

A Favor 481

Chapter 481

“Wait, where do you think you’re going?” I inquired, quickly standing up to block his path.

“I’m going to smash that bastard’s face in. How dare he talk to you like that? Last week he was drunk and told me how much he missed you. He said he loved you and that life felt unbearable without you. Now he stands there and throws lies right in your face. I swear I’m going to punch him and make sure it hurts.”

The moment he said that, my attention drifted from the room. I stood there while he talked, his voice fading into background noise as he circled back to the subject of Daniel. According to him, everything Daniel had said earlier was a lie, and the truth was completely different.

That meant Daniel had been acting the whole time.

“I can’t believe that fool. Why are you smiling?” he asked suddenly.

“What?” I replied, blinking as my thoughts snapped back to reality.

“I asked why you’re smiling, Sophia,” he insisted, frowning.

“It’s nothing. I’m just trying to take it all in.”

"You're confused. And when you feel confused, you smile."

"That's not what I meant," I retorted, rolling my eyes as I steered the conversation elsewhere. "You mean he lied when he claimed he didn't miss me, and he actually felt the exact opposite?"

"Yes. I was with him the whole time. I saw him talking to himself, and every night he fell asleep thinking about you."

"Then why did he act that way a little while ago?"

He clicked his tongue and leaned back in his chair. "Why do you think men hide the truth from the woman they love?" he questioned.

I paused, searching for an answer that wouldn't come. "Honestly, I don't know," I answered after a moment.

"Ego," Denise blurted out suddenly. We both turned to her, surprised. "Men hide the truth because they have an enormous ego. Sometimes it's bigger than the Pacific Ocean itself."

"Wow, you're amazing, sweetheart! That's why I love you," Andrew exclaimed, winking at her as he looked at her in awe.

I turned my head toward him, clearly surprised by his reaction.

“Thank you, but I don’t feel the same, Mr. Peterson,” she replied dryly; her voice was full of irony.

“That was harsh.”

“I’m sorry, I’m just stating the facts.”

He clicked his tongue. “What an honest woman.”

“Yes,” she answered proudly. “And I stand by it.”

“So you won’t even consider my feelings?”

“No, not one bit.”

“Excuse me,” I said, waving my hand between them. “I’m still here.”

“Right. Sorry. Let’s get back to the matter at hand,” Andrew replied, clearing his throat as he forced himself to pick up the thread again.

A calm laugh escaped me and I shook my head at their exchange.

“Sophia, I can’t explain why he behaved that way. But I’m sure of one thing: he loves you, and his life has fallen apart without you.”

The question kept circling in my head. Why would he go to the trouble of acting that way?

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“Honestly, I don’t know the reason. But if you want the truth, don’t pull away from him. Whether he’s pretending or not, you can’t give up. Don’t give up on what you had and don’t let Chloe take it from you.”

“I completely agree with him, Mrs. Sophia,” Denise added, nodding firmly.

A heavy sigh escaped me as I noticed them both looking at me with hopeful expressions.

“All right. So what am I supposed to do now?”

“Kiss him.”

“Hit him.”

My lips parted in surprise when their answers crossed. They looked at each other for a brief moment and I let out a laugh.

“Why would kissing him solve anything?” Andrew questioned, frowning at Denise.

“And why would I hit Mr. Kelley? If anyone deserves it, it’s that shameless woman, not him.”

“Wait,” I said loudly, drawing their attention. “I think I have an idea.” With that in mind, I jumped to my feet and ran down the hall toward Daniel’s office.

“Are you going back in there?” Andrew shouted behind me, but I didn’t slow down. A dangerous smile settled onto my face.

People liked to think that Sophia Del Mundo Kelley was always gentle and pleasant. That was only true for those who earned it. And as for her, kindness was not part of my plans.

As before, I skipped the courtesy of knocking. I turned the handle and walked in without hesitation.

The moment I entered, I caught the flash of happiness on Daniel's face before he hid it. At the same time, I saw her stiffen as she realized I was approaching again.

"Sophia, why did you come back?" he asked, but I stayed quiet and bit my lip.

As expected, that snake couldn't resist butting in where she wasn't wanted.

"You don't understand..." she started to say, but I cut her off.

"Shut up. I'll deal with you later."

"What?" she stammered. "Did you really just call me that?"

I paid her no attention. With a kind smile that didn't reach my eyes, I walked straight up to my husband, grabbed him by the collar of his shirt, and spun his chair so he'd face me. Before he could react, I settled into his lap and planted a bold kiss on him.

The room went silent, and her indignation was almost palpable.

Chloe's voice reached my ears from behind, but I chose to pretend she didn't exist. Instead, my arms stayed wrapped around Daniel's neck as I leaned in and deepened the kiss. If I hadn't already known how he truly felt about me, the way he tried to pull back would have hurt. But since I knew he was pretending, I refused to let go and even gently bit his lip.

"Sophia, why are you doing this?" he questioned quietly.

"I've missed you more than I ever admitted," I answered. "Being away from you was unbearable, and I hated not being in your arms. So from now on, even if you push me away or pretend I'm not here, I'll stay by your side as if it were my rightful place."

A playful wink followed my words, and I knew he understood exactly what I meant.

"Excuse me, I'm still here."

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My gaze shifted to her and a laugh escaped me before I could stop it. I had used those very same words before, and the irony amused me.

After giving Daniel one last quick kiss, I got up from his lap and walked over to her.

"Don't act like I don't know what's going on between the two of you. Your marriage was nothing but an arrangement, so stop pretending you're his wife. Everyone knows it was just a deal."

"Oh, really? And who told you that? And more importantly, who convinced you our marriage was fake?" I replied calmly, placing my hands on my hips as I held her gaze.

"Oh, please, Sophia. Wake up already. Everyone knows you're a fraud. And honestly, you're not even worthy to lick the dirt off my shoe. Look at yourself..." Her eyes slowly traveled from my head to my feet. "Those ordinary clothes and those cheap accessories. It's almost embarrassing to watch."

She never got to finish what she was about to say. My hand moved on its own, before I could think it through, and the slap I gave her rang out across the room.

"Ow. Did that hurt? I'm so sorry. I just wanted to see what my hand could do to your face, since you were so sure I was nobody."

I looked at Daniel, expecting some kind of reaction. He stayed where he was, and when our eyes met, I caught a brief smile tugging at his lips. He hid it quickly and stepped toward Chloe.

"What's wrong with you, Sophia? Have you completely lost your mind?" He raised his hand to cradle Chloe's cheek as he spoke.

"It hurts so much, Daniel. Look what your savage of a wife did to me. Are you really just going to stand there and do nothing?"

"It hurts terribly."

The only thing hurting was her pride, I thought coldly.

“Leave,” he said sharply, gesturing toward the door. “Leave now, Sophia.”

Thanks to Andrew, I already knew the truth behind his act. Instead of feeling shattered, I smiled calmly at both of them as he ordered me out.

“Get out of here, you slut,” she snapped. “I’m going to report you for assault.” She tried to lunge at me, but Daniel moved faster, grabbing her by the wrist and pulling her back to stop her before she could touch me.

“Fine. Take me to court,” I replied, keeping my eyes fixed on him. I still didn’t understand his behavior or why he insisted on acting as if his feelings for me had disappeared. Whatever the reason, I knew I would soon find out.

“Sophia Del Mundo, this is your final warning. If you don’t leave right now, I’ll have security throw you out of here.”

“Fine,” I answered, raising my hands in mock surrender. “I’m leaving, no need to call security.” I paused and looked him in the eyes again. “Just don’t forget one thing: I’m not someone you can push aside and forget. I’ll stay right here, in your life, whether you like it or not.”

Chapter 484

My hand was already on the doorknob when I realized there was one last thing I needed to say to him.

“You know what, Daniel? Has anyone ever told you that you’re bad at pretending?” He frowned, visibly confused. “Your performance was terrible. Really, it was painful to watch. But don’t worry, I still love you, even though you’ll never win an award.”

His surprise was impossible to hide, and I smiled before finally opening the door and letting the others into the office.

“Seriously, I can’t keep up with your drama, Sophia Ysabelle.”

Andrew had sat down in my chair behind the desk, while I sat across from him on the sofa.

“And I still don’t understand why he decided to hide the truth from me.”

“What I don’t understand is this: why would he pretend? What does he gain by acting that way? Tell me, what’s the point?”

“I don’t know,” I answered with a shrug. “But whatever his reason, this time I won’t pull away. No matter how much he pushes me or tries to reject me, I’ll keep showing up. I’ll keep proving that I love him and that I’m ready.”

“For God’s sake, Sophia. You’ve left behind all the old problems, doubts, and pain, and now is when the real chaos begins between the two of you. With egos as big as yours, I’m curious to see how you two plan to make it work together.”

I gave a small smile as his words echoed in my mind. It sounded exactly like what my mother had warned me about before I decided to go back to Los Angeles.

“At first, he was constantly chasing you, until the mess with your ex-fiancé came up. The moment that happened, everything you were beginning to build together collapsed, including the relationship that was just starting to grow. You chased him to San Diego, but you got nowhere. Then he followed you to Italy when you disappeared,” he said.

“I didn’t disappear. You know perfectly well I had to go there because...”

“Let me finish,” he interrupted, staring straight at me.

“Fine. Go ahead. Say what you need to say,” I answered, letting out a frustrated sigh.

“As I was saying, he followed you to Italy, sacrificed himself for you, took care of your family, and did everything he could. In return, you rejected him and told him to stay away from you. Now the roles have reversed, and suddenly you’re the one chasing him, while he’s the one rejecting you. What kind of game are the two of you playing? Do you plan to spend the rest of your lives taking turns rejecting each other?”

“Of course not. I swear I’ll find out why he’s acting this way.”

“All right. What do you have in mind? Are you going to tell your in-laws or Rian that you’re back?”

“No. It’s better if they stay out of it for now. You know how stubborn she can be, and she’d do anything to provoke her brother.”

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“I know, but you could use that to your advantage. She’d pester him so much he’d find it impossible to ignore you.”

“I don’t want to involve her. I have to handle this on my own. We’re grown up enough not to depend on your sister, especially with Chloe around. That woman meddles too much as it is.”

“For God’s sake, Sophia. She’d better not cross my path, because if she does, I swear I’ll make her regret it.”

His reaction made me laugh despite the situation. He slammed his hands on the table as he spoke, and I ended up telling him every detail of what had happened that very morning in Daniel’s office, including the earlier encounters.

“Don’t worry. I already gave her a good slap.”

“That barely counts. You should have done a lot more. Honestly, you should have dragged her to the window and thrown her out of your husband’s office.”

“That would be insane! Do you really want me to end up in jail?”

“Of course not. That’s my job. I’ll take care of that for you. I swear I’d tear her to pieces myself.”

All I could do was laugh and shake my head.

Watching him frown and slam the table again, I suddenly felt a wave of gratitude. Having him by my side all these years as my partner, my assistant, and my best friend was something I never thought I’d have.

He was always the first to call me out when I made bad decisions. He was also the first to laugh at me every morning when I woke up looking like I’d wrestled with my pillow all night. At the same time, he was the one who protected me, stayed by my side when things fell apart, and cheered me up when I needed it most. In moments like this, he could be as steady and reliable as a brother.

I didn’t always thank him out loud, but deep in my heart I knew he understood exactly how much he meant to me.

The next morning, I went to Kelley International Corporation again.

“Good morning, Denise.”

“Good morning, Miss Sophia. The CEO is already in his office. Would you like me to announce that you’re here?”

“Please don’t,” I answered quickly, stopping her before she could grab the intercom. I gently placed a paper bag on her desk. “I’m not here to see him today.”

“What? Why not? I thought you were planning to...”

“Just give him this for me. It’s about twenty-five minutes until lunch, so remind him to eat. And make sure to tell him something important. Tell him I cooked it all myself, with an outrageous amount of love.”

She laughed as I brought my fingers together to form a heart and pressed them against my chest.

“Are you absolutely sure you don’t want to see him?”

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“I want to hug him, kiss him, and never let him go. But since he insists on pretending he doesn’t love me and says he never missed me, this is the best I can do for him. I’ll take care of him this way, but I won’t step into his space again until he finally acknowledges the truth.”

“So cooking for him is your way of showing love.” She nodded thoughtfully.

“Exactly. After all, they say the fastest way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

"That's adorable, Mrs. Sophia. Don't worry. I'll make sure he gets this before lunch."

"I appreciate it, Denise. And while you're at it, tell him I love him too," I added with a playful wink.

"That's so sweet." She pursed her lips in an exaggerated pout. "Don't worry. I'll make sure he knows how much you love him."

"Thanks again. I need to go now. I have another appointment later today."

"Take care, Mrs. Sophia," she said, raising her hand to wave goodbye as I stepped into the elevator.

Denise's point of view:

I walked into his office and set the lunch on the table when his voice stopped me.

"I don't recall asking you to come in, Denise. And what is that?"

"It's a paper bag, sir," I answered with a smile, though he frowned immediately.

"Obviously, I'm not blind. What's inside?"

If I hadn't grown accustomed to his cold tone and imposing presence, I might have turned around and fled the office right then and there.

"Your lunch, sir," I answered, still smiling.

"I don't recall ordering anything."

"This was sent by your wife, Mr. Kelley," I replied, and that single sentence made him straighten up in his chair.

"My wife?"

"Yes, sir. She asked me to bring it to you before your lunch hour. She also mentioned that she cooked it all herself."

"Denise, I don't have a wife. What are you talking about?"

I held back my reaction, though I was full of disbelief. Seriously? In that moment, I could only think of one thing: Mrs. Sophia was right.

“Would you like me to put this on your desk or on the side table?” I asked, deciding to ignore the strange expression on his face.

“Throw it in the trash.”

“What?” My eyes went wide and my jaw nearly dropped. “Why, Mr. Kelley? She made it with so much love for you.”

“If you don’t want to throw it in the trash, then eat it yourself, Denise.”

Hearing that, an idea occurred to me. I had no idea what was in the bag. The more I watched him, the clearer it became that he was bad at pretending. Earlier, when I mentioned his wife, his face filled with surprise before he masked it.

“Are you absolutely sure about that, sir?”

He didn’t answer me and turned his attention back to the computer screen.

I moved closer to the bag and inhaled softly. “This smells delicious. It smells so good I’m dying to see what she made.”

Slowly, I pretended to open it while watching him out of the corner of my eye. He kept ignoring me, as if I weren’t there.

“Oh my God.”

“Denise!” he suddenly shouted.

“Yes, sir?”

“Get out, now.”

“All right. I’ll take this to my desk, Mr. Kelley.”

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With the bag in hand, I turned toward the door and made sure to open the packaging enough for the aroma to spread throughout the office.

“Oh, it’s fried chicken. It’s my favorite food.”

My enthusiasm was a little louder than necessary, and I finally managed to catch his attention. He looked up, blinking as if he’d just realized I was still there.

“Thank you so much for your generosity, sir. Judging by the smell, this will be the best fried chicken I’ve ever had.”

“Denise.”

“I’m going now. Have a good day.”

As I stepped out and closed the door behind me, I laughed to myself. The look on his face suggested he might change his mind.

I stayed right outside his office, standing in front of the door, with the bag still in my hands. A few minutes passed, but my boss didn’t come out. With a sigh, I turned to head back to my desk just as I heard Mr. Peterson behind me.

“Denise, what are you doing here? And what’s in that bag? Is it food?”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes and explained everything that had happened, including why I was waiting outside Mr. Kelley’s office.

“So he said he doesn’t have a wife and told you to throw the food in the trash?”

His reaction was immediate. His eyes went wide with disbelief, and I answered with a slow nod.

"If he weren't my friend, I swear I would have hit him by now. I can't understand why he insists on acting this way."

"There's really nothing we can do," I said, shrugging. "As I mentioned before, he may be your friend, but at the end of the day he's still your boss."

He let out a heavy sigh as he rubbed his face and shook his head.

"Anyway, are you willing to share that fried chicken with me?"

"How did you know what was in the bag, Mr. Peterson?"

"As it happens, fried chicken is one of my favorite foods. Of course I'd recognize it. And I already told you to call me Andrew."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Peterson. It's just that I'm used to calling people by their last name."

"If we were married, would you still call me Mr. Peterson?" He leaned in closer with a playful look.

I laughed mockingly. "Keep dreaming, sir."

An hour later, I was standing in front of my desk when we both looked up at the same time. Our boss was finally coming out of his office.

“Oh my God, I’m so full. Thanks for sharing lunch with me, Denise. That fried chicken was incredible.”

I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing when Mr. Kelley looked at us. Andrew didn’t dare look at him head-on. Instead, he kept rubbing his stomach as if he’d eaten the finest delicacy of his life.

“Anytime, Mr. Peterson. And you’re absolutely right. It was the best fried chicken I’ve ever tasted.”

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I made sure to pretend I didn’t notice Mr. Kelley standing behind us and continued my conversation with Andrew. We both got into character, deliberately using dramatic descriptions.

“It was perfectly crispy and unbelievably good. I swear, the next time I see Sophia, I’m going to give her a bouquet of flowers to thank her for that delicious meal...”

I never got to finish. Mr. Kelley shot us a withering glare that cut Andrew’s words short.

“What exactly are you two doing? Your lunch hour ended ten minutes ago. Why are you still standing here talking about food? The company pays you to work, not to gossip.”

Andrew and I exchanged a quick glance, both of us smiling in spite of ourselves. We weren't the only ones being dramatic. He was clearly reacting too.

"The company pays you to work, not to talk about fried chicken."

"Denise, did you finish the report I asked you for yesterday?" His attention turned to me.

"Yes, sir. It's already on your desk."

"Andrew, come with me. Now."

"Understood, sir."

I pressed my lips together, still smiling, as Mr. Peterson simply shrugged and followed him into the office.

"What is it now, Denise?"

His voice stopped me just as I was about to set the familiar brown paper bag on the small table. He had his brow furrowed; still, I knew he was eyeing the packaging with curiosity.

“It’s your lunch, sir.”

“Why do you keep bringing me her food? Why doesn’t she bring it herself?”

“So you’d like me to tell Mrs. Sophia to deliver the meals in person?”

“No... no. That’s not what I meant,” he said quickly, turning his head away.

After a pause, he added, “Shouldn’t you tell her to stop doing this?”

“I understand. Don’t worry. I’ll talk to her tomorrow. Would you like me to serve you lunch now?”

“No. Take it away.”

“Very well, sir.” I didn’t need to be told twice. I picked up the bag and left his office without another word.

As I walked away, I shook my head to myself. Did he really have no idea how much effort his wife put into preparing his lunch? How stubborn a man could be. Let him keep denying it and pretending all he

wanted. Even though I didn't fully understand his reasons, I was certain there was something more behind his actions.

I had already told Mrs. Sophia how he'd reacted the day before. Even so, judging by the way she laughed when I mentioned Mr. Peterson's dramatic comment, I was convinced she was too stubborn to back down.

One week later...

"Sir, today's lunch is your favorite. Plus, it comes seasoned with love, patience, and an impressive amount of waiting."

He made a face, which only made my smile widen.

"What nonsense are you saying now?"

"Well, the waiting part is because..."

"How do you even know what my favorite food is?"

"I know thanks to your wife."

He let out a deep, irritated groan as he narrowed his eyes and heaved a long sigh.

“It smells delicious. Would you like me to take it out of your office?”

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His reaction was immediate. His eyes went wide and he frowned as he stared at me.

He clearly hadn't expected that question. Normally, I'd ask if he wanted me to serve him the food, only for him to reject it and tell me to take it away. This time I decided to flip the script.

“So, sir, shall I take it away? I'm guessing you don't plan on eating it.”

“Yes... yes. Take it away.”

“Are you sure? It's your favorite food.”

“I told you yes,” he snapped, running a hand over his face. “Just go.”

I turned to leave, still unsure of what was going through his mind. As I walked off, I saw him covering his face with his hands and murmuring:

“Oh God, darling. You’re driving me crazy.”

“Oh my God, my dear, you are driving me insane.”

His words caught me off guard, and my eyes flew open as a thought suddenly formed in my head.

“Just to be clear, sir, your wife did not poison the food she has been bringing you.”

“You are still here?” He snapped his head up at once. Confusion and shock were written all over his face.

“I am, sir,” I replied calmly, pretending I had no idea why he was startled.

“I thought you had already left. Forget it. Just go back to work,” he said, dragging a hand through his hair.

“And the lunch?” I asked, lifting the paper bag slightly.

“Ugh! Fine. Put it on the table.”

“Are you absolutely sure, sir?”

“Yes. Set it down and leave.”

“Of course, Mr. Kelley.”

Once the bag rested on the small table, I turned toward the door with a smile I could not hide. As I stepped out of his office, amusement followed me. If I had known that menudo was the key to breaking through his resistance, I would have suggested it to his wife much sooner.

With a dish like that, his pride did not stand a chance, and it would not surprise me if he went straight to her the moment they met again.

Daniel’s POV:

My eyes kept drifting toward the door even though I told myself to stop. The clock read 11:45. Lunch was fifteen minutes away, yet Denise had not come in with my food.

Two weeks had passed since Sophia started bringing me lunch every day. Those same two weeks had nearly driven me out of my mind. Knowing she was so close and pretending I felt nothing had been torture. Every part of me wanted to pull her into my arms and confess how much I missed her, but I was still holding out for the right moment.

When noon arrived and Denise still had not shown up, I finally gave in and called her in, using work as an excuse just to see whether Sophia had already been there.

“Mr. Kelley, you asked for me?”

“Yes. Did you finish reviewing the marketing team’s report?” My eyes moved on their own, scanning her hands for a familiar paper bag.

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“Not yet, sir. You mentioned needing it by the end of the month, so I prioritized the financial reports instead. I can start on it right away if you want.”

“No, that will not be necessary,” I said, shaking my head before letting out a quiet breath.

I checked my watch again. It was already 12:15. She usually arrived between 11:30 and 11:45. The question sat heavily on my chest. How was I supposed to ask? Should I ask whether my wife had come by, or if she had called to say she could not cook today?

“Sir, do you need anything else?”

“No. You can go ahead and take your break.”

“And you, sir? Are you not having lunch?”

“Did my wife not bring lunch today?” The question slipped out of me without warning, and her response made my eyes widen.

“No, sir. Your wife did not come by today.” She placed clear emphasis on the word wife.

“Did I say that out loud?”

“You did, sir,” she replied.

A quiet breath left me as I motioned for her to go. Once I was alone, I leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes, unable to stop wondering why Sophia suddenly stopped coming.

My phone was already in my hand, her sister’s contact pulled up on the screen. After a second, I cursed under my breath and set it back down.

Damn it.

Sophia’s POV:

“Thank you to everyone who came to celebrate my girlfriend’s birthday with us. Enjoy the rest of the night. Happy birthday, love. I love you.”

Applause filled the room, and I clapped along with the crowd, rolling my eyes when Bryan and Aira kissed on stage.

“Sophia, your phone keeps ringing,” Craig said, patting my shoulder as he sighed.

“Ah, thanks, Craig,” I replied, realizing my phone had been vibrating. A small smile crossed my face as I pulled it from my back pocket.

Seeing Denise’s name on the screen made that smile linger. Since she worked directly with Daniel, I wasted no time excusing myself and stepping outside to answer the call.

“Hello, Denise.”

“Good evening, Madame Sophia. I just wanted to check on you. You did not bring Mr. Kelley his lunch today.”

“Did he tell you to contact me?”

“No, madame. He has no idea I am calling you. Actually, I wanted to share something with you.”

My curiosity spiked. “What is it?” I asked, a mix of anticipation and confusion tightening in my chest.

“He was noticeably disappointed today. He tried to hide it, but he was clearly upset that you did not cook for him. After eating your food for a week, he had gotten used to it. When it stopped, his mood changed.”

Her words caught me off guard, and before I knew it, laughter slipped out of me. I could hear her chuckling on the other end as well.

“Thank you for telling me, Denise. Knowing that, I have decided to stop cooking for him entirely.”

The line went quiet. Her laughter disappeared at once.

“What? I thought you said the fastest way to his heart was through food.”