

“And why do you look even happier than he does? Don’t tell me your boss is also swamping you with work. Has he enslaved you just like Andrew?”

“Honestly, Mrs. Sophia, I almost wish he’d turned me into a machine. At least then I wouldn’t feel anything. But no, that would have been too kind of him.”

“Has it been that bad?”

“My suffering doesn’t come directly from your husband. It comes from a very persistent nuisance who makes my days here unbearable.”

“She’s here again, isn’t she?” Andrew’s expression darkened immediately.

“Who are you talking about?”

“I don’t know if you know her, Mrs. Sophia. Her name is Chloe Enríquez. She’s Mr. Kelley’s new partner.”

Chloe Enríquez. The sole heiress of Enríquez Trading. Daniel’s ex-girlfriend.

“Yes, I know exactly who she is.”

“Wow. I like the way you just put that.”

Which one were you referring to? The ex-girlfriend who thought it appropriate to sneak into my husband's suite. I still owed her a slap for what she did in San Diego.

I shot Andrew a scathing look when he started to applaud, then turned and headed straight for Daniel's office.

"Wait, Sophia."

He grabbed my hand just as I stopped in front of the tall wooden doors.

"There's something you need to know before you go in. Nothing happened between them that night. Daniel didn't even know she was there."

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"That doesn't excuse her behavior," I snapped. "Regardless, she tried to seduce my husband." I paused, feeling my anger rise. "And yes, nothing happened, but she still slept in his suite. On top of that, she made sure not to explain anything to me the next morning. What else was I supposed to think?"

I didn't wait for his answer. After taking a deep breath, I flung the doors open without knocking, intending to catch them off guard.

What I didn't know was that I would be the one caught off guard.

“Hello,” I said coldly, glancing from Daniel to the woman seated across from his desk.

They both looked at me with obvious surprise, and for an instant, I caught the hint of a smile on Daniel’s lips. The expression vanished almost immediately, replaced by a cold, controlled look, as if my presence were of no consequence to him, as if he felt not the slightest emotion.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Del Mundo. What a surprise to see you here.”

I shifted my gaze to Chloe, who wore a smile that seemed rehearsed and hollow, as if she’d forced it onto her face.

“So you really did come back to Los Angeles. I assumed you’d stay in Italy for the rest of your life. What brought you here?”

“Hello, Ms. Enríquez. Yes, I came back. Los Angeles is still my home, and I realized I missed it more than I expected. That’s why I decided to return.” “And you, what are you doing here?” I asked, mirroring the stiffness of her smile as I approached Daniel’s desk.

“We’re in the middle of a meeting right now, Ms. Del Mundo.”

I froze at her words.

“Ms. Del Mundo? I thought I was Mrs. Kelley to you.” A disappointment I couldn’t quite hide crept into my voice.

Hearing him use my maiden name hurt more than I’d care to admit. Still, I forced myself to keep my composure, because that woman was watching my every reaction.

“The way he chooses to address you is irrelevant. This meeting is very important, so I’m asking you to leave.”

“I’m talking to my husband, so keep quiet.”

She let out a slow sigh, but I turned my attention to Daniel. His face was expressionless, and that unsettled me even more.

“Daniel, I need to talk to you,” I said, but he cut me off before I could finish.

“Sophia, she’s not wrong. Before you arrived, we were discussing a potential partnership, and it was crucial for us. I think it would be better another time.”

The word “partnership” echoed in my head. I didn’t know whether he meant business or something far more personal, and fear kept me from asking aloud.

Still, I needed answers, and I needed them right away. "Daniel, please, talk to me now, my love."

I saw the flash of surprise in his eyes, and it confused me. I didn't understand why he felt the need to hide it.

Chloe leaned back a little and studied me. "This sounds urgent. Is it so serious that it can't wait until tomorrow?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

I shot her a look sharp enough to cut. If anger alone could end a person, she would have ceased to exist in that very instant.

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I chose to ignore her completely and turned to Daniel. "I love you. I've always loved you, Daniel Kelley. I'm willing to marry you again and build a life with you, like before. I don't care about the ring. Having you by my side is enough." After those words left my mouth, I waited for his response.

There was none.

"I told you I love you."

"Last month I asked you to marry me," he answered calmly. "You told me you couldn't be with me and asked me to go back alone."

"I know. But I came back because I'm ready now."

Hope crept into my voice, bright and eager, until his next words tore it away.

"I see you came back. But I need you to understand that I'm no longer willing to take on that kind of commitment."

"What?" I inquired, stunned, as disbelief settled over me.

"Actually, I'm glad you rejected me before. It gave me time to think clearly, and I realized this isn't what I want anymore."

"How can that be true? You promised you'd wait for me."

My attention turned to Chloe, and I saw the glint of satisfaction in her eyes as Daniel spoke. Her reaction made my chest tighten.

"You were the one who told me not to wait for you. So I didn't."

"Daniel, I..." I tried to say, but he cut me off before I could finish.

"This isn't the right time for this conversation, Sophia. Ms. Enríquez and I still have important matters to go over regarding our new project. I need you to leave now. We can talk another time when my schedule allows."

"A meeting? Why would I have to make an appointment with you? You're my husband, and as your wife, I deserve..." My words were cut off again.

"Soon-to-be ex-wife, Ms. Del Mundo," he said coldly. He didn't even look at me as he opened the folder in front of him.

"I thought..."

"Didn't you hear? If I were you, I'd leave right now and go back where you came from. You're wasting your time, and you're definitely wasting ours," Chloe interjected without hesitation.

I breathed slowly, forcing myself to stay still. My whole being burned with rage, and I could barely contain that fury from erupting.

"Is this really happening?" I asked, clenching my fists. "Say one more thing. Just one more word, and I swear I'll make you regret ever opening your mouth. If you know what's good for you, stay quiet and stop interrupting a conversation that doesn't concern you." I forced each word out through clenched teeth.

Surprise crossed her face, her eyes widened, and the color drained from her skin.

“That’s enough, Ms. Del Mundo. I won’t tolerate threats or violence in my office.” His tone was firm, but I barely registered it. She was the only thing in my field of vision.

“If you refuse to talk to me here, then I’ll wait for you outside.”

“Sophia, I can’t. I have another meeting right after this one.”

“Then I’ll wait until you’re done with all your meetings.”

“My schedule is full until eleven at night.”

“That’s fine. I’ll stay until eleven.”

“I don’t want you to wait for me. Go home.”

He watched me with a raised eyebrow, but I didn’t react.

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“I’ll be at home. I can make dinner while I wait, in case you decide to...”

"I already sold the house, Sophia," he said, cutting me off.

"What? What do you mean you sold our home?"

The truth hit me all at once. He had sold the house while I was in Italy.

"And Nanay Emily, Tatay Berto, and everyone else?"

"They're not your family, and what I do with that house is none of your concern. I already told you, the house is mine. I have every right to decide what happens to it, and you have no say in the matter."

"Of course," I answered quietly, forcing myself to nod even though I felt a knot in my throat.

My strength was slowly slipping away. The confidence I'd brought with me that morning had vanished completely, without a trace.

"If you have nothing more to say, you may go, Ms. Del Mundo," he replied, gesturing toward the door.

Without waiting for my response, he turned his attention back to the folder and continued talking about his projects. Chloe looked at me and gave me a victorious smile, crossing her legs as she pretended to listen to him.

“Fine. I’ll go. It seems the only option I have left is to request an appointment through your secretary.”

I paused, hoping he’d answer or at least look at me, but he did neither. With no other choice, I turned around and headed for the door.

My hand closed over the handle and I opened it. Before leaving, I looked back at him one last time. Something about the way he’d spoken to me struck me as strange, and no matter how hard I tried, my heart refused to accept his words or his cold behavior.

What had just happened?

Someone had to tell me what had happened.

The moment the door closed, two voices spoke at once, startling me. Andrew and Denise were standing there, as if they’d been waiting the whole time just to intercept me the second I came out.

“What are you two doing here? You nearly scared me to death,” I said, forcing a shaky smile as I pressed a hand to my chest.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Sophia,” Denise said quickly. “I thought you’d already seen us.” She gave me a nervous smile that only made her apology more obvious.

“So tell me everything. Did you slap that woman?” Andrew asked, obvious curiosity on his face.

A long sigh escaped me before I slowly shook my head.

“That’s all right. There’s always another chance for that.”

“This has nothing to do with her. The problem is that he refuses to talk to me.”

Andrew looked at me in disbelief, then grabbed my arm and dragged me toward his office. Once inside, I told him everything that had happened, from beginning to end.

“What the hell? He really said all that to you?”

I nodded. The next instant, his eyes went wide and he slammed the table with both hands. Without another word, he rushed toward the door.