**Mafia Mask 401**

Chapter 401: First Heartbeat

Dominic’s POV

I was in the executive lounge of Zenith Systems, our family’s most successful money laundering front, regaling Mia with stories of the incredible trip Gemma and I had taken to secure new offshore accounts. The Mediterranean had been perfect for both business and pleasure, and I was still riding high on the memory of watching Gemma command respect from our European contacts when my encrypted phone buzzed. Xavier’s name flashed across the screen.

"Xavier, we just had lunch at the safe house. Not even my wife calls me this much," I joked, expecting his usual dry humor about my newfound domesticity.

His voice came through the scrambled line, stripped of all lightness. "Brother, I need you to listen carefully. Gemma is safe."

My blood turned to ice. In our world, when someone starts with "she’s safe," it means she almost wasn’t. "What the hell do you mean Gemma is safe? What happened, Xavier?" Every instinct honed by years in the family business screamed danger.

"Dominic, there was an incident at the office, but our security protocols worked. Daniel had his people monitoring the building, and Hunter reacted according to training. She’s been taken to the medical facility."

"Xavier, stop dancing around it and tell me what happened," I demanded, already moving toward the private elevator, my hand instinctively checking the weapon at my hip as I gave Mia a curt nod of dismissal.

"Nancy made her move. She got past the front desk looking for Gemma, but Hunter intercepted. Whatever chemical compound that psychotic woman brought hit Hunter instead of its intended target. Nancy’s been neutralized and is in custody. Gemma’s blood pressure spiked from the shock, so we’re taking no chances with the pregnancy."

"Which facility?" My voice carried the deadly calm that made even hardened soldiers nervous.

"Taylor's private clinic. We're en route with a full escort."

"Copy that."

The elevator opened to reveal Zoe stepping out with her trademark predatory smile. I grabbed her arm and pulled her back inside, jabbing the basement parking button repeatedly. I quickly briefed her on Xavier's report, watching her expression shift from casual confidence to the cold calculation that made her invaluable to family operations.

In the underground garage, my hands shook as I reached for the keys to my armored SUV. The weight of potential loss crashed down on me with devastating force.

"Boss, you need to let me drive. You're compromised right now," Zoe said firmly, snatching the keys from my trembling fingers. "I didn't survive multiple tours in Afghanistan to let you wrap us around a telephone pole."

She slid behind the wheel while I collapsed into the passenger seat. "Just get me there, Zoe. Whatever it takes."

"Roger that. Buckle up and hold on. I'm about to remind this city why they pay us protection money."

Zoe drove like the special forces operative she'd been before joining our family. She wove through Port Serenity traffic with surgical precision, using techniques that would have made our chase drivers jealous. We arrived at Dr. Taylor's private medical facility before the armored ambulance convoy, though I was so pale and shaking that the security guard at the entrance initially mistook me for a patient in crisis.

Minutes later, Hunter's ambulance pulled through the reinforced gates, followed immediately by the vehicle carrying my wife. When they rushed her stretcher past me, I fell into step alongside it, shouting that she was under family protection and that I was her husband. The paramedics, clearly briefed on family protocols, didn't question my presence.

"With us, Mr. Frost," one of them directed, and I sprinted alongside them through the facility's secure corridors.

When we entered the trauma bay and they transferred Gemma from the gurney to the examination table, relief flooded through me as I saw her conscious eyes find mine. Her expression showed the controlled fear of someone who'd learned to navigate our dangerous world, mixed with the shock of having that danger find her again.

"Elevated stress response caused the blood pressure spike. She's stable, but given the traumatic nature of the incident and her pregnancy, we're observing full precautionary protocols," the paramedic reported to the medical team before leaving us in the sterile safety of the clinic.

"Gemma, talk to me. How are you feeling?" I asked, moving to her side and gently taking her hand in both of mine.

"I'm okay, Dominic, but I need to know about Hunter. Where is he? Is he alive?" Her concern for the man who'd taken a chemical weapon meant for her spoke to the loyalty that had made her family from the moment she'd chosen our world.

"He's here, getting the best care our money can buy. I'll have updates as soon as the doctors finish with him," I assured her, fighting to keep my voice steady when inside I was ready to burn down half the city in retaliation.

A nurse entered, and I immediately mentioned that Gemma was Dr. Taylor's private patient. She nodded and reached for the phone, but it proved unnecessary as Taylor himself walked in with the brisk confidence that had made him our family's trusted medical authority for many years.

"My dear children, what chaos have we stumbled into now?" Taylor entered with his usual blend of paternal warmth and professional efficiency, washing his hands and snapping on latex gloves. "Ivy called and briefed me on the incident. So, Gemma, another attempt on the family, I see. These people really don't understand who they're dealing with, do they?"

"Andrew, please don't joke about it. I'm so tired of being everyone's target," Gemma sighed, the exhaustion of constant vigilance evident in her voice.

"Well, with Nancy neutralized, perhaps you'll finally have some peace," Andrew said while conducting his examination. "I want to run a full panel, just to be absolutely certain. And since you're here, what would you think about moving up that ultrasound? It was scheduled for later this week, but circumstances being what they are..."

"Really, Andrew?" Gemma's voice brightened with genuine excitement for the first time since the attack.

"I want to make sure my newest family member is thriving despite all this drama," Andrew smiled, his presence immediately calming the raw tension in the room.

"Yes, please!" Gemma exclaimed, her eyes lighting up with anticipation. "My love?"

"Nothing would make me happier, my queen," I smiled, leaning down to kiss her forehead, tasting the salt of fear finally giving way to joy.

"Excellent. I'll have them bring in the equipment and collect samples for the blood work. But preliminary assessment suggests it was purely a stress response, Gemma. Still, we monitor everything carefully with expectant mothers in our care."

After Andrew left to arrange everything, I helped Gemma change into the clinic gown. Soon he returned with a technician who efficiently drew blood samples. With all the medical protocols satisfied, it was time for the ultrasound. Nervousness and anticipation coursed through my veins like adrenaline before a hit. This would be our first glimpse of the future heir to everything we'd built.

Andrew prepared the ultrasound equipment with practiced efficiency, powering up the machine and applying the conducting gel to Gemma's gently rounded belly. He began the examination with clinical precision, and suddenly, a strong, rapid heartbeat filled the sterile room. Andrew looked at us with the kind of smile reserved for miracles.

It was my child's heart, powerful and determined, beating like a promise of the future. The sound hit me like a physical blow, overwhelming every defense I'd built over years of violence and loss. Tears streamed down my face unchecked, my vision blurred, and my legs gave out completely. In that moment, all I could process was that relentless thump-thump-thump and the white tile floor rushing up to meet me as consciousness fled.

Chapter 402: Wounded Masculine Pride

Gemma’s POV

After the medical scare, I couldn’t contain my laughter as I watched Dominic lying on the stretcher next to me in the Thorne family’s private medical facility, his face a portrait of wounded masculine pride that no Capo should ever display.

"Could you please control yourself, Gemma?" Dominic grumbled, adjusting his hospital gown with as much dignity as a feared mafia enforcer could muster under such circumstances.

"I simply can’t," I gasped between fits of giggles that bubbled up uncontrollably from witnessing the most dangerous man in Port Serenity reduced to this state.

"Gemma, Dr. Taylor already explained that I fainted due to emotional overload," Dominic’s voice carried that specific tone men use when their reputation as ruthless killers feels threatened.

"My darling husband," I wiped tears of mirth from my eyes, "you passed out cold during our baby’s first ultrasound. What on earth will happen when you’re in the delivery room with your heir?" New laughter erupted from me at the mental image of the Thorne family’s most feared Capo collapsing during childbirth.

"This was a one-time occurrence, Gemma." Dominic’s stern expression, the same one that struck terror into rival families, only made me laugh harder.

The curtain parted as Zoe strode in carrying a tray of snacks, her face serious for about a moment before cracking into a wide grin that transformed her usual cold intelligence operative demeanor.

"Oh, Dominic, this is priceless!" Zoe burst into laughter, setting me off again. "Don Caleb limited the visitors for security reasons, but fair warning—the boys from your crew are waiting outside with enough material to mock you for ages. This will become legendary in family circles."

"Damn it, Zoe! You need to control them. This is entirely your fault," Dominic complained, crossing his arms defensively like a petulant child rather than a man who controlled half the city's underground operations.

"My fault? How exactly?" Zoe raised an eyebrow, still fighting laughter while maintaining her razor-sharp composure.

"Your driving through hostile territory is criminally dangerous. I nearly died in that armored car today navigating enemy checkpoints. I was already worried sick about my wife's safety in this war zone, and then Taylor lets me hear our future family heir's heartbeat. It was an emotional tsunami in the span of moments!" Dominic's explanation held water, but his indignation remained hilarious given his fearsome reputation.

"Dominic, you're whining like a street soldier denied his cut," Zoe teased with the brutal honesty only a trusted family operative could get away with, which sent me into another laughing fit until I felt something warm spreading beneath me.

"Oh no. No way." I shifted uncomfortably, realizing what had happened in our heavily guarded medical sanctuary.

"What's wrong, Gemma?" Dominic's annoyance instantly transformed into the protective concern of a man whose wife represented his most precious vulnerability.

"I think I just peed the bed." I lifted the sheet in disbelief to find a wet patch spreading beneath me. "This cannot be happening! And it's entirely your fault, Dominic!"

"Mine? How is this possibly my fault?" Dominic's mock outrage failed spectacularly as his lips twitched with suppressed laughter, temporarily forgetting his dignity as a ranking family member.

Zoe collapsed into a nearby chair, her usually controlled intelligence operative facade crumbling as she gasped for breath between peals of laughter. Dominic's restraint finally crumbled as he joined in, his shoulders shaking with mirth in a way that would shock anyone who'd seen him interrogate enemies.

Zander chose that precise moment to enter the room. He assessed the situation with one clinical glance, accustomed to the Thorne family's various crises, and asked with medical precision, "Did you wet the bed?" When I nodded miserably, he announced, "I know I shouldn't laugh at the wife of a Capo, but I'm going to anyway," before joining the chorus of hysterics that filled our secure medical room.

My saving grace arrived in the form of a trusted family nurse who quickly evaluated the situation, ushered Zoe and Zander outside past our armed security detail, and called for another nurse who brought a wheelchair to escort me to a private bathroom for a shower.

After the fainting fiasco and the bed-wetting incident, Dr. Taylor finally released us from the family's medical facility once my test results came back normal. Zoe stood ready to drive us home through Thorne territory, but I needed to check on Hunter first.

"Taylor, do you have any news about Hunter?" I asked anxiously about our loyal bodyguard.

"Yes, Gemma. He's been moved to a recovery room under family protection," Taylor explained. "That psychotic woman tried to throw acid at you during the territory dispute, but Hunter stepped in front like the professional he is. It hit his back, causing burns, but fortunately, they're superficial. He reacted quickly, removing his wet jacket and shirt immediately, which prevented more serious injury. He'll stay here under our security for observation for a while. Would you like to see him?"

"Yes, Taylor, we would," Dominic answered decisively, his protective instincts fully engaged.

In Hunter's heavily guarded room, we found his wife sitting beside him—a beautiful woman in her thirties who'd married into our dangerous world. She rose gracefully when we entered, greeting us with the respectful warmth expected of family associates.

"Hunter, how are you feeling?" I approached his bed, grateful for his sacrifice.

"I'm doing well, Gemma. I'd be back on duty already if the decision were mine, but the doctor is being cautious about infection risks." Hunter offered his characteristic gentle smile despite being wounded in family service. "And you? Are you alright after the attack?"

"I’m perfectly fine, thanks to your quick thinking. The acid didn’t touch me. I don’t even know how to properly thank you for taking that hit."

"Just doing my job protecting family assets, Gemma. I should have been more vigilant and not let that unstable woman get so close, but with her disguise, I didn’t recognize the threat," he lamented with professional disappointment.

"Hunter, she was clever and desperate, but you saved Gemma from permanent disfigurement. The family is incredibly grateful," Dominic said with the sincere respect one warrior shows another. "Follow the doctor’s orders completely, and when you’re cleared for duty, your position protecting my wife remains yours. These territory wars aren’t over—I need someone I trust absolutely watching over her."

"Thank you, sir," Hunter’s relief was visible. "I thought perhaps my services wouldn’t be needed anymore, now that we’ve eliminated the immediate threats against Gemma."

"Absolutely not. She carries my heir and represents my greatest weakness—I need someone I trust with my life watching over her," Dominic assured him with the gravity befitting family hierarchy. "And don’t concern yourself with any medical expenses. Everything’s covered by family funds, plus there’ll be a substantial bonus in your account. Your recovery time will be fully compensated."

"That’s incredibly generous, sir. The family’s loyalty to its people never fails to amaze me," Hunter’s gratitude was evident and genuine.

After chatting a while longer with Hunter and his wife under the watchful eyes of our security detail, we said our goodbyes and finally headed toward the elevator through corridors lined with our armed guards.

"I’m going to be the one getting terminated," I sighed while waiting. "I just returned from our honeymoon in Sicily and have already missed part of a workday at the legitimate business front."

"Relax, Gemma. Don Caleb specifically said not to worry—he values your skills in managing the family’s legal operations too much to let you go over security incidents," Zoe reassured me, her hand on my shoulder with surprising gentleness.

In the secured parking garage, Dominic extended his hand toward Zoe as she helped me into our armored vehicle's passenger seat.

"Hand over those keys, reckless operative," Dominic demanded with his usual commanding tone.

"No chance! You fainted today—you're not driving through hostile territory," Zoe declared firmly, unimpressed by rank when it came to safety.

"I refuse to endure another stress test courtesy of your defensive driving through enemy checkpoints," Dominic protested, though his concern was valid given recent attacks.

"Don't be ridiculous, Dominic. Get in the back behind the bulletproof partition. I'm driving us home," Zoe ignored his outstretched hand, walked around the car with professional efficiency, and slipped into the driver's seat. "Get in already, Dominic!"

Dominic complied with much grumbling about subordinate insubordination. When we arrived at our heavily fortified family compound, we found the house buzzing with conversation and laughter—trusted associates and household staff had gathered, anxiously awaiting news of the attack and my condition. Our guard dog Amber greeted us enthusiastically, bounding toward us with a wagging tail past the armed sentries. As we mingled with everyone under the watchful protection of our security team, the jokes about Dominic's fainting spell began and continued relentlessly for the evening.

A profound sense of peace and security enveloped me, wrapping around my heart like the family's protective embrace. I had an incredible household fortress, a devoted husband who commanded respect and fear throughout the underworld, loyal friends bound by blood oaths, an adorable guard dog, and soon, our heir would be in my arms to continue the Thorne family legacy. What more could the wife of a Capo possibly want from this dangerous life? Absolutely nothing.

## Chapter 403: Dangerous Lies

Lila's POV

We had gathered at Xavier's secure compound for a relaxing afternoon by the pool and barbecue. It had been since the brutal takedown of that psychotic witch Nancy, and life within the Thorne family's protection seemed to have returned to its usual dangerous normalcy.

Almost normal, anyway. I couldn't shake the feeling that something was eating at Daniel lately. Just moments ago, he'd stepped away from our group to take what looked like an urgent call, his entire posture radiating the kind of tension I'd seen when rival families made moves against Thorne territory. This wasn't new behavior either. For days now, he'd been jumpy as hell, constantly checking encrypted messages on his burner phone and disappearing for mysterious meetings. I'd initially written it off as family business stress, knowing better than to pry too deeply into Thorne operations.

Ruby dropped onto the lounger beside me, her sharp eyes catching my worried expression immediately. "What's got you looking like someone's about to start a war, Little June?"

"Nothing's wrong, Ru," I replied, trying to keep my voice steady.

She rolled her eyes with the exasperation of someone who'd survived too many family secrets. "Don't feed me that bullshit. And don't pull a Gemma by keeping us in the dark when something serious is going down. Should I just signal Zoe over here right now?" The threat in her voice carried real weight. I knew exactly what would happen if Zoe got involved in this - Daniel would find himself subjected to her particular brand of enhanced interrogation techniques, the kind that left grown men confessing sins they'd forgotten they'd committed.

"Please don't bring Zo into this," I pleaded. "It's just that Daniel's been acting strange lately."

"Strange how?" Ruby followed my gaze toward him, watching as he paced near the compound's reinforced perimeter. "I mean, yeah, he seems more on edge than usual, and he's practically married to that encrypted phone. But he's Thorne family security - paranoia keeps us all breathing."

"This feels different, Ru. I can't put my finger on it, but my gut's screaming that something's wrong. Maybe I'm just being paranoid myself."

"Have you confronted him about it?" She continued observing as Daniel gestured sharply during his call, his free hand instinctively checking the concealed weapon at his hip.

I sighed deeply. "I don't want to come off as some clingy civilian girlfriend who can't handle the family business. The gap between his world and mine is already massive - I don't need him thinking I'm too naive to understand how things work in this life."

"Lila, noticing changes in your man’s behavior and feeling concerned isn’t naive - it’s smart survival instinct. In our world, when someone starts acting secretive, it usually means blood’s about to spill. You need to have this conversation with him."

"You’re right. I’ll corner him when we get back to the safe house tonight."

Shortly after, Daniel approached me, his face carrying the kind of grim expression that usually preceded family enforcement actions.

"Little one, something urgent came up with Thorne operations. I need to handle some business at headquarters," he said, leaning down to kiss me with an intensity that felt almost desperate.

"I’ll come with you. You can drop me at the safe house on the way," I said, already reaching for my things.

"No!" The sharpness in his voice made me freeze. He immediately softened his tone, but I caught the flash of something like panic in his eyes. "Little one, stay here and enjoy yourself. It’s a beautiful day - spend it with the family."

"Trying to sneak away with your deadly enforcer, Lila?" Zoe materialized beside us, martini in hand and that predatory smile that usually meant someone was about to have a very bad day.

"Daniel got called away on Thorne business, so I figured I’d head back too," I explained.

Zoe’s eyebrow arched in that way that had made seasoned capos sweat. "Martinez, I thought today was your stand-down day?"

"Family business doesn’t take days off," he replied with a strained smile that didn’t reach his eyes. "But I’m telling my little one to stay here where it’s secure." He ran his fingers through my hair in that protective gesture that usually melted my resolve.

"She absolutely should stay," Zoe declared with authority. "Finn and I will escort her back to the safe house later - we're in the same sector anyway."

"That won't be necessary," Daniel countered with an edge to his voice. "I'll come back for my little one once I've handled the situation at headquarters." His smile looked more like a grimace.

"Daniel, is everything really under control?" I couldn't help asking, that gnawing worry in my gut getting stronger.

"Yes, just routine security protocols. I wish I could stay here with you though." He kissed me again, this time with a lingering intensity that felt like goodbye. "I'll be back to collect you later."

As he prepared to leave, I noticed him discretely pull Xavier aside for what looked like urgent whispered instructions. Both Zoe and I caught this exchange, and the look that passed between us confirmed we were thinking the same thing.

"That was suspicious as hell," Zoe commented once he'd disappeared through the compound's secured gates. "What's really going on, Little June? And don't you dare say 'nothing' because I can smell lies from three blocks away."

Nothing ever escaped Zoe's notice - it's what made her so valuable to the Thorne family's intelligence network. Seeing my increasingly worried expression, she quickly gathered the girls and led us to the private sauna room where we could speak freely without surveillance concerns.

Inside the steamy sanctuary, I finally opened up about Daniel's increasingly erratic behavior - the encrypted calls at all hours, including middle-of-the-night conversations that had him speaking in hushed, urgent tones, his unusual solo trips to Thorne headquarters during his scheduled downtime, and his constant state of hypervigilance that went beyond normal family security protocols.

"When did this pattern start?" Ivy asked, her face showing the kind of concern that came from surviving too many family betrayals.

"It's been building for a while now," I admitted reluctantly.

"And you didn’t think to share this intelligence with your family?" Zoe’s tone carried the dangerous calm that preceded violent retribution. "Are you channeling Gemma’s tendency to handle deadly situations solo?"

"Initially, I genuinely believed it was just increased security measures after the Nancy situation. But as his behavior became more erratic and secretive, I started having serious doubts about what he’s really involved in," I explained.

Ruby’s eyes narrowed with the calculating look of someone planning strategic warfare. "Well, we’re going to uncover the truth behind this, even if I have to unleash Zo’s enhanced interrogation techniques on him." We all laughed, though mine felt hollow and forced.

When we returned to the pool area, we noticed the men clustered around the grill in what was clearly a strategic planning session rather than casual conversation.

"Perfect, now they’re all acting like they’re planning a hostile takeover," Ivy observed dryly.

"I don’t think they’re acting suspicious, Ivy. I know they are," Zoe crossed her arms with the decisive air of someone about to initiate a full-scale investigation. "Let’s give them enough rope to hang themselves."

Later that afternoon, Zoe’s encrypted phone buzzed. A predatory smile spread across her face as she checked the secure caller ID.

"Time to verify whether our boy actually went to Thorne headquarters," she said, showing us Inspector Adler’s name on the screen before answering on speaker. "Adler, my favorite dirty cop!"

"Boss lady! How’s life at the top of the food chain?" came the cheerful reply.

"Profitable as always. What about you?"

"I need some expert advice from the queen of fixing impossible situations."

"My consultation fees have gone up," Zoe teased, eliciting laughter from Adler.

"Whatever you want, Boss lady - you know I'm good for it!"

"So what's the crisis?"

"My wife's ready to put a contract out on me because I had to work today instead of taking her to some family gathering at the lake. I need a foolproof way to make amends unless I want to be sleeping in the garage indefinitely." Zoe chuckled at his domestic predicament.

"I'll send you details for an exclusive spa that caters to family wives. Book their premium couples package and drop my name - they'll treat you both like royalty. She'll forgive you instantly, especially if you can get in tonight after your shift."

"You're a lifesaver, Boss lady! Your reputation for fixing the unfixable is well-earned," Adler said gratefully. "What can I do to balance the books?"

"Why are you pulling duty today, Adler?" Zoe asked with calculated casualness.

"Someone from the rival task force called in sick and asked me to cover their surveillance detail. Easy money."

"Interesting! Is Martinez working the Thorne security detail today too?" Her tone remained deliberately neutral.

"No, Martinez is off rotation today. Probably holed up somewhere secure with his civilian girlfriend."

"I see. I'll let you know how you can repay this favor, Adler."

"Deal, Boss lady. You know I'm always available for family business."

After ending the call, we all stared at Zoe with a mixture of admiration and growing alarm.

"Since when did you and Adler become such close allies?" Ivy asked, clearly surprised by the familiarity.

"That partnership developed during your pregnancy complications. He kept me updated on all the Roman investigation details and potential threats to family security. I ended up meeting his household - his wife is absolutely charming and completely ignorant of what her husband actually does for the Thorne family," Zoe explained matter-of-factly. "We maintain regular contact for intelligence purposes."

"How did none of us know about this connection?" Ruby wondered aloud.

"You never asked, and operational security demanded discretion," Zoe shrugged. "Now, can we focus on the immediate threat? Martinez lied about Thorne headquarters requiring his presence today. Time to apply serious pressure on these idiots and find out what kind of game he's playing."

My heart felt like it was being squeezed in a vice, and I felt my throat constricting with fear. What kind of dangerous secrets was Daniel keeping from me? In the Thorne family's world, lies usually meant someone was about to die.

Chapter 404: New Heir Born

Gemma's POV

Late into my pregnancy, and I still couldn't believe how quickly time had flown since Dominic and I reconciled from that nightmare. With my delivery scheduled soon, I was in panic mode realizing our son's nursery in Dominic's heavily fortified compound wasn't ready. That's how I found myself on a Sunday morning, sitting in the custom leather nursing chair with Amber at my feet, reading crib assembly instructions to one of the most feared Capos in the Thorne family.

"Christ, why do I always get stuck with furniture assembly?" Dominic groaned, staring at the pile of imported Italian wooden parts. His expensive suit jacket was draped over a chair, sleeves rolled up revealing the intricate tattoos marking his rank within the organization. "We could hire someone who actually knows what they're doing."

I rubbed my enormous belly affectionately, feeling our future heir shift restlessly inside me. "Because this is your son's crib. Would you trust some stranger inside our compound to make sure it's secure enough to keep the next generation of the family safe?"

Dominic gave me an incredulous look, his emerald eyes flashing with that mixture of amusement and exasperation I'd grown to love. "You seriously think I'm more qualified than a professional furniture assembler?"

"Absolutely. It's your son who'll be sleeping in it. Your protective instincts will make you triple-check every screw, every joint. No one else would be as thorough as his father."

"I don't follow your logic, but I love you both too much to argue," he sighed, running a hand through his golden hair.

"Less complaining, more assembling," I countered firmly. "I refuse to have the future heir to your operations sleeping on the floor because his father was too lazy to put his crib together."

"You're worse than Zoe when you're giving orders," Dominic muttered, turning back to the instruction manual with a shake of his head.

I continued reading from the premium crib manual, "The maximum distance between the longitudinal supports should be—" Suddenly, an intense pain shot through my abdomen like a knife. "Owww..." I looked down to see wetness spreading between my legs on the expensive upholstery.

Dominic glanced over with a teasing grin, clearly remembering my frequent bathroom trips that had become a running joke among his security team. "Did you have another accident with your bladder?"

"You idiot!" I snapped, wincing as another sharp contraction hit me. "Owww! My water broke!"

"Gemma, focus on reading the instructions. You can change your clothes later," Dominic said, completely oblivious as he continued tightening screws with the precision he usually reserved for interrogations.

"Dominic! My water broke! Your son is coming now!" I practically shouted.

He turned toward me, his face draining of all color. The wrench dropped from his hands, clattering onto the hardwood floor. "What did you say?"

"Don’t you dare faint on me now. Call Andrew immediately!" I commanded, watching him freeze in panic. Rolling my eyes, I grabbed my secure phone and called Andrew myself. Fortunately, the family’s trusted doctor was at his private clinic and promised to be at the compound immediately.

Soon, Andrew burst through our reinforced bedroom door with a huge smile, his medical bag in hand. "I’m here! The newest Thorne heir is ready to make his entrance!"

Dominic looked absolutely terrified, his usual commanding presence completely shattered. "Is it safe? Isn’t it early?"

"Relax, Dominic," Andrew reassured him with the calm authority that had made him the family’s go-to doctor for years. "The baby is fully formed and healthy. Now grab the hospital bag Gemma has undoubtedly prepared, and let’s get to the medical wing. My surgical team is already being notified and the compound is on lockdown."

At the family’s private medical facility within the compound, everything moved with military precision. A trusted nurse helped me change and get settled while Andrew examined me under the watchful eyes of Dominic’s personal security detail.

"Excellent news, Gemma. Everything indicates we’re looking at a natural birth," Andrew said cheerfully. "Dominic, inform the family leadership while I monitor Gemma’s progress. This could take a while, so walk with her in the secured corridor to help with dilation."

As Dominic and I strolled the bulletproof hallway, making calls to inform our mothers about the impending arrival, a sharp, overwhelming contraction suddenly gripped me. I screamed and doubled over. Andrew appeared immediately, rushing to help Dominic get me back to the medical bed.

"Gemma, your baby is crowning!" Andrew announced excitedly. "Today’s the day we welcome new blood to the family. Come on, little one, we’re all eager to meet you."

Another powerful contraction hit, and Andrew coached me through it while Dominic held my hand tightly, helping me with the breathing techniques we'd practiced. Then Andrew was humming his signature melody as he placed my newborn son on my chest.

"Look at those strong lungs..." he murmured before turning to Dominic. "Father, come cut the umbilical cord."

"If you faint with surgical scissors anywhere near me, I will personally end you," I warned Dominic breathlessly, making Andrew laugh heartily.

After Dominic cut the cord with shaking hands, our son was examined and returned to my arms. Soon, the gentle-voiced nurse approached with reverent care.

"Mrs. Frost, I need to borrow your son for just a moment. He'll be back in your arms before you know it," she said softly, though I hated letting him go.

Despite the intensity, my delivery had been remarkably smooth and quick. After showering in the luxurious medical suite, my perfect son was returned to me. Andrew mentioned I could return to our quarters in a couple of days if everything continued well.

"Your family is filling up the security checkpoint," Andrew said, cradling my son with obvious adoration. "The leadership's given orders to let them in gradually."

"Andrew, please ask Nadia and Gerard to come in first," I requested, noticing Dominic's surprised expression.

"Are you sure, beautiful?" he asked.

"I've never been more certain," I smiled.

Moments later, there was a respectful knock before Nadia entered, eyes brimming with tears and wearing a ridiculous grin.

"I’m finally an aunt!" she exclaimed, hugging Dominic tightly before approaching me carefully. "So, the big reveal—heir or heiress?"

"Grandma’s predictions were right as always," Dominic smiled proudly. "It’s a boy."

Gerard followed close behind, eyes sparkling with joy, clutching balloons and an expensive teddy bear.

"Come meet your godson Miles," I said, extending my arm so Nadia could hold the baby.

"What did you say?" Nadia asked, confused.

"This is Miles, your nephew and godson. Unless you’d prefer not to be his godmother..."

"Are you serious? I’m going to be my nephew’s godmother?" Nadia’s emotions overflowed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Yes, and he couldn’t have better godparents in this world," I said with absolute certainty.

Nadia looked at Dominic with wonder. "Did you tell her about our old promise?"

"I had nothing to do with this decision," Dominic explained. "She made the choice and only told me she’d selected godparents. I didn’t know who until this moment, but I couldn’t be happier."

"What promise?" I asked, curious.

"When we were teenagers, we promised to be godparents to each other’s firstborn," Nadia explained. "When Vincenzo was born, I made Dominic his godfather without hesitation. I never expected him to honor the same promise."

"I was hoping for exactly this!" Gerard chimed in, making us all laugh. "Now let godfather hold the future don. Miles, we promise to always stand by your side—protecting, guiding, and ensuring your place in this family."

"Nadia, from the moment I entered your family's world, I knew if I ever had a child with your brother, you would be the godparents. You're incredible parents and honorable people. My son will be in the safest hands."

Gerard beamed while holding Miles with practiced ease. "The godfather is going to make everyone in that waiting area green with envy!"

"The godfather is also coming home with me to finish assembling that crib," Dominic reminded him with a pat on the back, making us all laugh.

Life in this dangerous world was truly beautiful when surrounded by the right people. Despite the violence and challenges Dominic and I had faced, we'd built a family protected by unbreakable bonds. I'd learned that family isn't always blood—it's the people who love you genuinely, who stand by you through bullets and betrayal. With family at our backs, we could survive any war, because they would always shield us, surround us with fierce love, and fill our hearts with joy worth killing for.

## Chapter 405: Struck by Magic

Daniel's POV

What a suffocating day! The only disruption in this monotonous routine was my parents relentlessly calling to make my existence miserable. My father harbored this stubborn notion that I should abandon the police force and join him and my brother in managing the family's underground empire. That would never happen.

I had already spent years working within the Martinez syndicate, both during and after law school, but overseeing a network of money laundering operations disguised as legitimate investment firms wasn't my calling, nor was managing the family's political corruption schemes.

I admit that when I first pursued legal studies, joining the family business was indeed the plan. Even though I found no satisfaction in the syndicate's machinations, I made an effort. I chose law specifically

to add value to our operations, and having judicial knowledge would prove invaluable, especially since my brother was already established in financial manipulation and offshore accounting.

However, law school transformed me in ways I never anticipated. I discovered various paths beyond the family's shadow world, and an entire universe of possibilities opened before me. It became impossible not to be seduced by legitimate law enforcement. Without realizing it, I discovered what many call a vocation, but for me, it represented pure passion. I attempted to dismiss the idea, but it consumed my thoughts. It was as if I had received a divine calling, and I couldn't resist answering it. I abandoned everything and became a detective, much to my parents' horror and disgust.

But my father was intensifying his pressure. The formidable Elias Martinez wanted to step back from active leadership and expected both sons to helm the syndicate. But this brilliant strategist, renowned for his cunning and ruthless business acumen, remained blind to what was directly under his nose. He couldn't see that the family member truly born with the instinct to command the Martinez empire, who possessed the hunger for power in her very blood, wasn't either of the sons he constantly boasted about as his successors, but rather our family's precious jewel, the youngest and a woman—my sister Sybilla. Unfortunately, my father would never acknowledge her exceptional talents. He belonged to the old guard that believed women had no place in syndicate leadership.

The truth was, I was growing weary of his and my mother's constant interference in my personal choices. That morning, while preparing for my shift, my mother materialized unexpectedly in my secured apartment, launching into her familiar complaints about my career decisions. This intrusion occurred frequently—she would appear without warning, in various locations, to berate me about being the ungrateful son she claimed I had become.

Under their relentless pressure, I lived in constant tension, desperately needing some real action to relieve stress and redirect my focus from these family power struggles. But in this deceptively tranquil city, incidents that truly interested a law enforcement officer rarely occurred. The routine was mind-numbing!

Lost in these brooding thoughts, searching for ways to release this mounting tension, I answered my phone almost mechanically, without paying attention to my actions.

"Inspector Martinez," I stated firmly, staring into the void while contemplating requesting extended leave.

"Daniel, my friend, how are things?" My closest ally Xavier Black spoke from the other end, instantly pulling me from my dark contemplations.

Xavier was offering me exactly what I craved—real action. He quickly briefed me on the developing situation: Caleb Thorne's heir had been abducted, and there was a woman currently in the city with an outstanding federal warrant who most likely possessed crucial information about the kidnapping. This news energized me completely—a fugitive hunt. I would track down this rat and her accomplices.

I assembled my tactical team and hit the streets; we would leave no stone unturned in this operation. By evening, we had successfully apprehended the fugitive and the two other kidnappers, and rescued the young heir. It had been an exceptionally productive day, and it became even better when Xavier informed me he would arrange private transportation so I could personally escort the boy and the prisoners to Port Harbor.

When I arrived at Thorne Group headquarters and witnessed the young heir being placed safely in his parents' embrace, I felt completely fulfilled. This was far more than simply completing an assignment; it was the profound satisfaction of being genuinely useful, of helping people and accomplishing meaningful good. This was precisely what captivated me about legitimate law enforcement. The relieved expressions on the parents' faces as they held their son confirmed that I was pursuing the right path—I had discovered my true purpose.

But this particular mission held something even more extraordinary in store for me. Caleb summoned an employee and requested that she escort me to the conference room where the other officers were waiting. She was extremely professional and courteous, but as we passed the executive secretary's station, she was suddenly called away.

"Gemma, I apologize, but I require your assistance with an urgent legal document," I heard a melodious, refined, distinctly feminine voice request.

I looked up and encountered an angelic face with large caramel-colored eyes framed by luxurious long lashes. She was positioned behind the mahogany desk with an intensely focused expression, but she was absolutely breathtaking, so flawless, almost like a porcelain masterpiece, with delicate features, porcelain skin, and naturally rosy cheeks, all complemented by shoulder-length layered hair with golden highlights that made her literally radiate.

My gaze remained fixed on this stunning woman, who appeared remarkably young yet was so utterly captivating. I stood frozen before her, completely overwhelmed by her voice and her presence. My

heart was racing frantically, my breathing became labored, and I felt as though I was floating above ground. I was simply oblivious to everything occurring around me; all my attention was concentrated on her, even though she hadn't yet noticed my presence. Something fundamental within me shifted the moment I heard that voice, though I couldn't identify what it was—it felt like being struck by powerful magic.

"Inspector?" I felt someone touch my arm and call my name, breaking the enchantment that kept me transfixed on that remarkable woman.

"Oh, my apologies, I suddenly remembered something important that momentarily distracted me," I fabricated an excuse to the employee Caleb had assigned to escort me to the meeting room, but what I genuinely wanted was to remain there studying that beautiful little enchantress who had completely bewitched me.

I took one final look at that exquisite face and noticed her small, elegant hands holding the telephone to her ear. At that precise moment, she released a soft laugh that resonated directly through my soul—it was the most beautiful sound that became permanently etched in my memory. Anyone capable of reading my thoughts would declare it love at first sight, but I didn't believe in such romantic nonsense; I was a pragmatic man. However, she attracted me with overwhelming force, and I needed to discover who this woman was. And I would do exactly that—I would uncover her identity.

## Chapter 406: Instant Attraction

Daniel's POV

When Inspector Adler suggested I transfer to the elite organized crime task force in Port Harbor to work alongside him, I never imagined the Martinez family connections would actually make it happen. Port Harbor's specialized unit was the crown jewel every law enforcement officer coveted—highly exclusive, with a waiting list of qualified detectives hoping for a chance. Yet somehow, Adler managed to get my transfer approved with just one strategic phone call to the right people in the department.

I couldn't believe my fortune. Without even trying, I'd secured a promotion, relocation to a major metropolitan area, and a position with the organized crime division that offered extensive fieldwork—exactly the kind of cases that challenged me. Most importantly, I'd finally have substantial distance from my father's suffocating political machinations and my mother's constant meddling in my personal affairs.

The opportunity had materialized out of nowhere, like a gift from the universe.

My strategy was straightforward: return briefly to Greenleaf to finalize paperwork and gather my belongings before permanently establishing myself in Port Harbor. While waiting for my departure flight at the terminal, I decided to contact Xavier to inquire about the captivating woman I'd encountered at Thorne Group's headquarters—a woman whose image had dominated my thoughts since our brief encounter.

"Daniel, my brother!" Xavier answered with his characteristic warmth. "Don't tell me you've already rushed back to that suffocating hometown. I was hoping we could share some bourbon and discuss business!"

"I'm at the airport currently. Flight departs shortly," I replied, amused by his obvious disappointment. "We'll have to reserve that bourbon for the weekend."

"What's driving this urgency? Stay several more days. I'm certain you can negotiate extended leave."

"I probably could manage that," I acknowledged, "but I need to organize everything for the move. I've just received orders transferring me to Port Harbor—I'll be collaborating with Inspector Adler in the organized crime division."

"You're serious!" Xavier's voice elevated with genuine excitement. "You're actually relocating here permanently? That's incredible news! Finally breaking free from your father's iron grip."

Xavier understood everything about my family dynamics—the political pressure, the manipulation, the constant surveillance disguised as parental concern. He'd consistently encouraged me to leave Greenleaf, to demonstrate to the Martinez family that I was a mature adult capable of independent decision-making.

"Exactly, and I'm withholding this information until after I've established myself," I confided. "I refuse to give my father opportunities to sabotage my career advancement through his political connections."

"Brilliant strategic thinking. When's this major transition happening?"

"This weekend. Simply need to close my active cases and pack essential items. Not transporting furniture—just clothing and personal effects—so they can't interfere with logistics. I'll acquire everything necessary in Port Harbor."

"Perfect! You can stay at my penthouse, Daniel. It'll be absolutely fantastic."

"Are you certain I won't be disrupting your lifestyle?" I asked, genuinely concerned about imposing.

"Don't even consider hotel accommodations. My home is your home. When do you arrive?"

"Sunday."

"I'll arrange something entertaining for us both."

"Excellent." I paused, finally addressing what had been consuming my thoughts. "Xavier, there's another matter. That young woman at Thorne Group's reception area—the petite one with remarkable composure—who exactly is she?"

"Petite?" Xavier sounded intrigued. "You must mean Lila."

"Lila," I repeated, the name rolling off my tongue like honey. "Beautiful brown eyes, golden highlights throughout her hair."

"That's absolutely Lila Sullivan. She actually works in Thorne's legal department but was assisting with front desk duties that day. What's sparked this interest?" His tone became knowingly curious.

"I found her... utterly fascinating. She appears quite young."

"Fascinating?" Xavier chuckled with recognition. "Daniel, you never describe women as 'fascinating.' What transpired during that encounter?"

"Nothing significant occurred. She barely acknowledged my presence. But something about her presence—she possesses extraordinary beauty. Something indefinable about her simply... captured my complete attention."

"Ah, I recognize that particular tone," Xavier teased knowingly. "Listen carefully, Lila is eighteen and integral to a tight circle of women in our organization. If you're genuinely interested, understand they maintain protective bonds with each other. Casual encounters aren't tolerated. Though she seems completely opposite from your usual preferences."

"She absolutely is," I admitted readily. "Petite stature, youthful appearance—normally I wouldn't glance twice. But I cannot rationalize this attraction. I'm completely enchanted by her. Could you facilitate an introduction? Perhaps meeting her properly will eliminate this inexplicable obsession from my mind."

"I can arrange introductions, but remember—she's protected by the inner circle. They don't engage in casual dating arrangements."

"Then arrange the introduction," I insisted firmly. "I'm genuinely serious about this interest. This remarkable woman has infiltrated my thoughts in ways I cannot explain or control."

"Was it love at first sight, detective?" Xavier mocked playfully.

"Come on, Xavier! I must go—they're announcing final boarding calls."

Throughout the entire flight and the following restless night, thoughts of Lila Sullivan consumed my consciousness completely. Xavier's teasing question echoed repeatedly in my mind: Was it love at first sight? I'd never believed in such romantic fantasy. That belonged in novels, not real life. Yet I spent hours tossing restlessly, this mysterious woman occupying every thought, inexplicable anxiety building at the prospect of seeing her again.

The following morning, I arrived at headquarters exceptionally early, exhausted and irritable from sleeplessness. I immersed myself completely in finalizing pending cases, seriously contemplating returning to Port Harbor ahead of schedule just for another opportunity to see her. Then my phone rang—Xavier calling.

"Missing me already?" I teased upon answering.

"Desperately," he responded with characteristic laughter. "Caleb wants to speak with you immediately."

"Inspector, I understand you're relocating here," Caleb said without preamble. "Any possibility of arriving earlier than planned?"

"Amusing you should ask—I was just considering exactly that. How's your family situation?" I inquired, remembering the terrified child I'd helped rescue from that warehouse.

"Thanks entirely to your intervention, they're thriving beautifully. I owe you an enormous debt. We're all thrilled that our guardian angel will be nearby."

"Guardian angel seems excessive," I chuckled modestly. "Perhaps just dedicated law enforcement."

"Something along those lines," he laughed warmly. "Listen, I'm inviting you to something very special. I'm marrying Ivy this Saturday."

"Congratulations. From my investigation, she's an remarkable woman."

"She absolutely is!" The profound love in Caleb's voice was unmistakable. "We'd be deeply honored if you'd serve as one of my groomsmen. You're already considered family and someone incredibly important to our organization."

"Caleb, I'm flattered, but—" I began, not wanting obligation to drive his invitation.

"Before you respond," he interrupted smoothly, "you should know you'll be escorting Lila down the aisle."

Checkmate. Xavier had obviously briefed him about my interest, and Caleb knew precisely how to ensure my acceptance.

"You realize you've made refusal absolutely impossible, correct?" My heart accelerated as Caleb laughed knowingly.

"Wonderful! My bachelor celebration is tomorrow evening—poker and premium cigars at Xavier's place. We're expecting you."

"I'll be there without question."

After ending the call, my spirits soared to unprecedented heights. I now knew exactly when I'd encounter that captivating woman again. I immediately booked the earliest available flight, contacted associates who owned luxury car dealerships in Port Harbor to arrange vehicle purchase, then finally packed my belongings with renewed energy. I was simultaneously euphoric and anxious, counting hours until I could properly meet the beautiful woman who had so mysteriously and completely enchanted me.

Chapter 407: Steel and Desire

Lila's POV

This week had been absolute chaos, but thankfully it ended well with Ivy and Max safe from the betrayal within Thorne Corporation's ranks. Now I was frantically trying to catch up on missed days of law school classes. The pile of case studies and legal briefs waiting for review meant I'd definitely be pulling an all-nighter. And as if my schedule wasn't packed enough, Ivy and Caleb's wedding was happening this weekend—a celebration that would unite two of the most powerful families in the city's underground network.

I stepped off the bus a block away from my secured apartment building, my hands trembling as I fumbled for my key card. Taking evening classes meant navigating the city streets after dark, and the empty sidewalks made me acutely aware of how much safer I'd feel with my own armored vehicle. Perhaps it was time to use the trust fund my grandfather had established before the Sullivan family's legitimate businesses became fronts for their more lucrative operations. The thought made me quicken my pace until I was practically running, my heart pounding against my ribs.

My fear of walking alone at night wasn't just paranoia—it was survival instinct drilled into me from birth. Growing up as the daughter of Claire Ward Sullivan, one of the most ruthless matriarchs in the city's money laundering empire, had instilled in me a hyperawareness that bordered on constant anxiety. In our world, enemies could emerge from any shadow.

Yet despite these fears and my complete inexperience with independence, I had chosen to face the legitimate world head-on. I'd taken the law school entrance exam and deliberately selected a university program that would give me skills to navigate both sides of justice. It wasn't just because the school housed one of the country's finest legal programs; I needed to escape the suffocating grip of my mother's control that had left me feeling like a caged bird for years.

My mother wasn't simply strict—she was a relic of the old school mafia traditions, with outdated notions about a woman's role in family operations and extreme ideas about loyalty and obedience. Her interpretation of "family honor" meant that she controlled every aspect of my life, from my clothes to my friends, as if we were still living in Sicily a century ago. She wielded tradition like a weapon to justify her authoritarian parenting style.

My father, thankfully, had been my advocate within the family structure. Despite overseeing the Sullivan family's legitimate cheese and dairy distribution network—which everyone knew was primarily used to transport far more valuable cargo—he encouraged me to develop skills beyond the family business. He insisted that I needed to learn independence because "succession plans don't always work out as expected." He wanted me to become a strong, self-reliant woman capable of protecting herself in both the legitimate and shadow economies. When I announced my plans to attend law school, my parents had their biggest confrontation in family history. My mother threatened to arrange an immediate marriage contract with one of our allied families, as if this were still the old country!

My escape had been orchestrated by my father and my half-brother Beckett, who now ran the family's day-to-day operations. They told me to pack secretly, and when my mother left for one of her charity board meetings—which served as excellent cover for laundering art auction proceeds—my father rushed me to a secure car and personally drove me to my new apartment. Beckett later told me that when she returned home and discovered my absence, she unleashed her fury on the household staff and even contacted family enforcers, who could barely contain their amusement at her demands to bring me back. This only escalated her rage further.

So here I was, some time later, a refugee from my own family's empire, working as a legal secretary at Thorne Corporation while attending law school, too afraid to return to the family compound for fear of being locked away until a suitable marriage alliance could be arranged.

The initial weeks had been tremendously challenging. My father continued to ensure my financial security through carefully laundered payments, but once I started working at Thorne Corporation, I insisted on managing most expenses independently, often declining his additional support. The Sullivan family's cheese distribution business had grown from my grandfather's small operation into a nationally

recognized brand—a perfect cover story that had been expanded significantly by my father's business acumen and was now being modernized by Beckett's innovative approaches to both legitimate trade and more discreet operations.

These family reflections occupied my mind until I finally reached my apartment building, scanning my key card with shaking hands, my pulse still racing from the vulnerable walk home.

"It's decided," I declared to my empty apartment, triple-locking the reinforced door behind me. "Since I'm off until Monday, I'm buying a car tomorrow. I've already completed the hardest part by getting my enhanced driver's license when I first arrived in the city. Now I just need the right vehicle with proper security features."

The next morning was dedicated to online research. I found several models within my budget that offered the safety features I needed and headed out after lunch, stopping at a small café near the luxury dealership in the financial district. The salesman who assisted me—a distinguished gentleman who clearly recognized money when he saw it—was patient and professional. I selected my car but would have to wait several days for delivery since they didn't have the pearl white model with tinted windows that I wanted in stock.

While the salesman processed my paperwork and ran the enhanced background checks required for the security package I'd requested, the dealership's reinforced glass doors opened, and in walked what could only be described as a living statue carved by the gods themselves. My breath caught in my throat. He was impossibly tall, with powerful muscles that strained against his perfectly tailored black shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal strong forearms marked with subtle but unmistakable tattoos. His jet-black hair was cut in a precise military style, and his closely trimmed beard gave him an air of dangerous sophistication. When he smiled at another salesman, warmth cascaded through my entire body despite my better judgment. He was absolutely devastating.

"How magnificent! Oh, I would need a stepladder just to reach his shoulders..." I whispered dreamily.

"What was that, Miss Sullivan?" the salesman asked, and I realized with horror that I'd spoken aloud. This habit of verbalizing my thoughts constantly landed me in compromising situations.

"What?" I feigned confusion, preferring to seem distracted rather than admitting I was talking to myself about the stranger.

"Did you mention something about a stepladder?" he persisted with obvious amusement.

"Oh yes," I improvised quickly, gesturing toward the massive armored SUV the magnificent stranger was examining. "I was admiring that impressive vehicle over there. It's beautiful, but I would definitely need assistance getting into something that substantial." I offered my most innocent smile.

The salesman chuckled knowingly. "That particular model is quite popular with our more security-conscious clients. Despite its size, it's surprisingly maneuverable, and it features retractable running boards for easy access. No stepladder required." He laughed warmly. "If you'd be interested in a demonstration, we maintain one available for private test drives."

"Oh, I would absolutely love to take him for a test drive..." I murmured absentmindedly, my eyes still fixed on the gorgeous man rather than his potential vehicle.

"Excellent! Let me arrange that immediately," the salesman began rising from his chair with obvious enthusiasm.

"Actually, I have another appointment," I said quickly, snapping back to reality and my carefully maintained schedule. "And I'm quite satisfied with my current selection."

"Of course. But please remember, if you'd like to experience that particular model another time, it would be my absolute pleasure to arrange a private viewing." The salesman smiled warmly, clearly hoping for additional commission opportunities.

After completing the transaction and security paperwork, I left the dealership, stealing one final glance at the most breathtaking man I'd ever encountered as he approached the very desk I'd just vacated. Part of me wondered if fate was trying to tell me something, but the rational part of my mind knew that men who looked like that in my world usually came with complications I couldn't afford.

## Chapter 408: Dreams Become Reality

Lila's POV

I couldn't contain my excitement about Ivy's wedding to Caleb Thorne. It had been ages since I'd attended such an elaborate celebration in our circles, and these traditional family gatherings were

absolutely my thing. The Thorne family spared no expense when it came to cementing alliances through marriage. Ivy had asked me to be one of her bridesmaids, pairing me with some associate of Caleb's from the law enforcement side. The mystery man had me intrigued, and I kept bombarding Gemma with questions about him.

"Come on, Lila, Inspector Martinez was at Thorne Corporation all week during the security briefings. He's impossible to miss—the man is massive," Gemma chuckled while helping me with my dress zipper. The Thorne family had been coordinating with various enforcement contacts to ensure the wedding went smoothly without any territorial disputes.

"Gemma, that place was pure chaos. Family representatives everywhere, encrypted phones ringing non-stop, security details being arranged. I didn't notice him at all. What's he like?" I pressed, desperate for details.

"There, all done! Now do mine." Gemma turned, presenting her back to me. "I've already told you I'm keeping quiet. You'll see him soon enough. Though I still can't believe you didn't spot him during all those legal consultations."

"Well, I didn't. I just hope he's somewhat attractive. He doesn't need to be drop-dead gorgeous like that man from the private banking meeting..." My voice trailed off, my mind drifting to that impossibly handsome stranger who kept invading my thoughts. I'd encountered him during a high-level financial consultation at one of our family's legitimate fronts.

"That mystery man really left his mark on you, didn't he?" Gemma observed. I'd told her all about the most beautiful man I'd ever laid eyes on during that brief encounter in the marble halls of our exclusive banking establishment.

"I've literally dreamed about him," I admitted, immediately regretting my confession.

"Oh really?" Her eyes lit up with mischief. "Please tell me you were making out in this dream."

My face flushed crimson. "Gemma! God, no. I just dreamed he was at the consultation again, smiling at me with those piercing eyes."

"Not even one tiny kiss? How disappointing," Gemma sighed dramatically.

"No kisses. Let's change the subject. I'll never see that godlike creature again anyway," I lamented. Men like that were probably already spoken for in arranged marriages within their own families.

"Never say never, Lila," Gemma winked. "Anyway, you'll like the Inspector—he's incredibly professional yet friendly."

"Friendly, is he?" I raised a suspicious eyebrow, making her burst into laughter. In our world, law enforcement contacts were usually either completely bought or dangerously unpredictable.

"Bridesmaids!" Zoe's voice called out, commanding our attention. As Caleb's cousin and the family's information specialist, she was coordinating the entire ceremony. "Everyone ready? It's time to meet your escort partners. The ceremony's about to begin."

We filed out to the magnificent garden where the Thorne estate had been transformed into something from an old-world fairy tale. I had to pause to retrieve my bracelet that had fallen—the antique clasp had come loose. Perhaps I should keep it safe and get it repaired before losing this family heirloom completely. I heard Zoe calling my name and approached her while still examining my bracelet. She placed her hand on my back, guiding me toward my assigned partner for the processional.

When I finally looked up, my knees nearly gave out. I began stuttering uncontrollably. This couldn't be happening. Inspector Daniel Martinez, my wedding escort, was none other than the Greek god from the banking consultation! Was fate playing some elaborate prank on me? I stood frozen, completely stunned, while he gazed at me with that mesmerizing smile and spoke with the same gentle warmth that had captivated me weeks ago.

As Zoe arranged us in the processional line, he extended his arm, which I took with visible hesitation. "Nervous, Lila?" he whispered, leaning closer. His voice carried that same commanding authority I remembered.

"M-me? N-no." I cursed internally at my inability to speak coherently. My hands were sweating, my body trembling slightly. Meanwhile, his enchanting smile remained firmly in place, making it nearly impossible to focus on anything else.

"So you are intimidated by me," he murmured near my ear, his breath warm against my skin.

"That’s not it," I protested. I could feel my cheeks burning with embarrassment, forcing me to look away to regain composure.

"What is it then? If you’re cold, I could hold you closer to keep you warm." That did it—I turned absolutely scarlet. He was clearly enjoying my discomfort, the confident way only someone from a powerful family could.

"It’s not cold. It’s... oh my god," I muttered, practically praying for divine intervention while he continued chuckling softly. "It’s just that you’re an Inspector—someone important in the enforcement network—and I’m just an ordinary legal secretary. I’m going to bore you."

"I see. But I view things differently. Yes, I work in law enforcement, but that hardly makes me untouchable. As for you, you’re hardly ordinary—you’re a beautiful woman from a respected family who’s honoring me with her company today. I doubt I’ll be bored." He moved his face closer to mine, definitely testing my composure.

"Well, if you say so," I replied awkwardly. Despite his intimidating position and those dangerous good looks, I refused to be completely intimidated. I was determined to enjoy this celebration.

As the evening progressed through the elaborate ceremony and reception, I gradually relaxed. Daniel proved to be wonderful company. I expected him to abandon me after the formal processional to network with other important family associates, but he stayed by my side the entire time, holding my hand whenever protocol allowed, dancing with me during the traditional waltzes, giving me his undivided attention—a complete gentleman throughout the entire affair.

We conversed extensively about everything from legal precedents to family traditions, discovering numerous shared interests. I was genuinely enjoying his sophisticated company. When the evening finally gave us a moment alone, I immediately dragged Gemma to the powder room, desperate to share my earth-shattering revelation.

"Girl, what’s going on? You pulled me in here like we’re avoiding surveillance," Gemma laughed as we entered the ornately decorated ladies’ lounge.

"Sorry, Gemma, but I need to tell you something." I bounced nervously from one foot to the other.

"What is it, Lila?" Gemma casually touched up her makeup in the gold-framed mirror.

"The guy from the banking consultation..."

"What? The god is here?" Gemma's eyes widened with immediate interest.

"He's Daniel!" I exclaimed, and Gemma froze, staring at me in complete disbelief.

"Daniel Martinez? The Inspector?" Gemma asked, and I nodded vigorously.

"What should I do, Gemma?" I was having a minor panic attack about the implications.

"Well, Lila, kiss him. Because he definitely wants to kiss you." Gemma laughed as I gaped at her like she'd suggested something completely scandalous.

"Don't be ridiculous, Gemma! A powerful man like that? Kiss me? Impossible!" I protested.

"Lila, look in the mirror—you're beautiful! Of course he wants to kiss you. I've seen how he looks at you; he's been signaling all evening long."

"What signals? You're imagining things."

"Oh really? Has he left your side even once since you were introduced?"

"No."

"Has he held your hand during every opportunity?"

"Pretty much the whole time."

"Exactly. He wants to kiss you. Stop being silly, Lila, and seize this opportunity. What's there to lose? The man is gorgeous, you're clearly attracted to him, he wants it, you want it—what's the problem? Go be happy, woman."

Chapter 409: First Kiss Magic

Lila's POV

I made my way back to our table, and Daniel immediately rose from his seat to pull out my chair with the refined grace expected of someone raised in the Martinez family's upper echelons. His gentlemanly gesture only added to the dangerous magnetism that seemed to radiate from every fiber of his being. Each passing moment in his presence made it increasingly difficult to maintain my composure around this powerful man who commanded respect from both sides of the law. Thankfully, the evening's festivities were drawing to a close, and I would soon be departing with Zoe and Finn, bringing this intoxicating encounter with this captivating inspector to an end.

"Tiny Cipher, I hate to interrupt your evening, but I'm completely drained. Are you ready to leave?" Zoe approached our table with her characteristic directness, cutting through my wandering thoughts.

Daniel's intense gaze remained locked on me as he voiced his objection. "Come now, Zoe, don't cut our night short. I insist on personally ensuring Tiny One arrives home safely."

"Listen to him asserting his claim already!" Zoe laughed with that knowing expression she wore whenever she detected romantic intrigue brewing. "He's exactly like those enforcement specialists from the Thorne organization—never hesitates to stake his territory. Enjoy yourself, Lila." She blew me an air kiss before turning on her designer heels.

"No, please wait, Zoe..." I called after her retreating figure, then pivoted toward Daniel. "You shouldn't feel any obligation. Zoe is perfectly capable of driving me home."

"Absolutely not, Tiny Cipher. You're clearly the inspector's responsibility at this point," Zoe called over her shoulder as she continued her elegant exit from the private dining room. I turned back to face Daniel, who wore that triumphant smile that never failed to make my pulse skip erratically.

"You see? Now you belong entirely to me. May I have the privilege of enjoying your company for just a little while longer, Lila?" His request carried such genuine warmth that every instinct urged me to lean forward and press my lips against his right there at the table. Yet I lacked the courage to act on such bold impulses.

"Very well. Thank you for your consideration," I managed to reply, fighting to project an air of composure I certainly didn't feel. "Shall we proceed?"

He stood with fluid grace, drew back my chair, and enclosed my hand within his much larger one. Together we walked through the opulent restaurant toward the valet area where his imposing black vehicle waited like a sleeping predator. Naturally, a man of his stature and family connections would command such a powerful, intimidating machine. He assisted me into the plush leather passenger seat and leaned across my body to secure my safety belt. His proximity sent my heart rate spiraling completely out of control, causing words to tumble awkwardly from my lips. Recognizing my obvious nervousness, he seemed unable to resist the temptation to tease me further.

"Do I frighten you, Lila?" I shook my head in denial, but he moved even closer, his breath warming my skin. "Then why are you trembling like a leaf?"

"It's just... I..." Before I could formulate any coherent explanation, his mouth descended upon mine with deliberate intent.

The gentle yet insistent pressure of his lips against mine caught me completely unprepared. My eyes flew wide as my heart threatened to explode from the confines of my chest. My breathing became rapid and shallow while my entire body began to quiver as thousands of butterflies erupted simultaneously in my stomach. I allowed my eyelids to flutter closed, surrendering completely to the overwhelming sensations.

His tongue traced the outline of my lips with skilled precision, silently requesting entry, and I parted them purely on instinct. Our tongues met and danced together—his confident and experienced, mine eager yet clearly inexperienced. Electricity seemed to course through every nerve ending as he gradually deepened the intimate connection between us.

I had never experienced a kiss before—certainly not like this, not on the lips with such passionate intensity. I hadn't even received so much as an innocent peck from any man. As incredible as it might sound to someone from a normal background, my controlling mother had successfully suppressed every natural romantic urge, drilling into my consciousness that such physical contact was absolutely forbidden outside the bounds of marriage. She had monitored my every movement throughout my teenage years with the vigilance of a prison warden, and I remained so thoroughly terrified of incurring her explosive wrath that even when secret opportunities arose to rebel against her iron-fisted rules, I simply couldn't summon the nerve to disobey her commands. This moment truly represented my very first kiss, and I felt like a bundle of exposed nerves, desperately afraid of making some terrible mistake that would ruin everything.

"Relax, little one," Daniel murmured softly, breaking our connection momentarily before reclaiming my mouth with even greater passion and hunger than before.

His lips moved against mine with unmistakable desire, as though he had been anticipating this exact moment for an eternity and simply couldn't get his fill of me. I gradually began to relax into the kiss, discovering that the reality far exceeded every fantasy I had ever entertained—infinitely better than any description I had heard whispered among friends at school. Warmth spread through my entire being, accompanied by the most delicious tingling sensation that rendered my knees weak and created an absolutely insatiable craving for more of his touch. Tentatively, I placed my hands against his broad shoulders before wrapping my arms around his neck, drawn by some inexplicable magnetic force that demanded I feel him even closer to me. Daniel enveloped me completely within his powerful embrace, making me feel utterly protected as I experienced sensations that were entirely foreign yet absolutely intoxicating.

When we finally broke apart, I found myself breathless yet desperately hungry for more of his attention. Daniel smiled with masculine satisfaction and leaned in to whisper directly against my ear, sending delicious shivers cascading down my spine.

"You're absolutely exquisite," he breathed against my skin, his lips beginning to trail exploratory kisses down the column of my neck. Each gentle caress created a direct pathway of pleasure straight to my core.

Daniel proved far bolder than I had anticipated in my wildest imagination. While continuing to lavish attention on the sensitive skin of my neck, his hand discovered my breast through the thin silk fabric of my evening dress. My nipples immediately responded by hardening into tight peaks. His touch startled me so profoundly that all my mother's repressive conditioning came flooding back—my body tensed

and stiffened reflexively. He immediately noticed my adverse reaction and relocated his hand to the safer territory of my neck instead. I feared this would mark the precise moment he would laugh at my inexperience and abandon me entirely, but he surprised me yet again.

He returned to kissing me with completely undiminished passion and desire, as though my moment of panic had never occurred. I gradually relaxed once more, finding this second kiss even more intoxicating than our first encounter. I sighed blissfully against his delicious lips, wishing desperately that this perfect moment could continue indefinitely. We remained there in his luxury vehicle, kissing with increasing intensity for what seemed like both an eternity and yet nowhere near long enough. That first kiss became the most extraordinary experience of my entire sheltered existence.

After I provided him with my address for his navigation system, Daniel drove through the city streets in contemplative silence. I lost myself completely in anxious speculation, utterly convinced he would soon declare tonight a regrettable mistake that would never be repeated.

"We've arrived, little one," he announced as we pulled up outside my building's imposing entrance. "Are you planning to invite me upstairs to your apartment?"

The question hung in the air between us, loaded with implications that sent both excitement and terror coursing through my veins. My mother's harsh voice echoed in my mind—all her warnings about men, about desire, about the shame that would follow any deviation from her rigid moral code. But then I looked into Daniel's eyes, saw the genuine warmth there alongside the undeniable hunger, and felt my resolve wavering like a candle flame in the wind.

"I... I don't know if I should," I whispered, my hands fidgeting nervously in my lap. "My mother always said..." I trailed off, unable to voice the litany of prohibitions that had been drilled into me since childhood.

"What do you want, Lila?" His voice was gentle but insistent. "Not what your mother wants. Not what society expects. What do you want?"

The simple question shattered something inside me. For the first time in my life, someone was asking what I desired—not what was proper, not what was safe, but what I truly wanted. The realization was both liberating and terrifying.

"I want..." I began, then stopped, my courage failing. "You're just so... cute when you're being gentle with me like this."

The words slipped out before I could stop them, and I immediately flushed crimson with embarrassment. Had I really just called this dangerous, powerful man 'cute'? But instead of laughing at my childish choice of words, something dark and primal flashed in Daniel's eyes.

Without warning, he was out of the car and around to my side before I could even process what was happening. My door swung open, and suddenly his hands were on my waist, lifting me from the seat and pressing me back against the warm metal of the car. His body caged me in, solid and unmistakably aroused.

"Cute?" he growled against my ear, his voice rough with desire. "Little one, there's nothing cute about what I want to do to you right now." He pressed his hips against mine, letting me feel the hard evidence of his desire through the fabric of his expensive suit. "Do you feel that? Do you understand what you do to me?"

My breath caught in my throat as heat pooled low in my belly. This was desire—raw, honest, overwhelming desire—and for the first time in my sheltered life, I was experiencing it firsthand. My mother's warnings seemed distant and meaningless compared to the intoxicating reality of Daniel's want.

"I do," I whispered, surprising myself with the steadiness of my voice. "And I want to feel more."

Something shifted in his expression—surprise, admiration, and an even deeper hunger. Slowly, deliberately, he reached for my hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a reverent kiss to my palm.

"Then come with me," he murmured, threading our fingers together. "Let me show you what desire really means."

Hand in hand, we walked toward the entrance of my apartment building, and with each step, I felt myself leaving my old life—and my mother's suffocating control—further behind.

Chapter 410: Dangerous Confession

Daniel’s POV

Lila’s apartment was a perfect reflection of her essence - elegant yet understated, every detail carefully chosen but without the ostentatious displays typical of mafia families. The space spoke of quiet sophistication, a stark contrast to the fortress-like compounds I was accustomed to. Standing in her living room, I felt like a dangerous predator who had wandered into a sanctuary, my presence disrupting the peaceful atmosphere with the weight of my world.

"Please, make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to drink?" Her voice carried newfound confidence here in her own territory, away from the shadows that followed men like me.

"No need, little one. Come here." I reached for her hand, gently pulling her to sit beside me on the pristine sofa.

I needed to approach this conversation with surgical precision. Lila settled gracefully next to me, tucking her legs beneath her as she faced me with that attentive posture that had first caught my attention at Thorne Group.

"What did you want to discuss, Daniel?" Anxiety colored her words, and I could see her trying to read the gravity behind my expression.

"Reality," I began, finding my starting point. "Lila, I’m mature with considerable experience in a world most people never see. I know exactly what I want and what I’m capable of protecting. From what I understand, you’re young and clearly haven’t been exposed to the darker aspects of families like ours."

"I’m almost another year older," she corrected with a slight huff, and I couldn’t suppress a smile at her indignation, as if that single year could bridge the chasm of experience between us.

"Alright, little one, older it is," I conceded, studying her determined expression. "That doesn’t change the fact that you’re a young woman who’s been sheltered from the realities of what being connected to someone like me actually means."

"Where exactly is this conversation heading, Daniel?" Her tone grew serious, and I caught a glimpse of the steel beneath her delicate exterior.

"Impatient, aren't you?" I ran my thumb across her cheek, watching as she leaned into my touch, her eyes fluttering closed.

Christ, I wanted to pull her against me right there on that pristine sofa, show her exactly what kind of man she was getting involved with. But I knew that would overwhelm her, and that wasn't my intention. I couldn't stop admiring her beauty - that angelic face, those expressive eyes that hadn't yet learned to guard themselves against men who lived in shadows.

"Daniel, you're clearly struggling with this conversation," she said firmly. "I may be inexperienced, but I know difficult conversations are best handled directly. Just say what's on your mind."

Suddenly, I saw a different side of her - resolute, unafraid, ready to face whatever truth I laid before her. Instead of the timid girl I expected to see shrinking away, here was a woman prepared to meet whatever challenge I presented.

"I like that spine," I said, the words escaping before I could stop them, and she offered a small smile in return. I wanted nothing more than to pull her onto my lap and lose myself in those sweet lips again.

Since first seeing her in that office, Lila had consumed my thoughts, but after tasting her lips, my obsession had intensified to a dangerous degree. I was already addicted to her kisses, her presence, everything about her. But I needed to be responsible and act like the seasoned man I was, not some hormone-driven fool.

"What are you doing to me?" I whispered, running my fingers through her silky hair. Clearing my throat, I forced myself to refocus. "Lila, your youth and inexperience with my world are perfectly understandable. But I'm a man who's lived in the shadows, someone who's almost twice your age and carries responsibilities most people can't imagine."

"Age is just a number, Daniel. Why are you so focused on that?"

"Because I've never been involved with someone as young as you," I admitted, holding her gaze. "I typically associate with women closer to my age, sometimes older - women who understand the weight of family obligations and dangerous loyalties. I have zero tolerance for games or naivety. I want you, and I won't waste time pretending otherwise."

"So what?" She remained remarkably composed, that quiet strength surfacing again.

"So, Lila, I'm... let's say, intense and uncompromising. Young women like you typically prefer men who can offer simple romance, who can take you to bed with gentle promises and peaceful sleep through the night." Her cheeks flushed crimson, confirming my suspicions about her romantic expectations.

I sighed heavily, feeling like my fate was sealed. I clearly wasn't the right man for her - not the safe choice she deserved. It would be better to walk away now and allow her to find someone who could offer her normalcy instead of the dangerous complications that came with my world.

"What exactly do you mean by 'intense and uncompromising'?" she asked, breaking the extended silence.

"I mean, Lila, that I'm not the romantic type who brings flowers and writes poetry. When I want something, I take it completely. I'm not satisfied with half-measures in anything - especially not with someone I'm protecting. I can be gentle, but I'm often more... direct in my approach." I fixed her with a serious look. "I'm drawn to strong women who know exactly what they want and aren't afraid to fight for it - women who understand that sometimes protection requires making hard choices. That's rare among young women like yourself, who dream of simple love stories."

Lila sighed and lowered her gaze, seemingly wrestling with an internal storm of thoughts. She was unreadable, weighing my words as if engaged in a fierce battle within herself. When she finally spoke, her response caught me completely off guard.

"Okay. You're saying I'm not your type of woman. So I have just one question: What are you doing here?"

"Damn, you really know how to corner a man," I said with a rough laugh. "Isn't it obvious? I just told you I want you."

"No, it's not obvious. If you're only here because you want me physically, why waste time with this conversation?" This little one had me completely outmaneuvered.

I couldn’t restrain myself any longer. I moved toward her, easing her back against the cushions and positioning myself above her, our faces close enough that I could feel her breath. Looking into her eyes, breathing in that intoxicating scent that was purely her, I gave her the complete truth.

"Because I don’t want to just possess you." I emphasized the word deliberately. "You have something, little one, something that captured me the moment I saw you in that office, completely oblivious to the dangerous man watching you. I can’t name what it is - I just know I can’t get you out of my system."

"What do you want from me, Daniel?" Her question was bold, direct.

"I want to know you. I want to be with you. Yes, I want to claim you completely, but not just physically. I want to share moments like we did today, and I definitely want to keep kissing you - frequently."

"I’m not stopping you." Her voice carried a challenge, and I knew she was ready to surrender everything in that moment. But I didn’t want her to have regrets.

"No, you’re not stopping me, but your inexperience with my world is." I brushed my nose against hers gently. "Here’s what we’ll do: think about everything I’ve said and decide if you truly want to get involved with a man like me. When you have your answer, find me - I’ll be waiting. But consider it carefully, and remember how right this feels between us."

"Just one more thing. Why would you want to get involved with someone like me, young and inexperienced as I am?"

"I honestly don’t know. I just know I can’t purge you from my thoughts. I even thought that getting to know you would convince me you weren’t right for my world. But the opposite happened. The more time we spend together, the more I kiss you, the more certain I become that you belong with me."

With that confession hanging between us, I captured those beautiful lips that were driving me to imagine countless scenarios of what I’d do when she was truly mine. She responded with matching intensity, and I felt our connection deepening with each heartbeat. I needed to stop before losing all control. Reluctantly, I broke the kiss.

"Think about it carefully, little one. Then find me when you're ready. I'll be waiting." I stole one more quick kiss before rising to leave, knowing if I stayed any longer, I'd abandon my resolve to give her time to process this. This beautiful young woman had me completely captivated; she might be too inexperienced for my world, but she was utterly irresistible, and I desperately wanted to make her mine.