

Chapter 844 To Stand Beside Him Through Every Nightmare

Cole stood alone on the mountaintop, the wind tugging at his jacket as he wrestled with thoughts that refused to settle. He remained steadfast in his resolve. Elliana would share his joy—every bright, burning moment of it—but his pain? That weight was his alone to carry.

The sun bled into the horizon when his phone shattered the silence.

He answered, and Bertram's voice exploded through the speaker. "Cole, get to the hospital now—your father's dying!"

The words punched through Cole, stealing the air from his lungs. He tore down the mountain without thinking, foot heavy on the accelerator as the city lights grew closer.

An hour later, he burst through the hospital doors and found the emergency room.

Ruben stood frozen outside the operating theater, his lips moving in desperate prayer. "Jarrett, you have to make it through this."

Diane had abandoned her recovery at the villa to be here. She pressed a tissue to her face, but the tears kept coming, relentless and hot.

Flanking them were Bertram and Emmanuel, their faces etched with deep worry.

Cole rushed over. Bertram grabbed his arm before he could speak. "Your father started deteriorating two days ago. Your grandmother brought him back to Ublento for treatment, but he collapsed the second they arrived. He's in surgery, but—"

His voice fractured. "The doctors say it's terminal. They don't think he'll survive. If he wakes up long enough to say goodbye, we should count ourselves lucky."

Cole's eyes fixed on those sealed doors. His chest constricted, squeezing tighter and tighter until he could barely breathe. Heat pricked behind his eyes.

All those years, Jarrett had been hollowed out by grief, mourning his wife who'd vanished without a trace ages ago. Cole had believed the long retreat at the villa would help his father recover. He'd never imagined death would find his father this soon. No—he refused to accept this. His father didn't even know yet that he had found Sophie, that their shattered family was one conversation away from being whole again.

"I've spent every day terrified Jarrett would die before me," Diane choked out, her voice splintering. "That's why I stayed at the villa—I used my own recovery as an excuse just to keep watch over him. No matter what happened backhome, I never returned. I centered my entire life around him."

She crumpled then, her composure disintegrating. "And after everything—after all that care—he's still leaving me first. He was my pride, my joy. How am I supposed to survive losing him?"

The wail that tore from her throat was raw, animal. Her body shook with the force of it.

Ruben, drowning in his own grief and helpless to fix hers, laid a trembling hand on her shoulder.

They leaned into each other, two people crushed under the same unbearable weight.

Bertram leaned in, voice dropping to barely a whisper. "Cole, before your father lost consciousness, he was still talking about finding your mother. If he doesn't wake up, you'll never get to tell him. He'll die with that regret carved into his bones."

Emmanuel's exhale came heavy, weighted. "Should've told him sooner."

Cole's heart slammed against his ribs. His father had dragged that failure through every waking hour—the torture of not finding Sophie, the agony of not knowing anything about her current condition. And now, because she refused to let him see her ruined face, he might actually die with that ache still lodged in his chest. She hadn't stopped loving him. She simply couldn't bear the thought of him looking at her disfigurement.

But Cole knew what his mother didn't see. His father's love didn't depend on perfection. Scars, burns, whatever devastation marked her skin—it wouldn't change a thing. He'd still look at her with that same absolute devotion, fierce and unwavering. Her departure—that self-sacrificing act she'd convinced herself was noble—had become his father's slow death. A regret so deep that it might follow him beyond the grave.

The truth crashed over Cole with brutal clarity. His mother was wrong. Had been wrong from the very start. She never should have kept such a catastrophic secret. She never should have abandoned his father to shoulder that torment alone. If she'd chosen differently then—trusted him with the truth, let them face the horror together as partners—this moment wouldn't exist.

And suddenly, Cole understood what Elliana had sought all along—total honesty. No matter how brutal, how dangerous, how devastating the truth, she wanted to know everything—wanted to stand beside him through every nightmare, not be sheltered from the darkness.

That was what marriage was supposed to be. Partners facing hell together, or not at all. Elliana had understood this long before Cole ever did. She'd watched her mother make that same catastrophic choice years ago—witnessed how a "noble departure" draped in love had only carved suffering into everyone left behind.

Cole's entire perspective fractured and reformed in that single breath. Elliana was right. He'd been devastatingly wrong.

The emergency room doors burst open. A doctor emerged, exhaustion weighing down every line of his face.

Cole lunged forward. "My father—how is he?"

The others pressed in behind him, a wall of desperate hope.

"I'm sorry." The doctor pulled down his mask, the gesture somehow making everything more final. "We've done everything possible, but we can't bring him back to consciousness." He paused, and that pause stretched like a blade. "He has some awareness left. Two hours, maybe. If there's anything you need to say to him, say it now. He'll hear you."

The words settled like stones in Cole's gut. Two hours. His father would spend his final moments as a prisoner in his own body—able to listen, but

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never able to respond. Never able to speak his mother's name one last time.

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