Mafia Mask 431

Chapter 431: Breathless Over Love

Daniel's POV

My little one had mentioned her mother was difficult, but she never elaborated on how twisted their relationship truly was within the Sullivan family hierarchy. In this way, we shared another bitter similarity that left a sour taste in my mouth. Family should represent protection, loyalty, honor, and acceptance—the very foundation of our world—yet I knew firsthand that reality often falls painfully short of these sacred codes, even among the most powerful bloodlines.

But Lila had me now, and I would shield her from every threat. My first priority was solving this communication problem. I couldn't bear the thought of her keeping her device silenced, cut off from our network—and from me. I left the precinct earlier than usual and stopped at a high-end electronics store that catered to our circle, purchasing a secure phone for her. This way, she could maintain contact with me even if she needed to silence her other device to avoid Claire's relentless manipulation attempts. With that handled, I headed to collect her.

When I arrived at Thorne Group's downtown headquarters, Lila was waiting as planned in the marble lobby. Though she appeared composed, those captivating amber eyes still held traces of the dejection that had haunted her since yesterday's confrontation. The way she looked at me completely disarmed my carefully constructed defenses, melting them in an instant. Xavier caught us in that vulnerable, intimate moment as he emerged from the executive elevator, and naturally, my friend couldn't resist his usual commentary about our connection. But his observations planted seeds of doubt in my mind that I couldn't easily dismiss.

Until that moment, I had been convinced that what I felt for Lila was simply an irresistible attraction—as though she had cast some enchantment that kept me captivated by her grace and strength. Perhaps even one of those passionate storms that arrives like a hurricane and disappears just as quickly, leaving nothing but wreckage and memories in its wake. Then Xavier speaks with such unwavering certainty that what I'm experiencing is love—the pure, consuming kind that defines men like us, the rare kind worth sacrificing empires for, the kind that, once claimed, binds souls forever.

His conviction stirred something dangerous within me, yet surprisingly, it didn't trigger my usual defensive responses. Instead, it made me consider how magnificent it would be if this feeling truly established permanent residence in my guarded heart. Lila gazed at me with the sweetest expression I'd ever witnessed, and I found myself completely unable to look away from those golden depths.

I confessed the truth to Xavier—that she held me completely at her mercy. This wasn't mere speculation but absolute fact. I simply hoped she felt something equally intense and inexplicable for me, because I recognized that the day she might walk away would utterly destroy me. I could no longer envision navigating this treacherous world without my little one anchored at my side. Whether this consuming fire was love, I couldn't definitively determine, but whatever this feeling was, it often left me breathless, as though I were suspended over an abyss, with Lila being my only lifeline to salvation.

We left Thorne's fortress-like building hand in hand, wrapped in contemplative silence. Xavier's words kept circling through my head like a relentless interrogation: Could this truly be love? How could I achieve certainty? And what if it was love but she didn't reciprocate with equal intensity? What would I do then—a man accustomed to controlling every variable? For the first time in years, I felt genuinely vulnerable about something in my carefully orchestrated existence. The only certainty I clung to was my desperate need to keep her close.

"Tiny one, which dealership are we visiting for your vehicle?" I finally asked after we settled into my armored sedan.

"The same exclusive place where you acquired yours," she replied with casual confidence.

"How do you know where I conducted my business?" I found her knowledge intriguing, given our world's emphasis on discretion.

"Because I finalized my purchase there recently, before Caleb and Ivy's ceremony. They didn't have the color I wanted in their immediate inventory. I actually witnessed you there at the showroom." I paused at a red light and turned to study her with surprise.

"At the dealership?"

"Yes, I was completing my paperwork when you walked in looking like some dangerous Roman emperor. I couldn't tear my gaze away from you." Her confession brought a predatory smile to my face.

"A dangerous Roman emperor, hmm?" I grinned as she nodded with obvious appreciation. "Why didn't you approach me then?" I would have treasured meeting her before that fateful wedding reception.

"Because I had absolutely no idea who you were or which family you represented."

"How could you remain ignorant, Lila? I'd been consulting at Thorne days before that encounter."

"True, but I never actually saw you there during those visits."

"Never saw me? I walked directly past your desk, little one. You didn't even glance upward, though I definitely registered every detail about you."

"That office was absolute chaos that particular day, Daniel. The reception area was flooded with representatives from various families conducting business. I simply didn't notice you among the crowd."

"That's remarkable, little one." I smiled at the bizarre twist of fate. Thorne's headquarters had indeed been frantic during my first consultation there. "But you could have introduced yourself at the dealership."

"And said what exactly, Daniel?" She looked at me as if I'd suggested something completely absurd.

"Perhaps something like, 'Hello, I'm Lila, your future queen, and you're a dangerous Roman emperor who's about to change my world forever.'" I smiled as her eyes widened and she burst into delighted laughter. "If I had noticed you there, I absolutely would have made my move."

"Of course you would have, being a dangerous Roman emperor and completely confident that I was mesmerized by your presence." She teased, making me laugh deeply.

"You really believe I'm all that impressive, don't you?" She nodded emphatically. "Oh, little one, you're absolutely incredible for my ego."

"What would you have said to me?" she asked with genuine curiosity.

"I would have told you that you're the most breathtaking woman I've ever encountered and that I'm destined to be the love of your life." She smiled radiantly, and I seized the opportunity at the red light to kiss her with tender possession. "I was already desperate to meet you that day, little one."

When we reached the exclusive automotive gallery, a well-dressed salesman greeted us with a professional smile directed at Lila. She responded with polite warmth that never failed to charm everyone around her. As he guided us toward her vehicle, I couldn't hide my surprise at her selection.

"What is it, Daniel?" She noticed my expression immediately.

"I expected you to choose something understated and compact. This is quite a commanding SUV. And this blue is practically a beacon—so vibrant it demands attention. Tiny one, I assumed you preferred staying under the radar." She laughed with genuine amusement.

"Daniel, I'm already compact myself! I prefer substantial things that make statements." Her eyes sparkled with mischievous intent, widening my appreciative smile. "And I absolutely adore this particular shade of blue."

The salesman chuckled, clearly charmed by Lila's infectious enthusiasm.

"You finally took that extended test drive, Miss Sullivan," he remarked, causing her to blush slightly before laughing.

"Yes, and you wouldn't believe the incredible coincidence. We met at a family celebration." Lila gestured toward me with obvious pride.

"Some might call that destiny intervening," the salesman observed with a knowing smile.

"I'm beginning to believe in such things myself," Lila replied. Her natural, relaxed demeanor with others completely captivated me.

"He's certainly a fortunate man," the salesman confided to her, and I wholeheartedly agreed with his assessment.

Lila was absolutely ecstatic about her acquisition. After completing the extensive paperwork and security protocols, we headed toward my building—she piloted her new machine while I followed protectively behind. I observed how skillfully she navigated the dense traffic patterns, handling the route with impressive competence and considerable speed for someone so young. When she parked in my private garage and stepped out, her radiant smile was utterly infectious.

"My very first car, Big Guy! Isn't she absolutely gorgeous?" Her excitement radiated from every gesture and word.

"More beautiful than me?" I asked with an exaggerated pout of mock jealousy. "I'm growing envious of this machine."

"Nothing could ever be more beautiful than you, my dangerous Roman emperor!" She declared passionately, wrapping her arms around my neck in the privacy of the garage.

"Yes, it's beautiful. Strikingly beautiful and remarkably blue." We laughed together as we walked toward the secured elevator. "Are you heading to campus now?" Just then, her phone began its insistent ringing.

Chapter 432: Father Takes Control

Daniel's POV

The transformation in Lila was instantaneous when her encrypted phone began ringing. The light in her eyes extinguished, her radiant smile faded to nothing, and her entire body went rigid with the familiar tension I'd witnessed countless times before. She began trembling slightly, a physical reaction that made my protective instincts flare.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, glancing at the secure screen with unmistakable dread. "It's my mother again."

I reached for her delicate hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze while scanning the apartment's security monitors out of habit. "Honey, you should answer. She's obviously not going to stop calling, and you know how persistent Sullivan family matriarchs can be."

Lila exhaled slowly, her shoulders slumping in defeat like a soldier accepting an unwinnable battle. "I'll take it inside the penthouse," she conceded, gesturing toward our heavily fortified living space. "I'm not going to the university today anyway. Professor Martinez canceled our criminal law seminar and sent a message to our encrypted group chat. That's why I turned my phone on—to check the secure messages—and I forgot to switch it back to silent mode."

I couldn't help but smile despite her obvious distress, knowing how our world operated on such careful protocols. "Well, that works out perfectly for me. I get to keep my little one safe in our fortress all night long." I disengaged the apartment's multiple locks, each one a testament to the dangerous world we inhabited. As we stepped inside, her phone began its insistent ringing once more, the sound echoing off the bulletproof windows.

This time, Lila answered with the decisiveness of someone raised in our unforgiving world. She activated the speakerphone with practiced ease, placed the device on our reinforced coffee table, and sank onto the Italian leather couch. The joy she'd radiated just minutes before had completely evaporated, replaced by that haunted expression I despised seeing on her beautiful face—the look of a daughter preparing for psychological warfare.

"Lila, who do you think you are, you ungrateful little brat?" The female voice that erupted from the speaker carried the venom of a woman accustomed to absolute control within her domain.

Lila's response was quiet, resigned, but with an underlying steel that reminded me why I'd fallen for this remarkable woman. "What is it now, Mom?"

"And you have the audacity to ask?" Rita Sullivan's voice crackled through the secure connection. "You've kept your phone off all day, closed your trust account, and got that incompetent accountant Tess fired from our financial operations. You're such a spoiled, petty creature!"

"Mom, please stop," Lila pleaded, but I could see her visibly fighting back tears while maintaining the composure expected of Sullivan family blood.

"No, I will not stop, Lila. You've crossed every line we've drawn. That money your grandfather left you wasn't yours to touch freely. I don't know why I didn't transfer it from your personal account to the family holdings sooner."

Lila’s voice grew slightly stronger, channeling the backbone that made her survive in our brutal world. "You didn’t because you couldn’t, Mom. The money is mine. Grandpa left it directly to me through offshore trusts, not to the family coffers."

"That cursed old man!" The viciousness in Rita’s tone intensified, revealing the true nature beneath her polished society facade. "If he weren’t dead already, I’d arrange his permanent removal myself. All he ever did was spoil you and Beckett rotten with his sentimental weakness. Poor Justin didn’t receive a cent from that old fool’s empire. This money should rightfully belong to Justin—he’s the heir, he needs capital for operations, not some college girl. Who ever heard of a woman controlling that kind of financial power in our world?"

"Mom, enough!" Lila finally raised her voice with the authority of her bloodline. "The money is mine. If Grandpa chose not to include Justin in the inheritance trust, that’s not my responsibility. Please, just let me live my own life."

"Your life?" Rita’s laugh was ugly and calculating, the sound of a woman who viewed her daughter as a business asset. "You’re going to abandon this university fantasy and return to the family compound immediately. I’m already in negotiations with Connor—I’m arranging your marriage to his youngest son to solidify our territorial alliance."

Every word this woman spoke about my Lila being treated like a commodity pushed me closer to the edge. There was no way in hell this manipulative matriarch was taking my woman away or forcing her into some strategic marriage arrangement. I couldn’t maintain my silence any longer.

"You’re gravely mistaken if you believe you can force Lila into any alliance," I interjected with the authority of both my badge and my bloodline. "In fact, you have zero authority to control her decisions whatsoever." I looked at Lila, who had gone deathly pale, and squeezed her hand reassuringly, trying to communicate both strength and protection through that simple touch.

"Who dares interrupt family business?" Rita’s voice turned glacial with the entitlement of old money and older power.

"Detective Inspector Daniel Martinez, NYPD Major Crimes Division," I stated with professional precision. "I’m Lila’s boyfriend and a sworn officer of the law. I strongly advise you to cease threatening Lila

immediately. Being her mother doesn’t grant you immunity from harassment charges, regardless of family connections."

"Boyfriend?" She spat the word like it was contaminated. "I knew that little whore went to the city just to spread her legs for anyone with a badge. Well, I’m coming to collect her right now!"

Every syllable this toxic woman uttered made my blood boil with protective fury. "You will stay exactly where you are," I warned, my tone carrying the weight of both legal authority and family enforcement. "Because if you show up here attempting to coerce Lila or force her removal, I will personally ensure your arrest and secure protective orders that will keep you away from my girlfriend permanently."

"Listen here, badge or no badge, I don’t care about your threats. Now put that worthless Lila back on the phone." The pure contempt in her voice was chilling even by our world’s standards.

Just as I was contemplating my next strategic response, a thunderous male voice erupted from the speaker with the commanding presence of a true family patriarch.

"ENOUGH, RITA!" The shout carried such power that Lila physically flinched beside me. "GIVE ME THAT PHONE IMMEDIATELY!"

"Nathaniel, I—" Rita’s tone transformed instantly into something submissive and fearful.

"THE PHONE, RITA!" he commanded again with absolute authority. Then, addressing us with the measured tone of a seasoned leader: "Good evening, who am I speaking with?"

I straightened, recognizing the voice of someone accustomed to respect. "Detective Inspector Daniel Martinez, sir. I’m Lila’s boyfriend. And who might I have the honor of addressing?"

"Good evening, Inspector Martinez. I’m Nathaniel Sullivan, Lila’s father and head of our family operations," he replied with unexpected diplomatic courtesy. "I apologize, but this is the first I’m hearing about my daughter having a boyfriend."

"I understand completely, sir. I regret you had to learn about our relationship under these circumstances," I acknowledged with proper respect. "However, your wife has been harassing Lila relentlessly today, and I couldn't permit the situation to escalate further."

"I appreciate your intervention, Inspector. Rita often exceeds her authority within family matters. I imagine Lila has briefed you on our household's... complexities."

"She's shared very little, actually, but after witnessing this exchange, I can certainly understand the dynamics at play. Sir, I'll be direct—Lila is an adult fully capable of managing her own affairs, but I will not tolerate anyone treating her disrespectfully, family included."

"I'm genuinely relieved to know my daughter has found someone willing to protect her, even from her own mother's overreach. Rita often forgets her place in family decisions. Can you tell me what triggered today's particular conflict?"

"Dad..." Lila's voice cracked as she finally found her voice again.

"Sweetheart, don't cry!" Nathaniel's tone immediately softened, displaying the genuine paternal affection that was clearly absent from his wife. "You know better than to let your mother's manipulations affect you."

Lila proceeded to explain everything—the car purchase, the closed account, the threats about her inheritance. I listened carefully, filing away every detail about the family's financial structure and power dynamics.

"Daughter, you acted appropriately, and I'm proud of your independence," Nathaniel assured her with warmth that made me respect him instantly. "Beckett will be pleased to hear you're finally asserting yourself. You're becoming the strong woman your grandfather always knew you'd be."

I made mental notes about this Beckett person and felt a surge of satisfaction knowing I'd earned the approval of Lila's father—a crucial victory in protecting the woman I loved from her family's darker machinations.

Chapter 433: You Belong to Me

Daniel’s POV

After an extended conversation with the head of the Sullivan family, I found myself genuinely impressed by Lila’s father. The man commanded one of the most sophisticated money laundering operations on the East Coast, yet he spoke of his daughter with the tender devotion of any loving parent. His legitimate real estate empire and art galleries provided perfect cover for moving dirty money, but when it came to Lila, there was nothing calculated about his affection. This stood in stark contrast to his wife Claire’s manipulative coldness. When the call ended, Lila appeared composed despite the evidence of recent tears still visible on her face. I gently pulled her onto my lap, my fingers tracing the damp trails on her cheeks.

"Now, beautiful girl," I said softly, "tell me who this Beckett person is."

Her response was unexpected laughter. "Anyone would think you’re jealous."

"But I really am," I admitted without hesitation. It was the unvarnished truth. In my world, jealousy could be deadly, but with Lila, I felt safe enough to be vulnerable. She studied my face carefully, as if searching for any hint of insincerity.

"Beckett is my older brother," she explained. "He’s wonderful and always protected me from my mother’s schemes. He’s from my father’s first marriage. His mother died giving birth to their second child, who also didn’t survive." She paused briefly, and I could see the weight of family tragedy in her eyes. "Shortly after, my parents married and had me. Justin is my younger brother and my mother’s golden child. We don’t get along well."

"I see." Based on what her father had mentioned about family dynamics, I ventured, "Your mother has always treated you this way?" In our circles, stepmothers often saw stepchildren as threats to their own children’s inheritance, but Claire’s behavior seemed particularly vicious.

"Always," Lila sighed heavily. "It’s like she despises my very existence."

Curiosity drove my next question, along with my protective instincts. "And how does she treat Beckett?" I wondered if the current acting head of the Sullivan family received similar treatment from his stepmother.

"She doesn’t dare mess with Beckett. She’s always ignored him, treating him like an unwanted guest in our family estate," Lila explained with sadness coloring her voice. "My brother is such a good person. He suffered terribly losing his mother when he was just a child. My father thought Claire would eventually accept him as her son, but that never happened. Beckett learned to navigate the family business early to protect himself."

"And it’s different with Justin?"

"Justin receives all her love and devotion. He’s a spoiled, entitled person who thinks the world owes him everything. He treats everyone beneath his social status like dirt. He and Beckett despise each other, and he and I constantly clash. When we were children, he used to hurt me and then play innocent when adults came around. Beckett left the main family compound when he turned eighteen to run the West Coast operations, and I followed his example by using college and this job at Thorne as my escape route." The profound sadness in her voice touched something deep inside me.

"What about your father?" I asked gently, though I already suspected the answer.

"My father is loving, kind, and surprisingly principled for someone in his position. He’s truly a good man who treats his associates and employees with respect and fairness. He always tried to compensate for the affection my mother withheld from me, protecting me whenever he could without undermining family hierarchy." Her face brightened slightly. "You’ll like him. And I think he was genuinely impressed by you." She offered me a weak smile, which I returned.

"Tiny one," I assured her, stroking her hair, "you have your father, your older brother, and now you have me to care for and protect you." I wanted her to understand that she wasn’t defenseless anymore, not with the Martinez family resources behind her.

"Daniel, you didn’t need to tell my father you’re my boyfriend," Lila said, avoiding eye contact.

I found her comment perplexing. "Oh no? Did you want me to lie and say we’re friends?" Lila was typically straightforward and honest, especially for someone raised in our world of constant deception.

"No, because we’re not just friends. But we’re not boyfriend and girlfriend either."

"What did you say, Lila?" Her eyes widened at my use of her full name – the first time I hadn't called her by a nickname – and my displeasure was evident. In my line of work, precision in relationships mattered. "What do you think we are?"

"I don't know, but you hadn't explicitly said we were dating, so I..." I interrupted before she could finish.

"Oh, I needed to announce it formally?" My irritation was growing, though I was beginning to understand her perspective. In families like ours, nothing was assumed – everything had to be declared and acknowledged.

"It's just..." Her face flushed crimson. I watched her silently, encouraging her to continue. "It's just that I've never been in a relationship before or anything like that. Growing up in our world, you learn not to trust anyone's intentions. So I don't know if you needed to make some kind of official declaration, but I also don't know if you actually want to be my boyfriend and..." Her reminder of her inexperience with genuine relationships immediately dissolved my frustration.

"Tiny one, don't overthink this," I said more gently, pulling her closer. "I forgot that with your background, I need to be completely explicit about my intentions. Look, we're together. 'Girlfriend' is too small a word to explain what you mean to me, but it's a term that works so people understand that you're with me, that you're under my protection. And I hope that's clear enough for you to understand that you belong to me and aren't available to anyone else."

"So you're officially my boyfriend?" I nodded firmly. "And you're exclusively mine?"

"Only yours, my little one. Completely yours!" The smile that spread across her lips was irresistible, and I leaned in to kiss her thoroughly. "Before I start removing your clothes and forget about everything else, I have something for you."

She gave me a suspicious look as I retrieved the bag from the electronics store and placed it in her lap. She stared at me questioningly before opening the bag and extracting the phone box.

"A secure phone?" she asked, confused but already understanding the implications.

"Yes. I don’t want to be unable to reach you or have you unreachable because you need to avoid your mother’s surveillance." I explained my idea of having a second device that Claire couldn’t monitor or trace, and Lila immediately grasped the strategic advantage.

"Thank you. That was brilliant thinking." Everything was remarkably uncomplicated with Lila – easy, comfortable, and peaceful despite the chaos of our respective family obligations.

"Now," I said, my voice dropping to a suggestive tone, "I’m going to take your clothes off and forget about the rest of the world." Her eyes lit up with anticipation at my words.

And that’s precisely what I did. I lost myself in her body until we were both thoroughly exhausted, and she fell asleep on my chest, our breathing synchronized in perfect harmony, the weight of family expectations temporarily forgotten in our private sanctuary.

Chapter 434: Secret Birthday Plot

Daniel’s POV

Saturday arrived like a blessing, offering me precious time away from both police duties and Martinez family obligations. Nothing mattered more than these uninterrupted hours with Adriana. My little one practically vibrated with excitement about meeting her friends at Caleb Thorne’s private estate. Ivy had been confined to the heavily secured compound lately due to her pregnancy and the escalating threats from rival families, which worked perfectly for my plans. I needed Zoe’s expertise for something crucial.

Adriana’s birthday was approaching next week, and I wanted to orchestrate something extraordinary for her. No one could design unforgettable events quite like Zoe, with her boundless creativity and talent for theatrical presentations that impressed even seasoned mafia bosses.

At Caleb’s fortress-like mansion, I waited for the right moment when Adriana became absorbed in conversation with Gemma. I subtly signaled Zoe to join me in the soundproof study, away from prying ears.

"What’s the emergency now, detective? Don’t tell me you’ve already created a mess and need damage control?" Zoe approached with her characteristic smirk.

I pressed my hand to my chest in mock offense. "Seriously? Do I have zero credibility with you?"

"You have some credit," she admitted with amusement. "But considering your associates' track records—especially Dominic's disaster with Gemma—I proceed with caution. You men only seem to contact me when there's chaos to clean up."

Her assessment was brutally accurate but amusing. Both Caleb and Dominic had nearly destroyed their relationships through spectacular blunders.

"Zoe, I haven't created any disasters, and I don't intend to. I operate with more finesse than these amateurs." I gestured toward my friends, who immediately protested from across the marble-floored room.

Xavier stepped forward in my defense. "Give him credit, Zoe. Judging by Adriana's radiant expression whenever she visits our headquarters, our detective operates more like a gentleman than a brute." His support surprised me.

"So the Thorne organization has become a breeding ground for romance?" Zoe's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Very well, detective, how can I assist you?"

"Next Saturday marks Adriana's birthday," I explained with growing enthusiasm. "I want to create something truly magnificent—it must be a complete surprise."

Zoe's eyebrows arched dramatically. "A surprise? And you're discussing this in front of Xavier, our resident information broadcaster? I question your strategic planning abilities."

The room erupted in laughter at Xavier's expense.

"Really?" Xavier protested indignantly. "You believe I'm incapable of maintaining confidentiality?"

"Xavier, on the scale of secret-keeping reliability, you rank only marginally above Vincenzo, Dominic's nephew—and that child spreads information like a malfunctioning surveillance system," Zoe mercilessly teased.

Caleb nodded gravely. "She speaks truth, Xavier. Your discretion requires improvement."

I fixed Xavier with my most menacing police inspector glare, the one that made hardened criminals confess. "Can you maintain absolute silence, or must I employ enhanced interrogation methods?"

Xavier raised both hands in immediate surrender. "I swear on the Thorne family honor to keep quiet."

"Consider it handled," Zoe assured me, her mind already working through possibilities. "Are you envisioning a grand celebration with the entire organization, or something more intimate?"

"Her birthday falls on Friday, so I'm planning dinner with our inner circle, followed by a private weekend retreat—just the two of us. But it needs to be absolutely unforgettable," I detailed my vision.

Zoe's knowing smile spread across her features. "Well, detective, she's completely conquered you, hasn't she?" She didn't require my verbal confirmation—my expression revealed everything. "Don't worry. I'll help create something she'll treasure for eternity."

We scheduled a lunch meeting for Monday to refine the details. While I already had several concepts brewing, Zoe would transform them into something truly spectacular for my little one.

The evening had grown late when we finally departed from Caleb's compound. Adriana appeared tired, and I craved having her entirely to myself. The moment our penthouse apartment door sealed behind us, I drew her into my arms and claimed her lips in a hungry kiss.

"I've been craving you all day," I murmured against her ear, pressing her gently against the reinforced steel door. "Sharing you with friends while you wore those tantalizing shorts, showing off your perfect legs—absolute torture."

She tilted her head back, exposing her elegant neck. "I've been aching for you too."

"Allow me to remedy that situation immediately." I dropped to my knees before her, sliding those distracting shorts down her silky legs, taking her delicate lace underwear with them.

There I knelt before this petite woman who had completely dominated my heart and soul. Looking up, I saw her watching me with desire darkening her beautiful eyes—she wanted me as desperately as I wanted her.

I placed worshipful kisses across her flat stomach, my hands spanning her narrow waist, marveling at her exquisite proportions. Her skin carried an intoxicating fragrance—spicy yet sensual, earthy with hints of sweetness—absolutely irresistible and maddening. I wanted to devour every inch of her like some rare, precious delicacy.

My lips traveled across her abdomen, occasionally sucking gently, watching her expression transform with building pleasure. Each kiss moved progressively lower until I reached the sensitive junction between her thigh and her center, where I delivered a gentle bite. Her soft moan was the sweetest reward, intensifying my already painful arousal.

Chapter 435: Against Steel Doors

Daniel’s POV

I couldn’t restrain myself any longer. My tongue found its way to her warm, slick center, and the moment I made contact, she moaned deeply, her head falling back against the reinforced steel door of my penthouse.

"Mmm, my little one enjoys that," I growled with deep satisfaction, well aware how much my law student craved when I pleasured her with my mouth.

I began teasing her with my tongue, alternating between her sensitive bud and her entrance, before eagerly sucking on her clit, causing her to squirm against the bulletproof door. She draped her leg over my shoulder, granting me deeper access to her needy core, and I devoured her hungrily. I wanted to satiate myself with her exquisite taste, but it seemed impossible - each taste only intensified my craving for more of this Sullivan family princess.

Lila started grinding against my mouth, each thrust of my tongue inside her eliciting increasingly louder moans. I gripped her waist firmly, my face buried between her thighs, my erection straining painfully against my tactical pants, feeling an indescribable joy having her completely surrendered to me in my fortress.

Without mercy, I pleasured her until she exploded in an orgasm that had her screaming my name and clutching my hair for stability. I felt her waves of pleasure rippling through her body, her trembling legs, and I savored everything she offered, licking up every drop of her sweetness. My little heiress was truly magnificent.

I didn’t even wait for her breathing to steady. Rising to my feet while hastily removing my pants and holster, I stripped off her blouse and lace bra in one fluid motion, barely noticing the expensive garments falling away. I discarded my own shirt and pressed her against the door. Lifting her legs to my hips, she wrapped them around me, and I entered her with a single powerful thrust, staring into her lust-filled amber eyes.

"Damn, little one! I can’t control myself with you," I said, as if lamenting my overwhelming desire to consume this dangerous beauty completely.

"Don’t control yourself. I want my big rough inspector," she whispered before lowering her head to suck on my neck, driving me to complete abandonment.

She gave my neck a hard suck that sent shockwaves through me - wild, delicious, and primal. It made me crave more. I began thrusting without restraint, fast and hard, making her body slide up and down against the armored door with each powerful movement. Her moans grew louder as she surrendered to the sensation, no longer trying to contain her pleasure in the soundproofed sanctuary.

"Ah, Lila, what are you doing? You’re driving me insane."

"More, Daniel, I want more," she begged, and I was determined to give my Sullivan princess everything she desired.

My thrusts became firmer, quicker, more intense. I moved relentlessly in and out of her with raw power. She matched my rhythm perfectly, grinding her hips against mine, clutching my neck while kissing and nibbling my skin. She tightened around me, drawing me deeper with each thrust.

"Oh, little one, you’re so eager. Taking all of me and still wanting more. Aaaahhh..." I groaned, feeling her inner walls gripping me as I buried myself deep inside her.

She planted another passionate kiss on my neck, and that was my undoing. It drove me wild, my pleasure building like a devastating storm about to break over this Martinez family stronghold.

"Tiny one, I can’t hold on much longer," I whispered against her ear, feeling her smile against my neck. "Come with me, beautiful." I gently pinched her sensitive bud between my fingers, and she responded with a loud moan that echoed through the secured apartment.

Caressing her, moving intensely within her, watching her lost in ecstasy, I felt her pulsate around me. She climaxed violently, crying out my name before biting down on my shoulder, pushing me over the edge. Her climax triggered my own powerful release as I emptied inside her, marking her as mine, reaffirming that she belonged only to me and no other family.

I needed to keep us pressed against the door for several moments longer, until our breathing steadied and my legs regained their strength after the intense and powerful climax this woman had given me.

I couldn’t help thinking she was the only one who had ever left me feeling this way - completely satisfied, weak-kneed, and utterly content. With previous lovers, including arranged encounters for family politics, it had never been this intense. I used to think it had been, but nothing compared to what Lila did to me, the intensity with which she drove me wild.

"Tiny one, what was that?" I asked, drawing deep breaths into my lungs. "You’re getting naughtier every day! I love it."

"You think so, big guy? But this naughty girl left you covered in marks today," she said with slight embarrassment. "Sorry about that, I couldn’t control myself, it was too good."

"Don’t control yourself. I love my naughty little one grinding on me, kissing me, biting, squeezing, and I’m going to proudly display the marks you gave me, show everyone at the precinct that I’m yours." She laughed, a delicious sound that made me join in.

"Good to know you’re mine."

"You’ve known that for a long time."

"But I like hearing you say you’re mine, especially when other families try to make moves."

"I’ll always say it. But I also want my little one to get even naughtier," I said playfully.

"How naughty do you want me?" she asked, still clinging to me in our fortress.

"I want the kind of naughty that pleasures me while I’m driving to crime scenes, wakes me up by riding me, and will let me take you in the elevator of Thorne Tower one of these days."

"In the elevator?" She looked at me with sparkling eyes.

"Keep looking at me like that and I’ll take you to that elevator and have you right now." She blushed crimson, making me laugh. "No, you’re not ready for that level of risk yet, maybe in several weeks."

She giggled, and the sound was utterly delightful in our secured sanctuary.

When I finally trusted my legs to support us, I moved away from the door with her still wrapped around me and carried us toward the master bathroom. We were sweaty and overheated, and a shower would cool our bodies. But I chuckled to myself - who was I kidding? A shower would only make me want my Sullivan family princess all over again.

Chapter 436: Birthday Morning Bliss

Lila’s POV

My life with Daniel had transformed into a perfect symphony of protection and passion. Each day flowed seamlessly into the next, wrapped in a security I’d never experienced before. Our routine had become sacred - he escorted me to Thorne Group’s headquarters where I handled legal correspondence, then to law school, always ensuring I was safely delivered and retrieved. Back at his fortress-like penthouse, he invariably had prepared a meal that spoke of his devotion. Then came the shower, and afterward, the sanctuary of his bedroom.

Intimacy with Daniel had opened doors to pleasure I never imagined existed. It stunned me how physical connection could wield such power, creating this insatiable hunger for his touch. Sometimes he claimed me with fierce intensity that bordered on possession - raw and primal, as he described it - and I treasured those moments when his control shattered under his need for me. Other occasions brought tender worship, his hands treating my body like sacred ground, touching not merely skin but something profound within my soul. Last night had been one of those reverent encounters, his caresses mapping every inch of me as territory belonging solely to him.

Dawn broke with the gentle pressure of his lips against my throat and fingers weaving through my hair. I stirred languidly beneath Egyptian cotton sheets, keeping my eyes closed to preserve the dreamlike sensation.

"Open those beautiful eyes for me, little one. Look at me," Daniel coaxed, his voice rich with warmth and morning contentment. I couldn't deny his request and finally lifted my lids to meet his gaze.

"I want more kisses," I murmured drowsily.

"What a spoiled princess I have!" The endearment from his lips still sent butterflies dancing through my chest. He pressed his mouth to mine with tender devotion. "Better now?"

"Getting there," I replied, earning his deep chuckle.

"Do you know what today represents?" he asked, though I was too focused on drawing his lips back to mine to concern myself with dates.

"Friday," I answered before kissing the fading mark I'd left on his neck recently. It had been a spontaneous act of passion, and he'd displayed it proudly throughout the week. Even I marveled at my boldness in marking him.

"When will you brand me again? I enjoyed walking around the precinct showing everyone I have an owner." I laughed, recalling how my law school friends had teased me, claiming I played innocent while harboring wild tendencies.

"So you're admitting I own you?" I loved when he acknowledged belonging to me.

"Could you possibly doubt it?" He turned me to face him directly. "You possess me, little one. I'm entirely yours, only yours." Another kiss sealed his declaration. "And today, I'm going to begin by spoiling my girl, considering it's her birthday."

Daniel rose from the bed, drawing me upright before retrieving a breakfast tray he'd obviously prepared with care. He positioned it carefully on the mattress between us. The silver tray displayed an array of pastries, cake, and artisanal bread, alongside a single pink lisianthus in an elegant crystal vase.

"How exquisite! You're spoiling me terribly. When I return to my apartment, I'll miss this luxury," I said, suddenly aware of how accustomed I'd become to awakening beside him in this impenetrable sanctuary.

"Are you planning to abandon me?" His tone shifted to something more serious.

"Never, but my place has been empty for days."

"We'll address that later. Right now, I want to share breakfast with you." He spread imported jam on artisan toast and brought it to my lips.

We shared the feast in bed, with Daniel insisting on feeding me portions of everything until I couldn't manage another bite.

"Stay exactly where you are, I'll return shortly," he said, collecting the tray and vanishing from the room.

Despite his instructions, biological necessity called. I slipped to the bathroom, and while there, decided to freshen up completely. Upon returning, Daniel sat on the bed's edge looking absolutely devastating - bare-chested wearing only black boxer briefs that showcased his powerful frame to perfection.

Familiar desire coursed through me. I no longer required liquid courage to pursue what I wanted from him. As he'd observed, I was growing bolder with each passing day. I approached the bed and climbed onto it, settling myself across his lap.

"You forgot my proper good morning," I said with feigned reproach.

"You're absolutely right, allow me to remedy that." His arms encircled me as he brought his coffee-scented lips to mine. "Good morning, my beautiful little one! Did you rest well?"

"Good morning, my magnificent protector! I slept wonderfully!" I replied, unable to suppress my radiant smile.

"I have something for you." He reached for an elegant bag beside the bed that had escaped my notice earlier. "I hope it pleases you, fits properly, and that you'll wear it tonight because I'm taking you somewhere special for dinner."

"A gift?" I regarded him with surprise.

"A birthday gift. Happy birthday my little one, may your life overflow with joy, health, and love. And may you continue blessing me by sharing your days with me." His smile was tender as he caressed my cheek with reverent fingers.

"Aren't you going to wish for me to be wicked, insatiable, and completely uninhibited?" I teased, making him laugh richly.

"No need, you already embody all that... and more demanding than I ever imagined possible. I couldn't be more satisfied with my fortune," he responded playfully.

I set the bag aside and gazed deeply into his eyes. He understood my intention; he could always read my desires through my expressions. "Won't you open your present?" he asked.

"I'll unwrap that one later," I said, nodding toward the bag. "I'm going to unwrap this one first," I continued, my fingers sliding beneath the waistband of his underwear.

His eyes widened with surprise and anticipation at my bold intention. When my mouth descended upon him, he was already fully aroused and waiting. His groans filled the room as I pleasured him, savoring his

essence and watching his face transform with ecstasy. This was my true gift - this magnificent man surrendering completely to the pleasure I alone could provide him.

Chapter 437: Birthday Gifts Unveiled

Lila’s POV

I practically floated into Thorne Group’s headquarters that morning, radiating happiness despite the dangerous world that surrounded our operations. My inspector had given me the most incredible birthday celebration—breakfast in bed accompanied by tender affection, followed by passionate encounters that continued seamlessly into his private shower. Lost in these delicious memories of our secure penthouse sanctuary, I barely noticed when Daniel’s armored sedan pulled up to the corporate building that served as our family’s legitimate front.

"Where’s your mind wandering, little one?" Daniel asked, his lips curving into that devastating smile that could disarm both prosecutors and rival families alike.

"Just replaying this morning’s activities and wondering if there might be an encore tonight," I admitted, knowing our conversations were safe from surveillance in his specially equipped vehicle.

His eyes darkened instantly with that predatory intensity that made him feared in both the precinct and the underworld. "Do you honestly believe I wouldn’t make you moan and come apart beneath me all night long?" The bluntness of his words sent heat rushing to my cheeks. Even after all this time in his protected world, his uninhibited way of expressing such intimate thoughts still flustered me.

"Is that a guarantee, inspector?" I managed, summoning the courage that came from being under the protection of the Martinez name.

"Absolutely, my little one. I have several ideas for tonight that I think you’ll enjoy in our secure tower."

"You’re feeling particularly inventive today," I teased, enjoying this rare moment of lightness in our heavily guarded existence.

"That’s entirely your fault. That incredible way you pleasured me this morning, looking up at me with those mischievous eyes while taking all of me into that sweet mouth of yours."

"Daniel..." I attempted to sound scolding, but secretly I was thrilled by how much he enjoyed my attentions. The way he responded drove me wild, and I had grown to love the intimacy of that particular act, especially knowing how much trust it represented in our dangerous world.

"Don't even try to deny it, you sexy minx. It's written all over your face how much you enjoy it." He laughed knowingly, and I couldn't argue. He could read me like classified intelligence files, interpreting my every thought just by studying my expressions. "Now go handle those legal contracts, but be careful—you have promises to keep tonight."

I reluctantly bid my inspector goodbye, wishing I could spend the entire day in our fortified penthouse instead of maintaining the legitimate business operations. But family responsibilities came first in our world. The workday began pleasantly with warm hugs and gifts from Xavier, Jude, and Caleb—all trusted associates who understood the delicate balance of keeping Thorne Group's operations running smoothly.

At noon, Gemma and Ruby arrived to escort me to lunch with proper security protocols, where Ivy, Zoe, and Nora were already waiting at a restaurant owned by one of our allied families. My friends showered me with more hugs and presents, and for dessert, they'd arranged for a cake with candles. The entire establishment joined in singing "Happy Birthday" to me, though I knew half the staff were likely armed and watching for threats. I felt overwhelmed with emotion; never before had my birthday been celebrated so wonderfully, especially with such careful protection.

"Tiny Cipher, tell us what Daniel has planned for tonight," Nora inquired eagerly, using the code name that had stuck since my early days learning the family's encryption systems.

"He's taking me to dinner at one of the secured venues and gave me a gorgeous dress," I answered, my mind already wandering to the promises he'd whispered in the car, though those details were staying private even among trusted friends.

"That inspector! He could have organized a gathering and invited all of us to the private dining room," Zoe pouted, making me laugh at her feigned indignation. "Well, since that's how it is, make sure you wear the lingerie I gave you tonight. Your inspector won't know what hit him."

"Oh, Zoe! Only you would say that. But I do love the gift—you always know exactly what to get, even when shopping through our secure suppliers."

"I’m telling you, Tiny Cipher, stick with me, and you’ll never go wrong in this business!" Zoe replied with a confident grin that reminded me she was far more than just a socialite—she was one of our most effective intelligence gatherers.

When I returned to Thorne Group’s legal department, three more gifts awaited on my secured desk. First was a stunning arrangement of pink lisianthus flowers in an elegant bulletproof glass vase from my inspector. The card expressed his wishes for a wonderful day and mentioned his anticipation for our evening together—a sentiment I definitely shared, knowing how rare such peaceful moments were in our world.

Next was a larger box with a card attached. It was from my older brother Beckett, the current head of the Sullivan family operations, and his wife Katarina, filled with warm birthday wishes and pride in the woman I was becoming within our organization. Inside was a luxury brand purse with hidden compartments and matching high heels—absolutely beautiful and perfectly functional for our lifestyle. Katarina’s taste was impeccable as always, combining elegance with the subtle security features our world demanded.

Since she began her strategic marriage to Beckett, consolidating two powerful family alliances, she’d made it a tradition to select thoughtful gifts for me and ensure my brother did the same. She believed that choosing presents carefully demonstrated how much you valued someone within the family hierarchy. In my childhood under Claire’s controlling influence, I’d had to hide these gifts, as my mother considered them frivolous displays of wealth that could draw unwanted attention. Now, living independently under Daniel’s protection, I no longer needed to conceal such treasures.

The third box was smaller, but I already knew its contents. Opening the card confirmed my suspicion—it was from my father, the patriarch of the Sullivan family’s legitimate business empire. Each year, he gifted me jewelry crafted by our family’s trusted artisans, secretly protecting these offerings from Claire’s interference. He always said gold and property were investments that could help me through difficult times if the family’s protection ever failed—a practical philosophy in our unpredictable world.

I had kept those pieces hidden from Claire during my childhood years under her supervision. Once, growing suspicious of my father’s generosity, she ransacked my room while I was at school, searching for evidence of what she saw as favoritism that threatened her position. Fortunately, I’d cleverly concealed my little collection inside a teddy bear that I would open, place the gifts inside, and carefully sew closed again, keeping it high on my bookshelf among other innocent childhood items.

That particular day, I returned to find my teddy bear thrown to the floor and Claire in a rage, demanding to know what my father had given me. When I denied receiving anything, she struck me with the calculated cruelty of someone who understood exactly how to inflict pain without leaving marks that would anger the family patriarch. She threatened to continue until I confessed. Thank goodness Beckett arrived home at that moment and intervened with the authority of the heir apparent. He took me to his secure residence, promising I wouldn't have to leave unless I wanted to and only with our father's explicit protection. I returned to the main house shortly after—she was still technically my mother in the family structure, after all. But I took my precious bear to my brother's compound for safekeeping, only retrieving it when I moved away to my own protected apartment.

That was just one of many birthdays Claire had ruined with her power games and psychological manipulation. Year after year, she transformed what should have been celebrations into nightmares designed to remind me of my place in her version of the family hierarchy. Lost in these painful memories of psychological warfare, I didn't realize tears had escaped until Jude appeared at my desk with the quiet concern of someone trained in personal security.

"That expression doesn't look very festive," he observed gently, automatically scanning the office for potential threats before focusing on me. I quickly wiped away my tears and looked up at him. "Just remembering something unpleasant from the old days," I explained. "Is your surveillance shift going badly?"

"Actually, this is the first truly happy birthday I've ever had," I admitted honestly, knowing Jude's loyalty to the Thorne organization meant my words were safe. Jude immediately pulled me into a comforting embrace with the practiced ease of someone who understood the emotional toll of our lifestyle.

"Want to talk about the security concerns?"

"Not today."

"Then tell me who these presents are from instead—I need to log them for the protection detail anyway."

"The flowers are from my inspector," I answered proudly, knowing the respect Daniel commanded throughout our interconnected organizations. "This one's from my older brother and his wife—they're expanding the family's art acquisition business. And this one's from my father—I was just about to open it."

"Those shoes are gorgeous! Daniel will love them when he sees you tonight," Jude teased, making me laugh while maintaining his professional awareness of our security protocols. "Do you want privacy to open your father's gift, or should I stay for inventory purposes?"

"No, stay. He always designs jewelry himself and has it crafted by our family's trusted artisans. They're always beautiful pieces that serve multiple purposes. Let's see what he created this year."

"That's unique—commissioning custom pieces just for you. I think I'm going to like your father when I finally meet him," Jude commented, settling beside me while maintaining visual contact with the office entrance.

"You will. He's a brilliant strategist and genuinely caring patriarch," I smiled, thinking of how he'd managed to protect me even under Claire's regime. "Let's see what message he's sending this year."

Chapter 438: Hidden Treasures Revealed

Lila's POV

I opened the velvet jewelry case and couldn't help but smile. My father never failed to impress when it came to his gifts. Inside lay an exquisite gold bracelet adorned with blood-red rubies and brilliant diamonds. Delicate golden hearts studded with diamonds formed the chain's foundation, while perfectly cut heart-shaped rubies nestled between each link. The craftsmanship was breathtaking, luxurious yet refined. The accompanying card moved me deeply. My father had written about his profound love for me, his overwhelming pride, and promised his unwavering protection regardless of which path I chose in the dangerous world we inhabited.

"Your father possesses incredible talent and impeccable taste, Lila. This piece is absolutely magnificent. Does he accept private commissions from other families?" Jude's question made me laugh, knowing how territorial the Sullivan family artisans were about their exclusive creations.

"Never. He only designs pieces for me. Beckett mentioned he used to create these for his first wife, my father's beloved Alice. He would design special pieces and have them crafted by the family's most trusted jewelers for significant occasions. He never did anything like this for my mother. But he does this for me, every birthday without fail. This makes many pieces in my private collection."

"That’s extraordinary! I’d love to examine the others sometime."

"Come to my place and I’ll show you the entire vault."

"Lila, that collection of yours should be secured in the family’s private bank immediately," Jude warned, his concern entirely legitimate given the volatile nature of our world.

"I’ve considered that, but I’m not entirely familiar with the security protocols."

"Just contact Peyton at the Thorne financial division. I’m certain Daniel would escort you and your jewelry to the secure facility personally."

"I’ll arrange that early next week. I couldn’t bear to lose these irreplaceable pieces."

Following Jude’s sound advice, I contacted the manager who assured me everything would be prepared when I arrived. The thought of my precious collection being properly secured in a facility protected by armed guards and advanced surveillance brought immense relief. For today though, I would proudly wear my newest treasure.

Throughout the afternoon, calls poured in from my father, my older brother Beckett, and Katarina. Every year, they were the only ones who remembered my birthday without fail. My paternal grandparents, who had been pillars of the Sullivan family’s old guard, used to remember as well before they passed on. This year felt remarkably different though. I had genuine friends who cared about me and a formidable boyfriend who had made my day truly extraordinary.

"Beautiful little one!" Daniel embraced me tightly as I emerged from the Thorne building. "How was your special day?"

"Absolutely wonderful! Look at all the presents everyone sent!" The packages were so numerous that a security guard had to assist in carrying everything to Daniel’s armored vehicle.

"You deserve much more than this." Daniel opened the reinforced trunk and helped secure all the packages inside.

"What about this jewelry case and the flowers—aren't you storing them in here?" he asked, noticing I was still clutching the roses he'd sent and the precious box from my father.

"No, these are far too special. They're staying with me." Daniel laughed warmly, opened the passenger door, lifted me effortlessly in his powerful arms, and placed me inside the leather seat.

"You're the truly special one, little one." He kissed me tenderly before walking around to take his place behind the wheel of the bulletproof sedan.

"Could we make a stop at my apartment?" I requested, remembering I had a matching ring that would perfectly complement my new bracelet.

"Of course, darling! Let's go. Meanwhile, you can explain why this particular jewelry case is so significant, considering I wasn't the generous soul who gave it to you."

"You're impossibly arrogant," I teased playfully. His responding smile was bright and supremely confident—the smile of a man who knew he was absolutely right. And he was.

During our drive through the city's protected corridors, I recounted my entire day and described all my wonderful gifts in detail. When I mentioned the extensive jewelry collection, Daniel strongly endorsed Jude's suggestion about keeping it in the family's secure banking facility.

Entering my apartment felt strangely foreign—I hadn't been there in several days. Everything seemed unfamiliar now and was covered in a thin layer of dust. We walked to the bedroom where Daniel sat comfortably on the bed while I gathered my belongings. I packed another small suitcase with carefully selected clothes and retrieved my cherished childhood teddy bear.

"Is that truly all you're taking, little one?" Daniel asked curiously, eyeing my modest suitcase with obvious concern. "You should bring significantly more."

"This is perfectly sufficient," I stated firmly, knowing instinctively that the more possessions I relocated, the more difficult it would become to maintain my independence eventually.

"Very well," he sighed resignedly, rising gracefully from the bed. "Shall we depart?" I nodded agreement, and we left the apartment together.

Back at Daniel's heavily secured penthouse, I organized my belongings in the walk-in closet while he watched attentively, periodically pulling me close for tender kisses. I carefully took my teddy bear and opened the hidden stitching along its back seam, methodically removing multiple individual jewelry boxes and a small waterproof container holding all the accompanying cards.

"You truly possess a remarkable treasure, Lila," Daniel remarked admiringly as I displayed the complete collection across the bed. "These are absolutely extraordinary pieces—worth an immense fortune, without question."

I shared the detailed story behind each piece of jewelry and explained precisely how I'd needed to conceal them from my mother's greedy reach. Until moving to the city and joining the Thorne organization, I hadn't fully comprehended their staggering monetary value or political significance.

"Your mother is, to put it diplomatically, an insufferable and dangerous creature," Daniel commented coldly while listening to my painful accounts of birthday conflicts and family manipulation.

"She certainly makes life extraordinarily difficult," I acknowledged honestly. "You know, today was genuinely the best birthday I've ever experienced. I even had a proper cake and birthday wishes during lunch. I'd never experienced anything like that before," I added with a genuine smile, but immediately watched his expression darken ominously, instantly regretting my careless words.

"What exactly do you mean by 'never'?" he asked tensely, dangerous undertones building in his commanding voice.

"My mother wouldn't permit birthday celebrations for me—only her precious Justin could celebrate his birthdays properly. She always claimed parties were exclusively for important and relevant family members, and I was merely a foolish little girl nobody truly cared about. She insisted I should focus solely on becoming a suitable wife to please a future husband from an allied family. She refused to let me receive presents, saying gifts would make me believe everything in life came without struggle. That's precisely why my paternal grandparents secretly opened a protected account for me and deposited money every year. When my grandfather died, he left me a substantial inheritance that went into the same secured account—the one my mother constantly threatened to seize." My chest tightened

painfully as I spoke, suddenly realizing I was revealing far more than intended. "She didn't even call today, not even for our usual bitter argument."

"Look directly at me," Daniel commanded firmly. "Your mother is a cruel, calculating person who deserves no place in your thoughts. You shouldn't internalize anything she says that diminishes your worth. And you absolutely shouldn't feel sadness that she didn't call."

"I understand." I rubbed my hands nervously against my thighs, lowering my gaze uncomfortably. "Daniel, would I be a terrible person if I completely stopped loving her? Sometimes I feel such overwhelming anger toward her."

"My beautiful girl, come here immediately," he pulled me securely onto his lap. "If you stop loving her, it's because she hasn't earned or deserved your love. That wouldn't make you a bad person whatsoever. Considering how viciously she treats you, I'm genuinely surprised you're not constantly furious with her. I'm absolutely amazed that with the mother you have, you've become such a beautiful, loving, and remarkably positive person despite everything."

I buried my face against his neck, carefully contemplating his wise words. Perhaps that was indeed the answer—maybe I needed to treat my mother as someone who no longer existed in my world. Maybe then I could finally discover the peace I desperately sought.

Chapter 439: Birthday Treasures

Lila's POV

Daniel's calloused fingers traced delicate patterns along my spine, his mind clearly occupied with thoughts beyond this moment. The weight of his family legacy seemed to press down on him constantly, even during our most intimate times. Then, with a deep exhale that sounded like he'd been carrying the world on his shoulders, he spoke.

"We should secure your birthday treasures in the vault now. Then we'll prepare for tonight's dinner. I promise this will be an evening you'll never forget." His voice carried that familiar tone of authority as he pressed his lips against my hair, the gesture both protective and possessive.

"The most incredible birthday with the most dangerous man in the city! I can't wait to see what you have planned!" I bounced up, forcing brightness into my voice because this formidable man deserved nothing less than my complete trust. "I didn't realize you had a vault installed here."

"Had it put in the day I moved to this penthouse. Security is everything in our world, little one. Come, let me show you." His hands were gentle yet firm as he helped me gather the jewelry boxes, leading me into his expansive walk-in closet that rivaled any luxury boutique.

Behind one of the custom-built shelving units was a concealed panel. When Daniel pressed a specific sequence against the dark wood grain, it revealed a substantial vault built directly into the reinforced wall. He entered a complex code, and the heavy steel door swung open silently. Inside lay the tools of his dual existence: two military-grade firearms, thick bundles of unmarked bills, several timepieces worth more than most people's homes, and an array of jewelry cases that spoke of generations of Martinez family wealth.

"This watch," he said, retrieving an extraordinary timepiece that seemed to catch light from every angle, "belonged to my grandfather. The man who built our family's empire from nothing. He always told me that powerful men must control time, never allow time to control them. That we must be the architects of our own fate, no matter the cost." A rare smile softened his usually hard features as he cradled the obviously priceless watch. "He was the kind of man who commanded respect from both our world and theirs."

"It's absolutely magnificent!" I studied the watch closely, recognizing the exclusive Swiss craftsmanship and noting the platinum construction that probably cost more than most people's annual salary.

"Place your treasures inside. Early next week we'll transfer everything to the family's private banking facility." Daniel stepped back, still admiring the watch that clearly held deep significance. "I think I'll honor your birthday by wearing this tonight. Special occasions deserve special acknowledgments in our circles."

His gesture made my heart race – he considered my birthday important enough to wear something that connected him to the Martinez family's most revered patriarch. After carefully arranging my gifts inside the vault, he closed it and made sure I memorized the combination, treating me like a true partner in his dangerous world.

I made a deliberate choice to banish thoughts of my manipulative mother; they only brought darkness to my spirit. Today belonged to celebrating with my powerful protector. He was taking me somewhere

special for dinner, and I knew we'd share one of those magical evenings that made all the danger worthwhile.

Daniel, ever the gentleman despite his lethal reputation, used the guest suite to prepare himself, granting me exclusive access to the master bathroom and bedroom. When I finally emerged, the woman in the mirror seemed like a stranger. The stunning crimson dress Daniel had chosen hugged my body like it was designed specifically for me – strapless with an elegant bow detail at the bust, fitted waist, and an A-line skirt that ended just above my knees. The luxurious silk felt like liquid fire against my skin.

It appeared everyone in my life had conspired to coordinate their gifts perfectly. The sleek black clutch from my friend Katarina matched flawlessly with the iconic red-soled heels my brother had selected – shoes that probably cost more than most families spent on rent. I added the ruby bracelet from my father and a matching ruby ring he'd given me the previous year, pieces that marked me clearly as Sullivan family royalty.

I discovered Daniel standing by the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room, cutting an intimidating figure in his perfectly tailored black suit that probably cost more than a luxury car. When I called his name, he turned and simply stared, his usual composure completely shattered, seemingly struck speechless for what felt like an eternity.

"Christ, Lila! You're absolutely devastating! I've never seen anyone more beautiful in my entire life," he finally managed, his voice rough with emotion.

"This dress is pure perfection!" I spun around playfully, enjoying the way the silk skirt flared dramatically. "Your taste is absolutely flawless, big guy."

"I know – just look at the gorgeous woman I claimed for myself!" He approached with predatory grace, placing a reverent kiss on my cheek. "But something essential is still missing."

"Daniel, everything is already perfect beyond belief. If you add anything else, I might collapse under the weight of all this incredible luxury," I laughed, but his expression remained completely serious.

"My gift is still missing, little one." He retrieved a small crimson velvet box adorned with white silk ribbon from his suit jacket. My curiosity exploded immediately.

"But you've already given me this breathtaking dress and those stunning flowers..."

"Open it and tell me your honest opinion," he commanded gently.

I untied the ribbon with trembling fingers and lifted the lid carefully. Inside nestled three pairs of earrings and a piercing that took my breath away – diamond hearts that sparkled like captured stars, identical ones crafted from blood-red rubies, and a third pair featuring intricate gold hearts dangling with diamonds each, ending in ruby hearts outlined with tiny diamonds that caught the light magnificently. The piercing was an elegant gold hoop studded with small rubies. Exactly one piece for each of my piercings, the collection was absolutely breathtaking.

"Daniel, this is far too expensive. I couldn't possibly accept jewelry this valuable," I protested after examining each exquisite piece.

"You can't accept jewelry from the man who protects you? Of course you can, little one. You belong to me now, and I have every right to spoil you with gifts that reflect your worth. Unless you find them lacking."

"I adore them, they're absolutely exquisite. It's like you coordinated with my father – they're perfect, but..." Words failed me as overwhelming emotion threatened to spill over. I craved his spoiling, desperately, but more than that, I needed his love. I wanted to be more than just a beautiful woman who caught his eye, but expressing that felt impossible.

"But what, little one? There's no 'but' in this situation. It's a gift you're going to accept graciously, or I'll assume you hate it and purchase something even more extravagant," he teased with dangerous charm, making refusal completely impossible.

"They're absolutely magnificent. Thank you, my love." I melted into his embrace, and he pulled me closer than usual, holding me tightly against his solid chest like I was something precious he might lose.

"May I change your earrings?" When I nodded eagerly, he gently replaced each piece with careful precision, placing my old ones in the velvet box before setting it on the marble coffee table.

"You’re so beautiful, little one." His thumb caressed my cheek as I smiled, savoring his heartfelt compliment. "Shall we go claim the night?"

"Yes, please. I’m getting hungry." His rich laughter filled the elegant room.

"Then let’s feed my queen properly."

We left arm in arm, the journey filled with easy conversation and comfortable laughter. His familiar playlist filled the luxury car as we drove through the city, and I couldn’t remember ever feeling this perfectly content in such a dangerous world.

Chapter 440: Birthday Bliss

Lila’s POV

The music flowing through Daniel’s bulletproof sedan transported me back to a very specific memory. These weren’t just random songs—they were the exact playlist from our first night together in his fortified penthouse. I glanced at my detective, noting his self-satisfied smile as he navigated through the city’s elite district.

"These songs..." I started, watching his expression grow even more pleased.

"Our playlist. Created it specially for our first night. Seemed appropriate for today too. Do you like it?" His eyes briefly met mine before returning to the road, ever vigilant for potential threats that came with our underground aristocracy lifestyle.

"I adore them! Did you personally select each one?" I asked, genuinely curious. I’d known he planned our first night together with military precision, but this level of attention to detail surprised me.

"Every single one was deliberately chosen," he confirmed with a sideways glance. "Nothing random about it—not when it comes to you, little one."

"I’m not sure I deserve this much thoughtfulness," I sighed contentedly, overwhelmed by my good fortune in finding love within our dangerous world.

"You deserve infinitely more, Lila! So much more! I only hope I'm worthy of having you." Daniel's gaze locked with mine as we paused at a red light. The sincerity in his eyes nearly brought tears to mine, despite all the darkness surrounding our families.

We pulled up to an unfamiliar tower housing a restaurant I'd heard whispered about in elite circles but never visited—an exclusive rooftop establishment known for its panoramic city views and clientele from the most powerful families. The kind of place where business deals worth millions were sealed with handshakes and where silence was golden.

Daniel swiftly exited the car and handed his keys to the waiting valet—a man I recognized as one of Thorne's security personnel—before circling around to open my door. We rode the private elevator to the top floor where we were greeted by a stunning hostess whose overly friendly smile and lingering gaze on my big guy did not escape my notice. She led us toward a secluded section of the restaurant separated by bulletproof glass partitions.

To my complete astonishment, all our friends were waiting—Inspector Adler with his wife, Jade alongside Sebastian, and many others from our interconnected world of legitimate businesses and underground power.

"I can't believe this!" I exclaimed, immediately feeling emotional as they erupted into an enthusiastic chorus of "Happy Birthday," their voices echoing through the private dining room.

After exchanging hugs and collecting gifts from those who hadn't presented them earlier, I settled into my seat with Daniel beside me, his hand protectively resting on my thigh. The evening unfolded beautifully with delicious food, premium drinks, and lively conversation about everything except the business that actually funded our lifestyles. When dessert time arrived, they presented a stunning multi-tiered cake—the bottom tier pink, the top white, adorned with cascading pink and white lisianthus flowers and flickering candles. Accompanying the cake were trays of traditional birthday treats and chocolates.

A violinist played a beautiful melody as the cake was placed before me. When the musician transitioned to "Happy Birthday," everyone rose to their feet, singing and clapping with genuine warmth that reminded me family wasn't always about blood.

"Make a wish, tiny cipher," Zoe encouraged before I blew out the candles. I closed my eyes, silently wishing for all my future birthdays to be as joyful as this one, with my big guy by my side, safe from the dangers that lurked in our world.

After the celebration wound down, we returned to the car. I was already anticipating revealing the lingerie hidden beneath my outfit to my handsome inspector. Daniel entered the car with a beautiful smile, his earlier vigilance softening into contentment.

"Finally, I have you all to myself," he said, giving me a quick kiss before starting the engine. "Are you enjoying your birthday so far?"

"More than enjoying—it's the best birthday imaginable! Thank you for organizing everything." I cupped his face and kissed him again, tasting the sweetness of champagne on his lips.

"I still have one more surprise," he said mysteriously. I studied him curiously, continually amazed by his creativity and thoughtfulness despite the weight of his double life.

"You never cease to amaze me. You consider every little detail," I said admiringly as he simply smiled in response. I noticed we were taking an unfamiliar route through the city's outskirts. "Aren't we heading home?"

"I mentioned I have another surprise," he replied, taking my hand and pressing his lips to it. Suddenly, I recalled something he'd mentioned recently, and feeling inspired by his generosity, I decided to do something special for him—something I thoroughly enjoyed as well. "Will it take long to reach this surprise destination?"

"A bit. It's outside the city limits. Why do you ask?" He glanced at me with curiosity as I unfastened my seatbelt.

"Because it's my birthday, and there's something I want to do." I slid my hand over his groin, gently caressing him through his expensive suit pants. His eyes darted between watching me and focusing on driving through the darkened streets.

"What exactly are you planning, little one?" His voice betrayed his anticipation, though he seemed uncertain if I'd actually follow through in the moving vehicle.

"Don't crash the car, Daniel," I teased playfully as I leaned over, kneeling on the leather seat, using both hands to unfasten his pants and pull down his underwear, freeing his already semi-hard member.

"You're not really going to...?" He sounded disbelieving, his inspector's composure cracking.

I moistened my lips and began stroking him with steady, rhythmic movements until he hardened fully. Then I lowered my head and took him completely into my mouth. His taste was intoxicating—pure masculine power. I established a rhythm, feeling him grow increasingly harder, throbbing against my tongue.

"Damn, you naughty girl, driving like this is impossible," he groaned, his usual controlled demeanor dissolving.

"Don't stop driving—I want my surprise," I replied before resuming my attentions, determined to pleasure my dangerous detective.

"God, little one, you'll be the death of me!" he moaned, feigning complaint while his body betrayed his complete enjoyment.

I was determined to give my inspector an unforgettable experience while he navigated the empty highway. I moved my mouth in unison with my hand along his substantial length, circling the tip with my tongue before focusing suction there. My other hand massaged his testicles, causing him to squirm and moan with pleasure. I noticed him slowing the car, gripping the steering wheel with one hand while the other gently stroked my back.

I controlled the situation perfectly, knowing exactly what techniques drove him wild. I loved pleasuring him this way—his taste, the power I felt when taking him into my mouth, the way this formidable man became completely vulnerable to my touch.

I increased my tempo and took him deeper, eliciting a primal groan that echoed through the luxury sedan. When I sensed his impending climax, I deliberately slowed my movements, allowing him to regain control before resuming with renewed vigor, eager to taste his release.

"Holy shit, little one!" He moaned, involuntarily thrusting his hips upward. Knowing I could make him lose control thrilled me more than any power play in our complicated world. "I can't—little one—I'll crash the car." He pulled onto the shoulder and killed the engine. I allowed myself a small victorious smile. "Now, my sexy minx, make your man cum in that sweet mouth of yours."

His words—"my man"—resonated deeply. I wanted him to be mine forever, despite all the dangerous complications. I redoubled my efforts, feeling his hand grasp and squeeze my backside. I devoured him completely, his lustful moans increasing my own arousal. His fingers found their way beneath my dress to my entrance, slipping inside me and making me moan around him, which only intensified his pleasure.

Soon he released in powerful pulses down my throat, nearly making me gag. I felt triumphant hearing his ragged breathing while his fingers continued moving inside me with practiced skill. I thoroughly cleaned his length with my tongue before resting my head in his lap, feeling my own pleasure building under his expert touch.

"I want to hear you moan, you naughty little one," he commanded, running one hand through my hair while the other worked magic with fingers pumping inside me, pressing that perfect spot that drew increasingly vocal responses from me.

My orgasm crashed through me with such intensity that I couldn't suppress a near-scream of pleasure. My body convulsed as he held me securely, preventing me from tumbling off the seat. He withdrew his fingers and immediately brought them to his mouth.

"You're so fucking delicious! Damn!" He leaned back against the headrest, eyes closed, savoring my taste once more. "You have me completely wrapped around your finger, little one!"

I smiled contentedly, hoping he would feel this way forever, regardless of whatever dangers our families might bring.