Mafia Mask 441

Chapter 441: Weekend Escape

Daniel's POV

After our passionate encounter, I watched my little one compose herself and settle back in her seat. What was this woman doing to me? I was utterly done for, hopelessly addicted to her. We were parked on the shoulder of a deserted road outside the city limits, far from the watchful eyes of both our families and the jurisdiction I patrolled. It took several moments before my brain started functioning properly again.

"I should make you ride me right here and now," I said, studying her face and trying to decipher what was happening in that mysterious mind of hers. "What's come over you? Don't misunderstand me—I'm not complaining in the slightest. Feel free to surprise me like this anytime, but that was incredibly bold, especially considering you only had one glass of champagne at Thorne's gathering today." I chuckled, recalling the first time she'd gone down on me in my penthouse, requiring liquid courage in the form of whiskey from my private collection.

"You're transforming me, making me bold," she replied with newfound confidence that reminded me of her Sullivan bloodline.

"No, little one. What I did was liberate a mischievous creature within you who craves physical pleasure," I traced my thumb across her lower lip. "And I'm more than delighted to handle her, no matter what your brother Beckett or my father might think about a Martinez getting this close to Sullivan royalty."

"Now I want my surprise, or I'll lock away this naughty sex-obsessed monster again," she threatened playfully, feigning anger with that aristocratic pout that drove me wild.

"And I'll enjoy setting her free again, though I adore shy and insecure Lila just as much. But I must confess, sexy vixen Lila is quite a sight to behold!" I kissed her lips, eliciting a smile. "I have to say, though it sounds crude, this gorgeous mouth of yours knows exactly how to please me in ways that drive me absolutely wild! You've given me the most incredible experience of my life, little one!"

"Oh, Daniel!" Her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, but I was simply stating facts.

"Now I'll have to work even harder tonight to reciprocate this delicious gift you've given me." I gave her another quick kiss before starting the car and merging back onto the road, checking my mirrors out of habit for any surveillance from rival families.

Lila was an exquisite box of surprises wrapped in Sullivan elegance and hidden strength. I couldn't bear to imagine what would become of me if this enchanting woman ever grew tired of me and left. Life without Lila seemed impossible now, especially with the dangerous games our families played. When we visited her apartment under Claire's watchful territory, I wanted her to pack everything and move permanently to my fortress-like penthouse, but she only packed another small bag, leaving me frustrated and terrified she might tire of me too quickly or succumb to family pressure.

My frustration transformed into sadness and rage when we arrived home and she revealed how Claire had denied her birthday celebrations throughout her childhood. I wanted to throttle that woman whom I'd never met but already despised, despite her position in the Sullivan hierarchy.

I wondered how someone as radiant and charming as Lila could come from such a despicable person. It defied understanding. While my parents were demanding and controlling in typical Martinez fashion, they fiercely protected their own, providing us with a twisted sense of security within our world of shadows and power. Lila deserved far better than the mother fate had given her. At least her father had been kind to her before his death. And talented—the jewelry he'd designed for Lila was exquisite and valuable, pieces that could fund small operations; she really needed to store them in one of the family vaults.

Learning about her previous birthdays made me grateful I'd organized a birthday dinner for her using my connections in the legitimate restaurant business. She glowed with excitement throughout every moment, and for once I saw her forget about family obligations and territorial disputes. But I received the greatest gift—her smiles and kisses directed at me throughout the evening were absolutely breathtaking.

She continued to astonish me—from a joke I'd made days earlier during one of our late-night conversations about escaping our family legacies, she conceived an idea and executed it, driving me wild with pleasure in the car. This woman was extraordinary! After she'd made me see stars, all I wanted was to reach the country hotel Zoe had helped me book through her network of contacts and lose myself in my little one for the entire weekend, away from surveillance and family politics.

"Here we are!" I announced as I pulled up to the entrance of the exclusive retreat I'd selected for its discretion and distance from both Martinez and Sullivan territories, where a valet immediately appeared.

I exited the car and circled around to assist Lila. Another staff member approached with a luggage cart. He retrieved the two suitcases I'd packed under Zoe's guidance from the trunk—she knew exactly what Lila would need for a romantic getaway—while I gathered my little one's presents from the back seat.

"Suitcases?" She looked at me curiously.

"One's mine and one's yours. Zoe helped me select everything. Actually, she deserves credit for everything," I explained.

"Of course she helped!" Lila smiled as I squeezed her hand. "And I loved everything about tonight."

"That's wonderful. This is a country hotel owned by people who value privacy and discretion. We'll stay until Sunday." Lila's eyes lit up with excitement.

"Just you and me the entire weekend, no family obligations or territory concerns? This sounds promising..." She laughed mischievously. Something told me she was plotting something delightful.

"Oh yes, very promising!" I chuckled at her enthusiasm.

I had reserved their most private cottage, one that guaranteed complete isolation from prying eyes and listening devices. After checking in using one of my legitimate identities, we exited through a side door and followed a stone path bordered by flowering shrubs. The staff member unlocked the door for us and left our luggage inside before disappearing with professional discretion. Lila surveyed everything with a radiant smile and sparkling caramel eyes.

As requested, the room was romantically prepared. Pink lisianthus arrangements adorned the space, candles flickered throughout, and wine chilled in an ice bucket—all arranged through contacts who owed my family favors. At the rear, French doors opened onto a small balcony overlooking rolling hills—a breathtaking vista free from the urban jungle where our families waged their subtle wars. Lila explored the space with obvious delight.

"Do you like it, little one?" I asked, feeling unexpectedly vulnerable despite all my power and connections.

"I love it, big guy! This place is beautiful!" She turned to me and leaped into my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist.

"Hmm, my little one is being quite bold today!" I kissed her deeply, savoring the feeling of her in my arms.

"It’s your fault," she replied when our lips parted.

"How could this possibly be my fault?" I asked, carrying her toward the bed.

"It’s because you’re a hot Greek god who’s getting me addicted to sex," she whispered in my ear, making me laugh.

"I love when you call me a hot Greek god. Makes me feel irresistible."

"And you are irresistible, big guy!"

"Am I?" She nodded in confirmation before sliding off my lap.

I started our playlist and pulled her close to dance. We swayed together until she stepped back and pushed me onto the bed. I sat watching an uninhibited Lila dance while unzipping her dress and letting it fall, kicking it aside. My self-control evaporated instantly. She looked devastatingly sexy in red lingerie with black lace accents and those garters that drove me wild—the little minx knew exactly what she was doing to this hardened inspector.

I pulled her onto the bed and kissed her passionately, my hands exploring every inch of her body.

"Tell me, little one, what do you want tonight—slow and gentle, or rough and intense?" I asked, restraining myself and allowing her to choose how she wanted the night to unfold.

"I want my detective just as he is. I want you completely crazy about me tonight." I understood exactly what she meant.

"Oh, little one, I'm crazy about you every moment of every day!" I replied, tugging down the delicate lace of her strapless bra to taste her tempting breasts.

I was determined to make this night unforgettable, to make her want to stay forever, because losing her wasn't an option—I couldn't imagine life without my little one anymore, regardless of what storms our family names might bring.

Chapter 442: Confession Vault

Lila's POV

My birthday weekend with Daniel had been absolute perfection. Every moment felt like a dream—he had meticulously planned each detail to create unforgettable memories. I found myself constantly drifting into daydreams, wishing that magical time together could stretch into eternity. More than anything, I longed for him to crave me with the same inexplicable intensity that I felt for him.

After he accompanied me to secure my jewelry in a private vault at the bank—a necessity in our world where valuable assets needed protection from both law enforcement seizures and rival family raids—he admitted he'd had the best weekend of his life too. Those words played on repeat in my mind as I sat at my desk at Thorne Group's legal department, absently chewing on my pen cap and replaying our time together.

"Lila, Lila!" Jude's amused voice broke through my reverie. "Are you still with us, or have you drifted off to some distant realm?"

I blinked back to reality. Jude was Thorne Group's financial advisor, a sharp-minded man who handled the legitimate investment portfolios that served as our family's public face. His father had been a trusted ally to the Thorne organization for decades.

"Not a distant realm—just Daniel's wonderful world," I confessed with a dreamy smile.

"Has the inspector completely captured you then?" Jude teased, his eyes twinkling with knowing amusement.

"Completely arrested and convicted with no chance of parole," I admitted.

"I can see that." He chuckled. "Have lunch with me today, little cipher? It's been too long anyway. Ready to go?"

Jude and I strolled out of the Thorne building together as I enthusiastically described my weekend getaway and the breathtaking private estate Daniel had chosen for our celebration. But I couldn't help noticing something seemed off with Jude. Once seated at our usual restaurant—a discreet establishment where family associates could speak freely—I went straight to the point.

"What's bothering you, Jude?"

"What do you mean?" he replied, feigning innocence while scanning the room with practiced caution.

"Something's weighing on your mind. I can tell."

"Yeah, you're right, Lila," he finally admitted, signaling the waiter. After ordering our meals, he continued, "It's Nora. She's been acting... different lately. More distant. When I mention it, she insists nothing's changed, but I can feel her pulling away."

"You two have been together quite a while, right?"

"Many years now. Since college, before I fully understood what it meant to be part of this life."

"Have you talked about taking the next step? A proper family union, perhaps?"

In our world, marriages weren’t just romantic partnerships—they were strategic alliances that strengthened organizational bonds and secured bloodlines. The pressure to formalize relationships carried extra weight when family reputations and business interests were at stake.

"It’s complicated," Jude sighed. "I’ve always wanted children, but Nora keeps saying she wants to wait. She’s in her thirties now, and I’m concerned about timing. The biological reality for women isn’t forgiving, and I’m beginning to wonder if she truly wants to bring children into this life at all."

I understood his dilemma. Growing up in a mafia family meant accepting that your children would inherit not just wealth and privilege, but also dangers and obligations that most people couldn’t imagine.

"Have you asked her directly about it?"

"Countless times. She always says ’yes, but not yet.’ Can I ask you something personal?" When I nodded, he continued, "If Daniel wanted a child with you—I know you’re young—but what would you say?"

I considered this carefully. In our families, children weren’t just personal choices—they were the next generation of the organization, future heirs to both legitimate businesses and underground operations.

"Honestly, I do want to be a mother someday, but not yet. I’ve always envisioned it happening after I finish law school but before I reach my thirties, especially since I’d like to have multiple children—enough to ensure succession but not so many that inheritance becomes complicated."

"Look at you with your dynasty all mapped out!" Jude laughed, though I detected a hint of sadness beneath his joke.

"I think most women in our position contemplate these milestones—education, establishing yourself within the family structure, marriage alliances, securing the next generation. I’ve always pictured them in that sequence." I smiled softly. "But for Daniel? I might reconsider the order."

Jude studied me thoughtfully before asking, "Is this thing with Daniel truly serious, Lila?"

"I’m completely in love with him, Jude," I confessed.

"And he’s obviously in love with you too."

I shook my head. "I don’t know about that. He tells me he’s enchanted by me and similar sweet things, but he’s never actually said he loves me."

"But the way he looks at you, how he protects you—it’s obvious."

"It’s not that simple," I sighed. "He might be infatuated, he might care deeply, he might even be somewhat in love. But true love, the forever kind that transcends family politics and organizational pressures? I just don’t know."

"But that’s what you want."

"More than anything. I just turned nineteen, and he’s my first real relationship, but I have absolutely no doubt that I love my inspector."

"How can you be so certain?" Jude asked curiously.

"Because I feel it with every fiber of my being. Because nothing and no one else matters more to me than him—not family expectations, not organizational politics, not even my own safety. Because I can’t envision any future without him in it. And because I witnessed my brother Beckett find someone who made him willing to risk everything, so I recognize what real love looks like."

"That’s beautiful. I’m certain the inspector loves you too, Lila."

"Please don’t tell anyone, especially Daniel," I pleaded. "I’m afraid if he knows how deep my feelings run, he might think I’m trying to trap him into something more than he wants. You know how careful men in our world have to be about emotional entanglements."

"You think knowing you love him would make him pull back?"

"Yes. He’s always been crystal clear about maintaining control over his life choices, balancing his duty as Martinez family blood with his role as a law enforcement officer. I don’t want him thinking my feelings will complicate his already difficult position."

"Your secret’s safe with me, and I’ll keep mine with you. We’re officially each other’s confession vault," Jude declared, extending his pinky finger with theatrical solemnity. "Pinky promise."

"Oh my god!" I laughed, linking my pinky with his. "Pinky promise! Where did you learn these things? You’re so emotionally intelligent about women..."

"Multiple sisters will do that to you," he grinned. "If that’s not advanced training in understanding the female mind, I don’t know what is."

"I need to meet them sometime."

"They’re all completely insane, but wonderful—and they’d probably interrogate Daniel like he was applying for witness protection."

After that lunch, Jude and I truly became confidants, meeting regularly to share our thoughts and concerns about navigating love within the complex web of family loyalties and organizational politics. He understood my hesitation to reveal my feelings to Daniel, while I empathized with his worries about Nora’s changing attitude toward their future.

Having a male perspective on my situation proved invaluable, and our friendship continued to flourish. Anyone who claims men and women can’t share genuine friendships in our world is completely wrong. Jude had become like a brother to me—my trusted vault of confessions where my deepest feelings could be safely stored.

Chapter 443: Dangerous Homecoming

Lila’s POV

The months following my birthday lunch with Jude had flown by in a whirlwind of changes. Finally, the corrupt detective Roman had been arrested by my inspector, who seemed to grow more commanding with each passing day. My relationship with Daniel had developed naturally, without the usual complications I feared. The only persistent thorn in my side was my adoptive mother Claire, who continued her relentless campaign to drag me back into the Sullivan family's money laundering empire.

Time had slipped through my fingers like sand. Between my work at Thorne Group's legal department and spending time with Daniel, I'd started screening Claire's calls more carefully. When I did speak with her, she invariably ruined my day with threats that if I didn't return to manage the family's art gallery fronts voluntarily, she would send Connor's men to drag me back herself. Despite repeatedly telling her she had no power over me anymore, a lingering fear kept me nestled in the safety of Daniel's fortified penthouse, unconcerned about how long I'd been staying there.

Reality, however, was beginning to tap me on the shoulder. After months together, I needed to consider returning to my own apartment. Eventually, I would have to face Claire and the family business head-on.

The truth carved a painful hollow in my chest—I didn't want to leave the comfort of waking up in Daniel's strong arms each morning, protected by his security system and the Martinez family's influence. Yet something held me back from fully committing. Despite all his affection and attention, he still hadn't said those words I longed to hear. Perhaps it would be better to maintain my own space, so when he inevitably tired of me, I wouldn't need to gather my belongings in a heartbreaking exit. Only Jude knew about this insecurity; our friendship had deepened considerably over these months, becoming a trusted confidant for my deepest fears.

Fortunately, I had options. Gemma had offered me a place to stay since her aunt Jade had finally moved in with her boyfriend. But first, I needed to handle the logistics of my apartment. I needed my father's signature to cancel the rental agreement. I arranged to visit my hometown over the weekend, but with a crucial caveat—Beckett insisted I stay at his heavily guarded estate to avoid a confrontation with my increasingly unhinged adoptive mother.

"Tiny one, I don't like this—you going to Sullivan territory alone when Claire is so determined to keep you there," Daniel said, his brow furrowed with concern as he loaded my suitcase into my bulletproof sedan that morning.

I'd told Daniel about needing to speak with Beckett in person about family business, though I'd kept the details vague. He hadn't pressed me for more information, respecting my boundaries as always. My plan was simple: drive there, handle the paperwork, and return the next day.

"Big guy, I need to go. If I don’t come back, you’ll know she’s trapped me in some warehouse," I joked, trying to lighten the mood. "Then you’ll come rescue me with your badge and your gun."

"That’s exactly what I’ll do," Daniel replied, his expression deadly serious. "So you better be here by tomorrow evening. And today of all days when I’m working a federal case and can’t escort you. Can’t this trip wait?"

"No, it can’t. I need Beckett’s signature on this document."

"I don’t like being away from you." His admission warmed my heart.

"I don’t either, but I need to go."

"Since there’s no other way." I laughed at his grumpy expression.

"Call me as soon as you arrive," he instructed. "And after you talk to Beckett. Call me before bed, when you wake up, and when you leave. And if you run into Claire, call me immediately."

"At this rate, I’ll spend the whole day on the phone with you," I laughed, touched by his protectiveness.

"Not a bad idea." His expression remained serious. "If you don’t call, I’ll contact Beckett directly. I’ll turn that whole territory upside down to bring you back."

His concern was both endearing and comforting. I kissed him goodbye and got in the car.

"Take care, little one. And be careful on the road."

The drive through Sullivan family territory consumed most of my day. By the time I pulled up to Beckett’s compound, it was late in the afternoon. My sister-in-law Katarina stood waiting with the garage door open, her security detail quickly closing it behind me as if we were conducting a covert operation.

When I stepped out of the car, her eyes widened dramatically.

"Oh my goodness! Lila, is that really you?" Her expression was one of pure astonishment.

"The one and only! What, you don’t recognize my voice?" I joked, but her shocked expression remained unchanged. Zoe had certainly transformed me with a new wardrobe, hair color, and the removal of my braces, but surely I wasn’t that different.

"Come here, my little Lila," she said, pulling me into a tight hug. "Beckett is going to flip when he sees you!" Her voice seemed to catch with emotion. "I missed you! Let me look at you." She stepped back, examining me from head to toe. "You look gorgeous! What did you so much good, the city or the inspector boyfriend?"

"I think both," I admitted honestly. "And Beckett, isn’t he home?"

"No, he went to the legitimate businesses for something. I’m calling him right now to come quickly." Her expression darkened. "Lila, Claire can’t know you’re here, neither her nor Justin. It’s best if nobody in the family network knows."

"Gosh, you’re talking like she’s going to chain me up in some basement," I laughed nervously, finding her caution extreme.

Katarina’s serious expression silenced my laughter. "That’s exactly what we’re afraid of. Claire had reinforced steel bars installed on all the doors and windows of the main house. Beckett says she put multiple locks on your bedroom door and hired private security to watch it. She’s been telling everyone in the family she’ll drag you back here by your hair if necessary."

"She’s not crazy enough," I whispered, disbelief washing over me.

"Oh, yes she is. You know Genevieve who works at my mother’s estate?" I nodded. "She’s Flora’s sister—Flora works at Connor’s casino. She overheard Claire and Connor discussing a dowry arrangement for you to marry his youngest son. Claire guaranteed she’d bring you back to Sullivan territory in the coming months."

Horror gripped me as I processed this information. My own adoptive mother was plotting to essentially sell me into a strategic marriage that would give Connor access to the Sullivan family's money laundering operations. I needed to hide from the woman who should have been my greatest protector. The realization left me shaken to my core.

As Katarina called Beckett, I called Daniel to let him know I'd arrived safely. Within a short time, Beckett and my father appeared, their expressions a mix of joy at seeing me and concern for what might happen if Claire discovered my presence in family territory.

Chapter 444: Lila Transformed

Lila's POV

When my father and Beckett arrived at Katarina's penthouse, their reactions mirrored hers perfectly. They stood frozen in the marble foyer, staring at me with bewildered expressions, my father's eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Is everyone just going to stand there without giving me a hug?" I planted my hands on my hips, feigning annoyance as they continued to gape at my transformation.

"Lila, what happened to you?" Beckett finally broke the silence before pulling me into a tight embrace, his voice thick with emotion.

"Just a makeover courtesy of a friend," I explained excitedly, twirling around in my designer dress. "What do you think? Does it suit me?"

"You look absolutely stunning, sis!" My brother's voice cracked as he held me at arm's length. "Those eyes... Where are the braids? The bangs that used to hide your beautiful face? Those rosy cheeks from always keeping your head down?"

"Your sister isn't a little girl anymore," Katarina interjected with a knowing smile, answering for me. "She's become a woman who knows her worth."

"She certainly has." My father cleared his throat, emotion evident in his voice as he enveloped me in his strong arms. "My little girl, you look absolutely radiant!"

"She looks so much like—ouch!" Beckett started to say before Katarina shot him a warning glare that could have stopped a freight train.

"Stop comparing people, Beckett," Katarina scolded sharply. "She looks like a movie star, that's what she looks like."

"But, Lucy, she really does look like..." Beckett tried again, but Katarina's almost menacing growl silenced him immediately. Their heated exchange piqued my curiosity, but I sensed this wasn't the time to push for answers.

My father wiped away tears and guided me to sit beside him on Katarina's luxurious Italian leather couch. The way he looked at me felt different somehow—more attentive, more intense, as if he was seeing me for the first time. He must have missed me terribly during my time away.

"First things first," he said, his arm still protectively around my shoulders. "Tell me about this boyfriend of yours. Does he treat you with the respect you deserve?"

"Better than I could have ever imagined," I answered, happiness radiating through my words as I thought of Daniel's gentle strength.

"And why didn't he join you today?" my father pressed, his businessman's instincts kicking in. "I want to meet this man who's captured my daughter's heart, Lila."

"He wanted to come, truly," I explained carefully. "But he's a police inspector and couldn't get away from a major case today. Plus, I was eager to discuss something important with you privately."

"A police inspector?" Beckett's eyebrows shot up in surprise, and I caught the meaningful look he exchanged with my father. "You leave home as our shy little Lila and return this gorgeous, confident woman dating law enforcement? Are we sure you're really our Lila?"

"Don’t be ridiculous!" I laughed at their dramatic reactions, though I understood their shock. "If any of you had bothered to visit me in Port Harbor, you wouldn’t be so amazed by the changes."

"Well, I’m definitely making that trip now," my father declared, his protective instincts clearly activated. "I need to meet this inspector. He sounds like a good man who cares for you, but a father needs to see these things for himself." He squeezed my hand. "Now, what was this important matter you needed to discuss?"

"Dad," I took a deep breath, knowing this conversation could get complicated, "a friend invited me to live with her, and I’ve decided to accept. I want to surrender the penthouse you’ve been maintaining for me."

"Wait," Katarina teased with a knowing smile, "wasn’t it your inspector boyfriend who invited you to move in, Lila?" Heat rose to my cheeks at her perceptive observation.

"Sweetheart," my father said gently, his voice understanding, "there’s no need to be embarrassed. I’m not like your mother—I understand that times have changed. Young couples live together now. You can be honest with me about your relationship."

"No, really," I insisted, though it wasn’t entirely the whole truth. "Gemma invited me to move in with her, and I’ve been staying there for some time already. It’s been wonderful having a true friend."

"I really need to meet this Gemma," Katarina said warmly. She and Gemma had developed a friendship through their frequent phone conversations. "Could I come spend a weekend with you girls?"

"Anytime, Katarina. You know how much I adore you," I replied, genuinely excited at the thought of having her visit my new life.

"Alright, daughter," my father nodded approvingly. "Where and with whom you live is entirely your decision. I’ll need to visit to handle the lease termination paperwork. How soon are you planning to vacate the penthouse?"

"I’m moving out immediately. I took the liberty of bringing all the necessary documents for you to sign," I explained, producing the folder from my purse. "That way I can finalize everything today, and you can stop that unnecessary expense. When you visit, it’ll be purely to see me, not to handle business."

"Excellent!" His face showed genuine pride and approval. "I appreciate your initiative and independence. What financial arrangement have you made with Gemma?"

"She isn’t charging rent—the apartment belongs to her family. We’re just splitting utilities and groceries, but don’t worry about supporting me. My new job pays well, and I can manage all my expenses," I assured him confidently.

"I’m incredibly proud of you, Lila." He kissed my forehead tenderly, his voice filled with fatherly pride. "But you know I’d still like to help support you if needed."

"I know, Dad, and I truly appreciate everything you’ve done for me. But there’s no need now. If I ever find myself in trouble, I promise I’ll reach out," I said with newfound confidence.

After signing the legal documents, we talked for hours in Katarina’s elegant living room. My father warned me extensively about my mother and my younger brother, suggesting I maintain careful distance from them both. Based on everything he shared about my mother’s increasingly erratic and controlling behavior, I agreed that complete avoidance was the wisest course of action.

"Dad," I asked hesitantly, dreading the answer, "will my mother ever give up trying to drag me back home and force me into that arranged marriage?"

"Eventually she’ll exhaust herself, honey," he sighed heavily, exhaustion evident in every line of his face. "But right now, she’s completely beyond reasoning with. To be completely honest, I can’t tolerate living with her toxic behavior anymore. I’ve been seriously contemplating divorce."

"You should have done that long ago," Beckett interjected forcefully. "I understood why you stayed while Lila needed protection, but now she’s independent and building her own life. And you know you’re always welcome in my home, Dad."

I’d always known my father endured my mother’s increasingly dangerous behavior primarily to shield me from her wrath. He’d sacrificed his own happiness because I needed his protection—but now it was time for him to escape that nightmare marriage. My mother made his life absolutely miserable with constant screaming matches, property destruction, and wild accusations of infidelity despite his unwavering faithfulness to their marriage.

He’d been living in absolute hell because of me.

"I know, son. Thank you for always supporting us both," my father replied, profound exhaustion evident in every word.

"She’s made your entire life miserable for so long," I said softly, guilt weighing heavily on my heart. "Why did you endure her abuse for so long? Was it really just to protect me?"

"Lila," he took both my hands in his weathered ones, "I endured it because I wanted to watch you grow up safely and keep you protected from her manipulations. I made terrible mistakes with my first wife that I regret every single day, but you were God’s gift to me—like divine forgiveness for all my errors. I would do absolutely anything to protect you and ensure your happiness. But it wasn’t solely about you; I genuinely hoped my marriage to your mother could somehow work despite everything."

"Oh, Dad," I embraced him tightly, tears stinging my eyes, "I love you so much. But my mother doesn’t deserve you or your loyalty!"

"I love you too, my precious daughter. Now, let’s go see that flashy sports car you bought," he chuckled, clearly wanting to lighten the heavy mood. "Wasn’t there a more understated color available?"

"No, this model only comes in bold, attention-grabbing colors," I joked back. "The alternative was lime green!" His genuine laughter warmed my heart completely. Being surrounded by family who truly loved and supported me felt absolutely wonderful.

After admiring the sleek vehicle and discussing its safety features, my father prepared to leave, advising me to depart early the following morning and avoid stopping anywhere in the city. He genuinely feared my mother would follow through on her threat to have me physically dragged back by my hair and locked away until I agreed to her demands. He promised to visit Port Harbor soon to meet both Gemma and my inspector.

The following morning, with mixed emotions swirling through me, I said goodbye to Beckett and Katarina before heading back to Port Harbor—the place that had truly become my sanctuary and home.

During each rest stop along the long journey, I called Daniel on his secure phone. He expressed his eagerness for my return and how much he'd missed having me in his arms. I couldn't wait to be back with my protective inspector again, in the place where I truly belonged.

Chapter 445: Stay For Good

Daniel's POV

Lila had been away handling family business, and her absence had been absolute hell. I was on edge the entire weekend, my temper flaring at every minor inconvenience while my mind remained fixated on her being gone. By Monday, even the precinct felt suffocating.

The workday crawled by at an agonizing pace—endless reports about territorial disputes between rival families and minimal field action. My thoughts kept drifting to Lila, calculating every minute until I could race back to my fortified penthouse to hold her again. When I finally arrived home and found her already there, relief flooded through me like a drug. I couldn't restrain myself—I swept her up in one swift motion, crushing her against my chest, desperate to feel her warmth and confirm she was real. Words seemed pointless as I captured those lips that had tormented my thoughts during our separation, holding the body that had become my obsession.

I needed a shower after dealing with the street filth that came with my double life, but I needed her more. I carried her toward the bathroom while continuing our kiss, my pulse racing when she responded with matching intensity.

"You have no idea how much I missed you," I confessed between kisses, setting her down only long enough to strip away the barriers between us. Her smile illuminated her entire face, that innocent radiance that somehow survived in our dark world.

"Well, let me tell you something," she replied with that playful tone that drove me wild, "I was going crazy missing you too." She hesitated briefly. "But I already showered today."

"So what, little one? Take another with me."

I didn’t wait for further discussion. The need to reconnect with her was consuming. I guided her into the marble-enclosed shower, and as heated water cascaded over our bodies, I lifted her against the tile wall, joining us together in one fluid movement. Her kisses and soft moans erased the emptiness that had plagued me since she’d left on Saturday morning.

After our shower, I carried her to the bed, determined to worship every inch of her body, losing myself completely in her presence. Lila was my sanctuary in this violent world; there was nowhere else I wanted to be except with her. She brought me peace, filled me with something I’d never experienced before, and awakened desires I’d buried beneath layers of family obligation and street survival.

Once our physical hunger had been satisfied and our connection reestablished, we lay entwined, talking about her trip. She mentioned her mother’s ongoing threats, which sent ice through my veins—Claire Sullivan was unhinged and dangerous, causing my little one genuine distress that I was powerless to completely shield her from.

I noticed Lila growing contemplative, her expression becoming pensive as if wrestling with something weighty. Finally, she raised those beautiful eyes to mine.

"Daniel, I want to talk to you about something," she said, her tone carrying unusual gravity.

Anxiety spiked through me instantly. In our world, serious conversations often preceded betrayal or death. "Is something wrong?"

"No. It’s just that I’ve been here in your penthouse for months now, and maybe it’s time for me to go back to my own place," she explained, making my heart race with panic.

My first instinct was that she had grown tired of the constant security measures, the bulletproof windows, the armed guards downstairs. Before I could pull away, she climbed onto my lap. This gesture reassured me somewhat—she might want to return to her apartment, but she wasn’t retreating from me completely. She had become more comfortable with my world over time, more uninhibited, touching me more freely despite knowing exactly what I was capable of. I loved when she sat on my lap during serious conversations like this. I wrapped my arms around her waist, studying her beautiful face for any sign of fear or deception.

"Are you tired of me, little one?" I asked directly, and she smiled.

"It’s impossible to get tired of you, big guy! But I don’t want you to get tired of me."

"I’ll never get tired of you. Why do you want to go back to your apartment? Don’t you like it here? Don’t you like being with me every day?"

"It’s not that at all. Being with you is the best part of my day. But I have my apartment, and Gemma asked me to live with her since Aunt Jade moved in with Sebastian, that’s why I went to my hometown, for my father to sign the documents so I could hand over the apartment and—" She was rambling nervously, words tumbling out without pause. I decided to interrupt and speak from my heart.

"Come live with me, little one, permanently, stay for good. Bring all your things here, and if you don’t like this place, we can find something else. I want to have you with me every day, to fall asleep and wake up holding you. Come live with me," I said, my tone almost pleading despite everything I’d been taught about never showing vulnerability.

Her expression registered surprise. In the Martinez family, arrangements like this were typically business transactions, not emotional appeals.

"Daniel, I want to be with you all the time too, but don’t you think we’re moving too fast?"

She had a point. Our relationship had accelerated rapidly, yet everything between us felt natural and right. I didn’t need time to recognize what I wanted—I had known from our first meeting during the Max rescue operation. I wasn’t impulsive in my emotions, and I knew time wouldn’t change my desire to have her by my side.

Still, I needed to consider her perspective. She was young and still adjusting to the realities of our world. Perhaps she needed more time to understand the intensity of what existed between us. What we shared transcended the typical arrangements in our families—it was too powerful to be treated as mere convenience.

Since Xavier had suggested I was in love with Lila, I couldn't dismiss the thought. The more I considered it, the more I believed he was right. My feelings for her went beyond desire or the need for a suitable companion—they felt permanent and profound. Perhaps I truly was experiencing love for the first time, because I'd never felt anything remotely similar.

I'd had Sasha before and had believed that was love, a union blessed by both families for strategic purposes. I'd always thought she was my destined match, but when forced to choose between her and my position in the force, I hadn't hesitated to choose duty. Now I questioned whether I'd ever truly loved her at all.

What I felt for Lila was entirely different—something peaceful yet constant, simultaneously tranquil and intense. Unlike my arrangement with Sasha, which had been convenient and politically advantageous, Lila captivated me with everything she was. For her, I would sacrifice anything, even my carefully maintained position bridging both worlds.

I didn't want any distance between us. Lila brought lightness into my dark existence, displaying a maturity that belied her youth. Our life together had developed organically, as if she belonged in my fortress, as if we complemented each other perfectly. I treasured coming home to her each day.

I wanted her to live with me permanently, for however long fate would allow. I needed her to understand how desperately I wanted her presence in my home and my life—and I prayed she wanted the same.

Chapter 446: Mine to Keep

Daniel's POV

My mind raced through countless scenarios, each one darker than the last, but one truth remained unwavering—I couldn't survive the thought of losing her or watching her walk away from the fortress I'd built around us.

The penthouse wasn't just my home; it was the one place in this city where the Martinez family name couldn't touch her, where Thorne Group's protection extended like an invisible shield, where Lila could exist without the constant threat of Claire's manipulation or my father's political machinations.

"Lila, when I brought you into this world—my world—I warned you that I'm not some young street soldier still figuring out his territory. I'm a man who's survived decades in the shadows between law enforcement and family loyalty. And what I know with absolute certainty is that I want you here, protected, within these walls. I don't need time to calculate that decision like some rookie cop working his first case. Whether we're in your apartment or mine, I intend to shield you from every threat this city can throw at us, unless that's not what you want." I kept my voice steady, hoping she understood that in our world, geography meant everything—safety, territory, control.

She met my gaze with that fierce intelligence that first caught my attention at Thorne Group, seeming to weigh every word against the realities of mafia life she was still learning to navigate. A shadow crossed her features, and I wondered if our age difference created more than just emotional distance—it might represent entirely different approaches to survival in families like ours. That possibility sent ice through my veins, knowing how such gaps could fracture even the strongest alliances between crime families.

"Maybe you need more time to understand what you're truly choosing, and I'll respect that. You're young, Lila, and it's natural to have doubts about binding your life to someone like me. But understand this—I have absolute certainty about wanting you here, under my protection, for as long as we both draw breath in this dangerous game."

After I finished speaking, my pulse hammered with the same intensity I'd felt during undercover work, waiting for her response while scanning her expression for any hint of her decision. I noticed something flicker through her eyes—something I couldn't quite identify, like secrets she wasn't ready to share. Lila drew a deep breath, studying me with an intensity that reminded me she was Sullivan family blood, raised to read between lines and calculate risks. We remained locked in that weighted silence until she finally seemed to reach some internal resolution.

"You know what, you're absolutely right—it is just geography. I don't need time to know I want to be with you, despite everything that comes with your last name. These past months have shown me what real protection feels like, what it means to have someone willing to stand between me and Claire's schemes, between me and Connor's threats. Being here with you is the first time I've felt truly safe since I learned what the Sullivan family really does for money. I don't want to be apart; I want to be with you. I have no doubts about that." Her voice carried conviction, and I sensed genuine resolve in her decision—her authentic desire to stay—yet something remained hidden beneath the surface, something she wasn't ready to voice.

"Good. If you're certain about making this your permanent sanctuary, why do I still feel like you're holding something back?"

"Oh, Daniel..." She closed her eyes, confirming my suspicion that whatever she was protecting, it wasn't easy for her to share.

"Tiny one, in this business, secrets get people killed. Tell me what's weighing on that brilliant mind of yours."

"Daniel, I grew up in a small town where my mother's moral crusade ruled every aspect of my existence until I escaped to the city. Even after I joined Thorne Group, she maintained control because I desperately tried to avoid giving her ammunition for arguments or reasons to unleash Connor's people on me, though that strategy rarely worked anyway." Lila was revealing something about her upbringing that I knew caused her significant pain.

"I'm already aware your mother uses guilt and shame to control you."

"It runs deeper than manipulation. She raised me to believe that a woman should preserve herself exclusively for her husband—that virginity should only be surrendered on the wedding night. Obviously, that's no longer the case for me. But she also convinced me that marriage is sacred, and living together without legal union makes a woman worthless in the eyes of respectable society." She exhaled heavily.

"You realize that's extremely outdated thinking, don't you?"

"Absolutely. But throughout my entire childhood, she systematically convinced me that if I wanted marriage, I needed to remain untouched, or else I'd be nothing more than entertainment for men like Connor. She raised me to believe that men don't value women who give themselves before securing commitment—that they only use such women for physical pleasure before discarding them like trash. She drilled this so thoroughly into my head that it's become part of me. Rationally, I know the world has evolved and this thinking is wrong, but something deep inside keeps triggering these doubts. I haven't been able to shake them yet." She inhaled deeply. "And sometimes I worry that you're just..."

"I can't believe you'd think me capable of that level of betrayal, Lila." I interrupted before she could finish that devastating thought. The idea that she might believe I was using her was more painful than any bullet wound I'd survived. I recognized the psychological damage she'd endured; I'd watched my father use similar tactics to control Sybilla before she escaped to Thorne territory. I fought to maintain my composure. "Do you honestly think I'm just playing some elaborate game with your heart?"

"Oh, Daniel, how can I explain the conflict in my head? I know logically that you're not using me, but sometimes I feel ashamed for living so freely when I was raised to save myself for marriage." Her voice grew tense and apprehensive. I desperately needed to understand what she was thinking.

"Lila, do you regret what we've shared? The intimacy we've built?" I asked, dreading her answer more than any dangerous assignment.

"Never! I don't regret it and never will! I know you're not just using me—I know there's something real between us that goes beyond family politics. But I'm damaged, Daniel, broken in ways that run deep. Changing beliefs that have been part of me my whole life isn't as simple as flipping a switch."

"I understand completely. Your mother manipulated you for years, and now you're breaking free from that control, but it's a gradual process that creates internal conflict."

"Exactly." She exhaled, appearing relieved that I understood her situation.

"You're growing, little one, becoming the woman you want to be rather than the person others tried to make you. That naturally creates discomfort during the transition. But you need to take control of your own life and follow your heart," I spoke with the calm patience I'd use with a traumatized witness.

"You're absolutely right," she agreed after a moment of consideration. "You know what, regardless of how this turns out or how long we last, I want to be here with you. When you eventually get tired of me or decide you're done with this relationship, I'll have all these beautiful memories to hold onto."

Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and suddenly everything became crystal clear. It wasn't just her mother's lifelong manipulation making Lila cautious about our arrangement—she was terrified I would eventually abandon her like every other man in her life had threatened to do. But that would never happen! I pulled her tightly against my chest, holding her like she was the most precious thing in my world. I was beginning to understand that Lila harbored the same fears I carried—that our relationship would end, leaving her to pick up the pieces alone.

"Hey, who said anything about me getting tired of you? Where did that idea come from?" I asked, my heart heavy with the weight of her fears.

"You specifically said you want me here ’for as long as this partnership continues,’" she replied, sadness evident in her voice.

"Has it occurred to you that you might be the one to walk away? Or that this could become permanent?"

"Well, if it’s my choice to make, it will be permanent, because I will never choose to leave your side, Daniel. I simply couldn’t survive it!" She spoke with her face nestled against my neck, and satisfaction flooded my chest knowing she had no intention of abandoning what we’d built together.

"In that case, you’re definitely staying here permanently, and this time the arrangement has no expiration date," I declared with the unwavering certainty that she would remain under my protection forever. "Gemma will need to find another roommate because you belong to me now, little one—completely and exclusively mine!"

I gently repositioned her on the mattress and moved above her, smiling with deep contentment because she had agreed to make her permanent home within my fortress walls.

Chapter 447: Protective Fury

Lila’s POV

The piercing sound of my encrypted phone dragged me from sleep. I hadn’t silenced it the night before, and my blood ran cold as I recognized the caller ID. Only one person had the audacity to contact me through our family’s secure line at this ungodly hour.

"Hello, Claire," I answered, using her first name deliberately, my voice thick with exhaustion.

"What kind of greeting is that?" she snapped through the encrypted connection. "This early hour and you’re still lounging in bed? What other disgraceful habits have you developed in that cesspool that I’ll need to purge when I bring you back to the estate?"

I sighed deeply, pushing myself up against the headboard of Daniel’s king-sized bed. The reinforced windows of his penthouse apartment reflected the early morning skyline of our territory. "Claire, my

work at Thorne Group doesn’t begin until later in the morning, and I’m staying within our allied boundaries. There’s no reason for me to rise before dawn."

"Excuses!" Her voice climbed to that familiar pitch that once terrorized me as a child. "I raised you according to Sullivan family traditions—a proper mafia wife rises before dawn every morning to ensure her husband’s coffee is ready the moment he opens his eyes."

"Claire..."

"Don’t you dare use that tone with me, Lila!" she interrupted, her fury crackling through the secure line. "I’ve already informed you that you’re returning to the compound, and your engagement to Connor’s heir has been finalized through the proper channels."

My patience shattered completely. "You’d better cancel whatever backroom deal you’ve struck. I’m not returning to your compound, and I absolutely refuse to marry into the Connor syndicate. We’ve discussed this exhaustively."

"You will obey family law, young lady." Her certainty was as suffocating as it was infuriating, but I was no longer the compliant daughter who once cowered under her authority.

"What do you really want, Claire? Besides these empty threats about some arranged alliance?" I kept my voice steady, determined to maintain control despite the tremor in my hands.

"These aren’t threats, Lila. You will be wed according to Sullivan family protocol, and soon. I should have enforced this arrangement long ago—especially after discovering you were operating within our territory without reporting to the family council."

"I’ve been staying with Beckett at his secured residence," I defended myself. "And I avoided the main compound because reliable sources informed me you’d prepared a containment room specifically to imprison me." From my peripheral vision, I noticed Daniel had awakened, his dark eyes burning with escalating rage as he listened to our exchange.

"And I will utilize every resource at my disposal," she replied with chilling satisfaction. "Either you return to the compound willingly and submit to family decree, or I’ll deploy our private security forces to

retrieve you and keep you confined until the wedding ceremony. And I'll ensure your future husband understands the importance of maintaining strict control over his wife afterward."

Tears began streaming down my face as the familiar suffocation of her control threatened to drag me back into that nightmare. "Claire, you cannot imprison me or force a marriage contract—"

The phone was suddenly lifted from my trembling hand. Daniel sat up fully, his jaw clenched with deadly intent as he activated the speaker function.

"Good morning, Mrs. Sullivan. This is Inspector Daniel Martinez, Lila's boyfriend." His deep voice carried that deceptively calm tone I'd heard him use during interrogations.

"Of course this shameless girl has spread her legs for some opportunistic outsider," Claire spat through the encrypted line. "Behaving like a common street whore instead of respecting Sullivan family honor—"

"You are profoundly mistaken," Daniel cut through her venom with arctic precision. "Think whatever poisonous thoughts you wish, but understand this clearly—my patience with your harassment is reaching its limit. Lila is under my protection now. She will not be marrying Connor's son or anyone else because you demand it. And I strongly advise against attempting to physically coerce her into compliance."

"Who the hell do you think you are, you parasitic outsider?" she shrieked, her composure finally cracking. "Don't interfere in Sullivan family business! I will drag this rebellious girl back to our compound, and I'd like to see you try to prevent it."

Daniel's voice dropped to a whisper so dangerous it made my blood freeze. "I suggest you research the Martinez family name before making such threats, Mrs. Sullivan. You'll discover it's remarkably unwise to have someone like me as an enemy. I've made my position crystal clear—I will not permit you to harm Lila in any capacity."

I listened to their verbal warfare with mounting horror. Claire possessed the resources and connections to make good on her threats. She controlled legitimate businesses that could serve as cover for kidnapping operations. And now that she knew I was intimate with a man outside her chosen alliance, her wrath would be absolutely devastating.

"You have no comprehension of what the Sullivan family is capable of, boy!" she threatened, pure hatred vibrating through every word.

"I am not some naive boy," Daniel replied with lethal composure. "And I seriously question whether you could be more dangerous than someone with my particular skill set and connections. But if you're determined to test those limits, don't complain about the inevitable consequences."

The line went dead as Claire terminated the call abruptly. I sat there with tears flowing freely down my cheeks, my entire body shaking from the confrontation. Daniel discarded his phone and pulled me directly onto his lap, his powerful arms encircling me protectively.

"Tiny one, please don't cry," he murmured against my hair, his large hand stroking gently down my back.

"She despises me, Daniel," I sobbed into the warmth of his chest. "And now that she knows about us, she's going to unleash hell and try to destroy everything we have."

"Lila," he said with absolute conviction, his voice rumbling through his chest, "I will never stand idle while your mother terrorizes you or attempts to force you into some political marriage. You belong to me now, little one, and you'll only leave if that's genuinely what you choose. As long as you want to remain by my side, I won't allow anyone—not family, not allies, not enemies—to separate us."

I clung desperately to his neck as he held me, his steady presence gradually calming my storm of tears and terror.

"Promise me that no one will tear us apart?" I whispered against his throat, needing that guarantee more than oxygen.

His intense gaze locked with mine, those dark eyes burning with fierce determination. "Lila, I'm prepared to wage war against every family in this city to keep you with me. But what about you? Are you willing to face whatever comes to stay with me?" Little did I realize then that Claire would prove to be merely the first of many obstacles we would face together.

"I'm willing to do anything for you, Daniel. I..." I wanted to give him the complete assurance he deserved, almost confessing those three words that would surrender my heart entirely to him. But I

hesitated, terrified he might not feel the same intensity and worried that my desperation might drive him away. "I'm absolutely certain that I want to build a life with you."

"That's exactly what I needed to hear, little one." His arms tightened around me possessively, as if he could shield me from the entire world through sheer force of will. "I don't want to release you, but duty calls at the precinct."

"I don't know if I have the strength to let you go right now," I admitted softly, drawing a low chuckle from him.

"Really now? Planning to stay wrapped around me all day?"

"All day and all night," I confirmed without hesitation, making him laugh again despite the gravity of our situation.

"I could call Adler and arrange extended leave. Can you do the same with your position at the firm?" His voice had turned playfully conspiratorial, lighter than the deadly tone he'd used with Claire.

I pouted dramatically, despite my lingering fears. "Damn corporate obligations!"

He pressed a tender kiss to my forehead, still chuckling, and I reluctantly extracted myself from his protective embrace, already mourning the loss of his warmth as we prepared to face whatever retribution Claire might unleash upon us.

Chapter 448: Political Storm Rising

Daniel's POV

Life in the metropolis had found its perfect rhythm lately. My position as Senior Inspector in the major crimes division offered far more compelling challenges than the sleepy precinct I'd abandoned years ago. I had an extraordinary woman who consumed my thoughts completely, and a tight circle of allies who had become my chosen family. Everything seemed flawlessly arranged.

Well, nearly everything. Lila's foster mother remained our persistent nemesis, bombarding her daughter with relentless phone harassment. The situation had escalated to the point where my sweet girl kept her old phone powered down most hours of the day. This morning, however, Lila had overlooked this essential precaution, and that manipulative harpy had launched her verbal assault before dawn. I couldn't restrain myself—I seized control of the conversation immediately. There was absolutely no possibility I'd allow that woman to continue her delusional schemes of forcing my girlfriend into some arranged marriage with a casino baron.

Meanwhile, my own bloodline had maintained an eerily suspicious silence. My regular check-ins with my mother consisted primarily of her inquiring about my health and voicing complaints about my sister Sybilla's latest rebellious antics. My father hadn't spoken a single word to me since I'd established myself in this territory. Instead of finding this troubling, I was genuinely amazed that my parents appeared to be tolerating my career choices without orchestrating elaborate schemes to manipulate me back into their carefully planned trajectory. Perhaps Lila and I had more common ground than I'd initially recognized.

How monumentally foolish I was! The day had already begun with tension after being jolted awake by that witch calling Lila, and circumstances were about to deteriorate dramatically. I'd barely settled into my desk at headquarters when my phone blazed with my older brother's contact information. Gregory represented the diplomatic force within our household—he maintained his neutrality, cherished his tranquil existence, and steadfastly refused to choose sides in our parents' ongoing battles with me and Sybilla. He embodied the perfect definition of the model son, not because he permitted our parents to control his decisions, but because his personal aspirations naturally harmonized with their expectations.

"The golden heir calling the family disgrace? Something catastrophic must be unfolding," I responded with dark humor.

"You make it sound like I only contact you during emergencies," he chuckled from his end.

"Not entirely accurate, big brother. You also call to provide advance warning of approaching disasters." Gregory had consistently served as my intelligence source regarding our parents' elaborate plots to force me back into line.

"Well, today I'm unfortunately delivering news of an approaching disaster," he announced, his tone becoming gravely serious. "What's the latest development?"

"Father just exploded out of the boardroom, heading directly toward your jurisdiction. He declared he'll exploit every political connection he possesses, but he's absolutely determined to terminate what he calls your 'playing law enforcement' charade." The weight in Gregory's voice was unmistakable. "Steel yourself—he's planning to have you stripped of your badge. I overheard him stating exactly those words."

"He wouldn't push that boundary!" I protested, though my instincts knew better. "This crosses into extreme territory, even by his standards."

"It does, but he's proceeding regardless. I walked into his office during his phone conversation with the Deputy Commissioner of Public Safety. Prepare for the political hurricane that's approaching." I released a sharp breath, fury building within my chest. My father's network of corrupt officials was extensive, but removing me from my position wouldn't be simple, and I possessed my own arsenal of leverage.

"Appreciate the intelligence, brother. I'll work to minimize the damage. How are circumstances with you?"

"Increasingly complicated. Our parents have redirected their pressure toward badgering me about producing grandchildren. Neither Sloane nor I desire children currently—she's completing a crucial specialization program to assume control of her family's legitimate enterprises. She's growing progressively frustrated with Mother's interference; they nearly erupted into open warfare yesterday."

"Welcome to the exclusive club of disappointing offspring," I laughed grimly, imagining my typically composed brother navigating this unwelcome intrusion into his peaceful world.

"This isn't amusing. If they maintain this pressure, I'm uncertain how much longer Sloane will endure it—you understand how volatile her temperament can become."

"Indeed I do. You two represent perfect counterbalances—your serenity against her fire. The classic opposites attract dynamic."

"She's absolutely remarkable," Gregory agreed wholeheartedly. "And I'm completely serious when I say that if our parents threaten my marriage, I'll follow your and Sybilla's rebellious path—abandon the family corporation and leave them to handle the consequences." This was unprecedented territory—my brother contemplating direct defiance against our parents.

"You’re genuinely serious about this decision?"

"Completely serious. Sloane represents everything meaningful to me, and I absolutely refuse to lose her over our parents’ unreasonable demands."

"I sincerely hope circumstances don’t deteriorate to that point. I understand how deeply you value your position there. And I seriously doubt our parents could withstand another child breaking away from their control."

"Speaking of rebellion," Gregory continued, "have you heard Mother’s latest scheme to arrange Sybilla’s marriage to that insufferable Grant Barlow?"

"Sybilla informed me—she’s absolutely livid. We cannot allow Mother to force this arrangement through. It would prove catastrophic for Sybilla’s future."

"I’m carefully monitoring the situation. If conditions deteriorate here significantly, I’ll devise a method to send Sybilla to your territory temporarily."

"Outstanding strategy. I’ve already advised her to escape if the situation becomes untenable. Send her here immediately."

"Won’t she completely disrupt your treasured bachelor lifestyle?" Gregory teased, provoking genuine laughter.

"Those days belong to my past completely. I’ve encountered a woman who’s fundamentally transformed my entire world. I’m in an absolutely committed relationship now."

"You’re joking with me!" Gregory sounded genuinely astounded. "You’re seriously dating someone? Who is this miracle worker and what has she done with my brother?"

"She’s completely captivated my heart and soul. And here’s the shocking part—she’s quite young." I braced myself for the inevitable mockery.

"Are you being serious? You who publicly swore off younger women forever?" My brother couldn't conceal his complete astonishment.

"I understand the irony, she represents nothing like the women I typically pursued, but this incredible woman has me utterly devoted to her wellbeing. What I felt for Sasha doesn't even remotely compare to the emotions I feel for Lila." I reflected again on the overwhelming passion that had completely taken control of my existence.

"Wait, are you actually telling me you've discovered your soulmate?"

"I'm still processing the entire concept of love, but simply imagining life without her presence drives me toward complete madness."

"The moment Father returns from his political maneuvering, I'm traveling to visit immediately. I need to meet this girlfriend personally and witness with my own eyes if this actually represents genuine love."

"It would be absolutely fantastic to host you and Sloane for an extended visit," I agreed enthusiastically, appreciating the prospect of seeing my brother and securing his support during these turbulent times.

"Excellent planning. Brother, I need to return to managing the family empire to subsidize your civil servant lifestyle, since that modest government job pays starvation wages, as Father perpetually reminds everyone within hearing distance." I laughed at his perfect mimicry of our father's favorite criticism.

"Thanks for the advance warning, brother. I'll prepare my defenses accordingly."

After terminating the call, I knew precisely what strategic action I needed to execute. I headed directly toward Adler's office—he represented the only ally who could assist me now in this brewing storm.

Chapter 449: Political Maneuvers

Daniel's POV

I stepped into Chief Adler's office, knocking briefly before entering. He sat behind his mahogany desk reviewing case files, his weathered eyes lifting to meet mine with that familiar spark of determination that mirrored my own dedication to walking the line between justice and survival in our world.

"Morning, Daniel. What brings you by today?" Adler's voice carried its usual gruff warmth. The man understood the delicate dance we performed daily, keeping the peace between the legitimate world and the shadow empire that truly ran this city.

"Chief, I need your help with something," I said directly, knowing Adler was one of the few people in law enforcement I could trust completely. He rose from his leather chair, moved to his private bar, and poured two glasses of bourbon, sliding one across the desk toward me.

"Sit down and tell me what's eating at you. If it's something I can handle, you know I will." This was vintage Adler – always extending support when I needed it, understanding the unique position I occupied as a Martinez family heir working in law enforcement.

"My father is making moves to have me pulled from the force. He's already reached out to contacts in the Department of Public Safety," I explained, the words coming out more strained than I intended.

"What's driving the old man's agenda?" Adler asked, his strategic mind immediately analyzing the power dynamics at play.

"He wants me back in the family operations full-time."

"Understood. From what I know about your bloodline, the Martinez name opens doors that most of us can't even see, my friend."

"You've been keeping tabs on my background, Adler?" I raised an eyebrow, though I'd always been selective about how much family business I discussed at the precinct.

"Of course. I ran a comprehensive background check when my contacts told me Greenleaf's finest would be joining our joint task force. When I brought you into this operation, I already knew exactly who you were and what you represented. And I'm certain you did the same homework on me before we shook hands. We're cops who happen to navigate a world where family loyalty and badge duty don't always

align – we only trust those who prove they can handle both sides," Adler stated with the blunt honesty I respected.

"Fair enough," I chuckled, and he joined me. Naturally, I had thoroughly investigated Chief Adler's connections and allegiances before accepting his partnership. The man had his own understanding with certain powerful families, which made him invaluable. "So can you help me navigate this situation?"

"I believe so. I'll have a conversation with some people in Public Safety, though they'll expect a favor in return. These bureaucrats always want something that benefits their political positioning," Adler said with a knowing smile.

"As long as it doesn't cross any lines that would compromise Lila or put civilians at risk, I'm prepared to pay whatever price necessary," I affirmed without hesitation.

"I'll contact you once I have concrete information," he replied as I stood to leave. "But understand that I'll be calling in a marker as well."

"Come on, Adler, I thought we had mutual respect here?" I gave him a pointed look as he laughed heartily. Adler maintained an unusual balance for someone in his position, always ready with gallows humor, but that pragmatism was exactly why our working relationship functioned.

"That's precisely why I can ask for something. Nothing that will interfere with your priorities – I'll explain later," he continued laughing, and I suspected he was planning to assign me some complex investigation or high-profile security detail.

When the afternoon shift began, Adler finally delivered the intelligence I'd been waiting for regarding his discussion with the Department contacts.

"Listen, I spoke with my people in Public Safety. They confirmed your father is pulling every string he has to get you transferred out of active duty," Adler informed me, which aligned with my expectations.

"Honestly, what drives these family patriarchs? Why can't they accept that the next generation needs to choose their own path?" I sighed, considering all the political favors my father must be leveraging in his campaign to end my law enforcement career.

"Some fathers believe their experience gives them the right to control their children's destinies. Usually, they do know how to protect family interests, but they forget that children need autonomy and the right to make their own choices, their own mistakes, and their own victories. In their determination to shield the next generation from the dangers they've faced, parents sometimes overlook that children must develop their own judgment and find meaning in their own decisions," Adler shared, drawing from his years of balancing family obligations with professional duties.

"Is that the kind of father you are?" I asked with a grin, knowing his wife ran their household with an iron fist.

"You think I'm allowed to make unilateral decisions? My wife controls our domestic operations completely," he laughed. "But she believes in preparing our children to handle themselves rather than fighting their battles for them. She's got the educational background for that approach."

"You both raised capable children," I observed.

"Maybe, but I don't have your father's financial resources and political network. What I do have are solid relationships built over decades. The Deputy Commissioner owes me several favors, and he's already committed to sending your father away empty-handed," Adler said, and I felt immediate tension leave my shoulders. "However..."

"There's always a condition," I muttered. "Alright, I knew this wouldn't be free."

"He wants to meet with you personally. He's impressed with your international security credentials, aware of your specialized training, and wants you to develop some advanced tactical programs for academy recruits. I already told him you'd accommodate this request."

"Hell, Adler," I protested. "Training assignments? Come on, I don't have the patience for instructing rookies."

"That's not true. I'm sure you're already teaching your little one plenty of important lessons," he chuckled.

"Lila is completely different, Adler! I'd share everything I know with her," I replied, unable to suppress the smile that appeared whenever her name came up.

"There it is – mention Lila and his entire attitude transforms," Adler teased.

"Yes, my little one absolutely makes everything worthwhile," I admitted, my expression softening before hardening again as I considered the teaching obligation. "But these sessions will cut into the time I have with her!"

"Don't worry, they'll schedule them for morning hours, regularly each week. Once they identify someone else qualified, you can step away from the academy. But the Deputy makes a valid point – as long as you remain cooperative and he can demonstrate your value to the department, you become untouchable. Your father's influence won't reach you here."

"He's going to be furious when he realizes his connections failed him this time." I found satisfaction imagining my father's reaction when his carefully orchestrated plan collapsed.

Sure enough, when I returned from my meeting, there he was, waiting in my office like a predator preparing for the kill. But I was equally prepared for this confrontation! I had no intention of backing down or allowing his intimidation tactics to succeed.

Chapter 450: Fathers Ultimatum

Daniel's POV

My father sat rigidly in the visitor's chair outside my office, his tailored Italian suit and gold cufflinks marking him as the don he was, even in this sterile precinct environment. His weathered face held that familiar expression of cold calculation, the same look that had intimidated rival families for decades. If there was one thing I knew about Antonio Martinez, it was that he never abandoned a territorial claim.

"Dad! Have you been waiting long? You should have called me," I said, maintaining a respectful tone despite knowing exactly why the head of the Martinez crime family had ventured into enemy territory.

"I arrived less than five minutes ago, Daniel," he replied with his characteristic directness. "I want to talk to you, and I'm certain you already know what this concerns." Despite being in his mid-sixties, my father

carried himself with the imposing presence of a man who controlled half the city's underground operations. His sharp eyes and commanding demeanor had made politicians tremble and judges reconsider their verdicts.

"Let's go to my office," I suggested, fighting the urge to tense up as I led the way into what he probably considered hostile territory.

Once inside, my father scanned my workspace with barely concealed contempt, his critical gaze evaluating every object as if conducting reconnaissance on enemy turf.

"How are things in Greenleaf?" I attempted conversation, though I recognized the signs that my father had abandoned diplomatic courtesy in favor of his intimidation tactics.

"I'm not here for pleasantries about the neighborhood," he stated coldly. "I came to end this rebellious phase of yours and bring you back to take your rightful place in the family organization."

I sighed. "You realize I'm thirty-five, right? This approach stopped working years ago. I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave the police force, I won't return to Greenleaf, and I certainly won't get involved in your operations. My obligations don't include your empire."

"I'll cut you out completely, Daniel," he threatened with unsettling calm. "It's very simple. Either you come back and help run our territories, or you inherit nothing from this family."

"Are you seriously making that threat again? How many times have we been through this dance?" I maintained my composure, knowing from experience that showing anger would only escalate his intimidation tactics. Our conversations had always resembled territorial negotiations more than father-son discussions. "Dad, I live comfortably on my inspector's salary and legitimate investments. Your money and operations mean nothing to me, and I stopped being impressed by the family influence long ago. I haven't depended on Martinez family resources since I left the organization and moved out."

"Daniel, be reasonable," he pressed. "It's the family business! Our entire network of operations, legitimate fronts, and territorial control. Do you want me to leave it all to outsiders?"

"The operations are managed perfectly well by Gregory," I countered. "And you'd be better off grooming Sybilla for the position you're trying to force on me. She's sharp and actually wants to be part of the organization."

My father scoffed. "Your sister is a spoiled princess! This is just another of her rebellious impulses. Everything she claims to want is a whim. She's twenty-eight and still doesn't understand the importance of strategic alliances. Now she's creating problems by refusing to accept the arrangement with Grant, which would strengthen our partnership with the Marchetti operations. You must know about this situation."

"That entitled fool? Yes, I know all about it," I said, not caring how he'd react. "What I don't understand is why you and Mom are trying to force Sybilla into a strategic marriage with someone who spends his time at high-stakes poker games, exclusive clubs, and chasing socialites. You're condemning her to a miserable existence for territorial gain."

"Love?" My father practically spat the word. "Love is for civilians, Daniel. Grant represents a strategic alliance that would consolidate our influence with his family's shipping operations and political connections."

"A convenient arrangement for your power plays," I said with a bitter smile. "Always about expanding the empire."

"Enough!" he snapped. "Your mother and I will handle your sister's situation. Daniel, I want you back in Greenleaf overseeing our legitimate businesses and coordinating with your brother. You have one month, or I'll return and ensure your removal from this police department."

"Dad, you can give me all the time in the world, but my answer won't change. I'm not coming back. My life is here now, and I'm content with it. I was never happy working the family angles—law enforcement suits me better. When will you accept that?" I tried reasoning with him, though I knew it was pointless.

"I'll never understand this obsession with throwing away your birthright," he said with disgust. "Where did I fail with you children? How did you all turn out so indifferent to family legacy and organizational loyalty?"

"Come on, Dad! Gregory did everything exactly as you demanded for years."

"Gregory, Gregory..." he muttered irritably. "He followed orders initially, but then he married that ambitious woman. If I had known Sloane would be one of these modern career women, prioritizing her father's legal firm over giving me heirs, I wouldn't have supported that union. Now she works for competing interests and refuses to provide the next generation! Everything I've built will eventually crumble with no one committed to preserving it."

"God, Dad, such melodrama! Sloane is smart to establish her career before having children, but that doesn't mean she won't eventually. You and Mom need to stop expecting your children to sacrifice their lives for your organizational ambitions. Let us make our own choices," I said, feeling the familiar weight of this recurring argument.

"I would if any of you demonstrated sound judgment," he countered. "God gave me three impractical children. All of you chase romantic fantasies about love, personal satisfaction, and individual happiness. Let me tell you something, Daniel—life isn't about pursuing whatever makes you feel good."

Seeing the conversation spiraling nowhere productive, I changed direction. "Are you staying in town overnight?"

"No, I'm returning to Greenleaf this evening. I only came to attempt reasoning with you." He stood up abruptly. "You have one month to abandon this hero complex and come home to fulfill your family obligations, or I'll ensure your dismissal from this department."

"You wouldn't offer me a month if you could actually accomplish that immediately," I said with a cold smile. His expression darkened dangerously.

"It seems you've made yourself indispensable here, and the department leadership is reluctant to lose you. But I have alternative methods to make you reconsider your position," he said with a menacing stare. I knew then he had developed a contingency plan. "I have to leave now. I expect you in Greenleaf within thirty days."

"Keep fantasizing! There's nothing you can do to force my return."

He simply laughed as he walked out, leaving me concerned about whatever scheme he was orchestrating. I knew one thing with absolute certainty—I wouldn’t be left wondering about his backup plan for long.