**Mafia Mask 451**

Chapter 451: Ghosts From the Past

Daniel's POV

The tension hadn't left my shoulders since my father's unexpected visit to my penthouse recently. My father never appeared without an agenda, and his silence since then only amplified my unease. Even my brother had come up empty when I asked him to dig into the old man's latest schemes within our family's political network.

By the weekend, I forced myself to focus on something that actually brought me joy—helping Lila settle into our shared space. Standing beside my armored sedan, I loaded the final box of her belongings into the trunk.

"Tiny one, is this everything?" I asked, shutting the reinforced compartment.

Lila smiled up at me, her caramel eyes sparkling in the afternoon light. "Yes, big guy. The corporate apartment Thorne Group provided came fully furnished, so there wasn't much to bring to your fortress."

I pulled her close, wrapping a protective arm around her waist. "Our fortress," I corrected her gently. "Now it's our home. Though if we're being honest, it always was."

We spent the entire day organizing her things throughout the penthouse. By nightfall, Lila had completely transformed not just my living space, but my entire existence—and I couldn't be happier about it. Her law textbooks now shared shelf space with my case files, her delicate jewelry scattered across the same surfaces where I cleaned my service weapon each night.

Still, my father's visit lingered like a shadow in the back of my mind. My father had been unnaturally quiet since our tense conversation, which worried me more than his usual power plays ever could. The Martinez family patriarch never retreated without launching a counterattack. I hadn't mentioned any of this to Lila. She was already navigating her own complicated relationship with Claire Sullivan's manipulations; she didn't need the weight of my family's political machinations added to her burden.

Later that evening, we relaxed on the leather sectional, lost in each other's company with lazy kisses and gentle caresses. The bulletproof windows offered a stunning view of the city skyline, all the legitimate businesses below hiding the underground networks that truly ran this metropolis. Everything felt perfect until my encrypted phone started ringing from across the room.

I reluctantly extracted myself from Lila's embrace and retrieved the device from the charging station built into my custom sideboard. An unknown number flashed insistently on the screen. Probably Thorne Group business, I thought with irritation as I answered.

"Inspector Martinez," I answered curtly, my professional mask sliding into place.

Lila giggled softly from the couch, clearly amused by how quickly I could shift into my law enforcement persona.

"Hello, my darling! It's been far too long." The sultry voice on the other end made my blood turn to ice. This was it—my father's power play had finally revealed itself.

"What do you want?" I snapped, my mood plummeting as recognition hit me like a physical blow.

"You, always!" Her reply made me laugh bitterly. I kept my voice deliberately low, not wanting Lila to pick up on the threat this ghost from my past represented. "I want to see you, my love. I'm here in your beautiful city now. Come to me, or I'll simply show up at your door and send that little princess running back to her family's estate."

"Have you completely lost your mind?" I was seething, my voice rising despite my efforts to maintain control.

"I think you're the one who's lost his mind, and it's been far too long." Her provocative laughter grated against my nerves like nails on glass. "Seriously, Daniel, a sheltered little heiress? Please, darling, I could even understand the sophisticated women you entertained during my absence, but this child?"

I noticed Lila watching me with growing concern from across the room. Making a quick gesture to indicate I needed privacy, I retreated to our bedroom and closed the reinforced door behind me.

"What exactly do you want?" I demanded once I was alone, pacing like a caged predator.

"I want to have a conversation with you in person. Simple as that, Daniel!" Her tone suggested this was the most reasonable request imaginable.

"Keep wanting. I have absolutely nothing to say to you," I replied, fury building inside me at having my carefully constructed peace shattered.

"Oh, darling, it's not quite that simple. You have plenty to discuss with me," she insisted with that infuriating calmness I remembered all too well.

"You're part of my past. You stayed buried there, in the past. I have zero interest in seeing or speaking with you." It was the absolute truth. Why was this devil resurfacing now? My father's involvement was obvious—this reeked of his political manipulations.

"But I very much want to talk to you! And if you don't come to me willingly, I'll come to you like a hurricane. And you know exactly how impulsive I can be when I don't get what I want." Her laughter only stoked my rage higher.

"Don't you dare threaten me! You left, you were the one who wanted out of our arrangement. Why crawl back now? You should have moved on by now, found some other family to attach yourself to." I continued pacing the walk-in closet like a caged animal.

"Let's say I just took an extended vacation, darling. But now I'm back and ready to reclaim what belongs to me," she said with mocking sweetness.

"Vacation? For years?" I laughed incredulously. "You have nothing here anymore. Nothing that belongs to you is with me or anywhere near me, so disappear back to whatever hole you crawled out of."

"No, no, no. It's not like that at all. You belong to me, Daniel. And I always take back what's mine." She sounded completely unhinged, which made her infinitely more dangerous.

"You’re either insane or high on something. This is the biggest delusion I’ve ever heard in my life." I ran frustrated fingers through my hair.

"Crazy or not, either you come here, or I’ll go there, and believe me, I know everything about your current situation, including the fact that your little princess is living in your penthouse. If I come there, I’ll drag her out by that beautiful hair. And you know I’ll do exactly that." She would—she had done it before. Creating devastating scenes was her specialty, her weapon of choice.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" I was beyond outraged now.

"I’ll be waiting at the Summit Hotel bar shortly. It’s either that or..."

I ended the call before she could finish her threat. The urge to hurl the phone against the reinforced wall was overwhelming. It would be better to just go and end this nightmare. That woman thrived on chaos and destruction, and I had no doubt whatsoever that she’d show up here to terrorize Lila if I refused her summons.

I quickly changed into darker clothes, grabbed my car keys and shoulder holster, then returned to the living room where Lila waited with increasingly worried eyes.

"Any problems, big guy?" she asked carefully, her legal training making her naturally observant.

"Work emergency, little one. I need to handle something at headquarters. Hopefully I won’t be gone long." The lie tasted bitter on my tongue, but I would go to this damned hotel, deal with this parasite from my past, send her back to whatever cesspit she’d emerged from, and return to my Lila without allowing this poison to contaminate her world.

"Okay. Go handle your business, big guy. When you come back, wake me up so we can continue what we were doing." She approached and gave me a kiss that made me want to forget everything else and carry her straight to our bed.

"Can I really wake you up?" I asked, already knowing I absolutely would.

"You must!" Her caramel eyes sparkled with promise and desire.

I kissed my little one once more before leaving, seething at the past that had chosen this perfect moment to rise from the grave and haunt me again.

Chapter 452: Ghost Returns Home

Daniel’s POV

The moment I stepped into the exclusive lounge of the Meridian Hotel, I spotted her. That silhouette was burned into my memory like a brand—tall, elegant, draped in designer black that hugged every curve. Sasha Benedetti sat at the corner table overlooking the city skyline, her manicured fingers wrapped around a martini glass, a thin cigarette burning between her lips. The woman who had once shared my name and my bed. The woman who had demanded I choose between my badge and our marriage, then vanished into the European social circuit when I refused to become another Martinez family puppet.

Seven years had passed, yet she remained devastatingly beautiful. We had grown up in the same circles—our families bound by old alliances and unspoken agreements that stretched back generations. Our parents had orchestrated our union so skillfully that I never realized I was being maneuvered into position until I found myself standing at an altar, convinced she was my destiny. That illusion crumbled when she demanded I abandon my position in law enforcement and return to manage the family’s legitimate businesses like a dutiful heir. I chose justice over legacy. I had never looked back.

"Why would a ghost crawl out of her grave just to haunt me?" I growled, making no attempt to mask my irritation as I approached her table.

She laughed, that familiar sound that once made my pulse race and now set my teeth on edge. "Is that any way to greet your wife, darling?"

"Sasha, you stopped being my wife when you signed those papers and disappeared to Milan," I shot back, remaining standing despite her gesture toward the empty chair.

"Did I?" Her crimson lips curved into a predatory smile. "Sit down, Daniel. That righteous anger doesn’t suit a man of your stature."

"What do you want, Sasha?"

"The same thing I wanted seven years ago—for you to stop playing hero and remember who you really are. I grew tired of waiting for you to come to your senses. Now I'm taking matters into my own hands." Her presumption that I would suddenly capitulate to demands I had rejected during our marriage was breathtaking in its arrogance.

"Who exactly do you think you are to make demands of me?"

"Your wife, Daniel. The woman who exchanged vows with you in front of five hundred witnesses at St. Catherine's Cathedral. Surely you remember that day?"

"That's ancient history, Sasha. Our marriage ended with legal documents. You chose to walk away. You spent years jet-setting across Europe on the settlement money while I stayed here, building the life I wanted."

"You may think those papers freed you in the eyes of the law, but remember what Father DiMarco said? 'What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.' Some bonds transcend legal technicalities."

"Please, Sasha. Even you don't believe that sanctimonious nonsense."

"But I do now. I want my husband back. Daniel, I love you. Deep down, beneath all this stubborn pride, you love me too."

"You've lost your mind. Forget about me, Sasha. Go live your life and stop trying to resurrect something that was dead and buried years ago."

"You only feel this way because of that little plaything of yours. She's just a distraction—fresh excitement that will fade once the novelty wears off. Tell me about her."

"Stay away from Lila. Don’t even think about her name." The thought of Sasha anywhere near Lila sent ice through my veins. Sasha was cunning and ruthless, trained in the subtle arts of family warfare. She could destroy Lila without breaking a nail, and I would never allow that to happen.

"Look how protective you are of your little pet." Her eyes glittered with calculated interest. "But I have news that changes everything, my darling husband."

"Just say what you came to say."

"First, that divorce you’re so confident about? Your father is quite resourceful, you know. Don’t ask me how he managed it, but legally speaking, we’re still married."

"That’s impossible. I have the decree."

"Yes, you do. What you don’t know is that I filed an appeal and had that divorce nullified—with dear Vittorio’s assistance, of course. Everything was handled through proper channels, just quietly enough that you wouldn’t discover it. We assumed you would eventually tire of this rebellion and return to reality." Her smile dripped with triumph.

"That’s insane, Sasha." My mind reeled. Even with my family’s connections in the judicial system, nullifying a finalized divorce without my knowledge seemed impossible.

"Oh, sweetheart, the right favors in the right places work miracles." Her smile turned glacial. "I brought copies of everything." She slid a leather portfolio across the table.

As I scanned the documents, my vision blurred. This had to be forgery. But the seals looked authentic, and the signatures...

"What the hell is this, Sasha? These papers claim we requested an annulment due to pregnancy? This is some sick joke. I never signed these documents, and you were never pregnant."

"Your signature is right there. Look more carefully." Her unnatural composure fed my growing rage.

"This is fraud. I know it is. I'll have every document examined."

"By all means, investigate. But everything is legitimate. As for the pregnancy, I discovered it shortly after our divorce was finalized. I wasn't about to raise a child alone—I never wanted children anyway, though your parents convinced me this separation would be temporary. As you mentioned, I received quite generous compensation from our dissolved marriage and decided to enjoy myself. That's exactly what I did for seven years. But I'm tired of the games now. I've come home."

"What happened with the pregnancy?" I dreaded her answer.

"I lost our child. And it was your fault for abandoning us." She spoke with such chilling detachment that I doubted she had ever truly been pregnant or mourned any loss.

"You're despicable." My voice shook with disgust.

"You're simply overwhelmed by all this revelation. But as always, Daniel, I'll be practical and spell out your options. Take one week to verify everything I've told you. Then send that little distraction away. After that, you'll return to me, we'll move back to the family compound, and eventually you'll abandon this pointless career in law enforcement."

"You seem remarkably certain of yourself. But I don't dance to your tune anymore, or my father's."

I stood to leave, but paused to deliver one final warning. "Don't even think about approaching Lila."

I stormed out, fury coursing through my veins, unable to process the audacity of this woman's claims. I needed to investigate these allegations immediately. Too shaken to face Lila yet, I drove to the precinct to examine those documents and explore my options.

Dawn was breaking when I finally returned home. Lila lay sleeping peacefully in our bed, but I desperately needed her warmth and presence. After a scalding shower, I slipped beneath the covers and pulled her soft body against mine, waking her gently.

"You're home," she murmured drowsily.

I said nothing, simply removed her silk nightgown and lost myself in her embrace, temporarily forgetting the world and all the chaos that had just been unleashed upon it.

## Chapter 453: Strategic Alliance

Daniel's POV

Sleep had become my enemy. After another restless night haunted by the fraudulent marriage documents, I knew I needed Adler's expertise more than ever. Lila remained peacefully asleep when I slipped out, leaving only a brief note about an urgent case at headquarters. The deception gnawed at me, but I refused to drag her deeper into the Martinez family's web of corruption.

"Adler, I can't thank you enough for meeting me at this hour," I said, spotting my trusted ally near the precinct entrance.

"Brothers in arms stick together," he replied, clasping my shoulder with the familiarity of someone who understood the weight of our dual loyalties. "We'll dismantle this conspiracy piece by piece."

Inside my private office, I spread the forged documents across my desk and recounted every detail of Sasha's calculated return.

"I stake my reputation on this, Adler—those signatures are masterful forgeries," I declared with absolute certainty.

"Here's our battle plan," Adler said, leaning forward with the intensity of a seasoned strategist. "I have a contact—a prosecutor who specializes in judicial corruption. She's built her career exposing exactly this type of systematic fraud. Additionally, there's a forensic expert in the financial crimes division who owes me significant favors. We'll file simultaneous complaints and launch a full investigation immediately."

"Your network continues to astound me," I admitted, feeling the first glimmer of hope in days.

"Years of navigating both legitimate law enforcement and the shadow world of family politics builds certain connections, Daniel. But understand this," his expression darkened with warning, "once we

activate these channels, there’s no containing the fallout. Everyone involved in this conspiracy will face consequences."

"This is systematic fraud perpetrated through judicial corruption, Adler. It demands investigation and prosecution."

"Even if it exposes your father’s influence network? The woman explicitly implicated his role in orchestrating this scheme."

"He crossed a line that cannot be uncrossed," I stated without hesitation.

"Then we proceed with full force," Adler nodded approvingly. "The prosecutor will meet us at the federal building. I took the liberty of arranging this after our conversation."

"Adler, you’re invaluable," I said, managing my first genuine laugh in days as we departed for the meeting.

Upon arriving at the federal courthouse, we were immediately escorted to the prosecutor’s secure office. She commanded the room—a sharp-eyed woman whose reputation for dismantling organized crime’s legal manipulations preceded her.

"Adler, my old comrade!" The prosecutor rose with genuine warmth. "Finally, an opportunity to return the countless favors I’ve accumulated over the years."

"Adrienne, collaborating with you has always been a privilege," Adler responded, clearly comfortable in her presence.

"Excellent, because I’ll continue requiring your unique insights," she replied before focusing on me. "And you must be Inspector Martinez. Your work precedes your reputation."

"My work?" I questioned, genuinely intrigued.

"Indeed. Federal oversight has noted your precinct's exceptional case resolution rates and your unit's remarkable effectiveness in complex investigations." Her knowledge of our operations surprised me. "Would you consider a temporary assignment to my organized crime task force? Your background would prove invaluable."

"I appreciate the recognition, ma'am, but violent crime investigation remains my expertise. Besides, Adler and I have established an exceptionally productive partnership."

"Precisely," Adler interjected with a knowing smile. "I provide the strategic analysis, while Daniel executes the operational components. Daniel, meet Dr. Roman Knightley, the attorney who'll be spearheading our legal offensive."

I greeted the legendary lawyer—his reputation for dismantling corrupt judicial networks and his record of victories against entrenched power structures made him a formidable ally. His history with my father would make this particularly satisfying. I presented our evidence and detailed the conspiracy. The prosecutor immediately filed federal complaints while summoning her forensic specialists.

"Our primary objective is proving signature falsification through advanced analysis," she explained with confidence. "Dr. Knightley, I'll petition the federal judge for complete case file access. What's your tactical approach?"

"Once judicial notification occurs, I'll file emergency motions to invalidate the fraudulent ruling," he responded. "With documented evidence of systematic corruption, I'll petition for complete restoration of the original divorce decree with all protective provisions intact."

"Outstanding," she said, directing a reassuring smile toward me. "Rest assured, Inspector, we'll expedite this matter with maximum efficiency."

After discussing various procedural strategies with the prosecutor, we concluded the meeting and accompanied Dr. Knightley from the building.

"Dr. Knightley, please provide your payment information so I can transfer the retainer immediately," I said, determined to resolve this matter without delay.

"Inspector, that won't be necessary," he replied with professional warmth. "Consider this a courtesy among colleagues. Adler's endorsement carries exceptional weight, and frankly," his smile turned predatory, "cases involving judicial manipulation fascinate me professionally."

"Then I'm deeply in your debt. Should you require anything, I remain at your complete disposal."

After the lawyer departed, Adler and I walked toward his vehicle. I felt significantly calmer but couldn't resist commenting on the situation's delicious irony.

"Adler, you've truly outdone yourself," I chuckled. "Of all the attorneys in this city, you've recruited the one man my father considers his greatest adversary."

"What do you mean?" Adler asked, clearly puzzled.

"He didn't mention their history? That demonstrates exceptional professionalism," I observed, appreciating the lawyer's discretion. "Dr. Knightley and my father engaged in legendary warfare years ago. He represented a small construction firm that had contracted with our family's legitimate businesses. Knightley defended them with absolutely ruthless determination and systematically exposed every fraudulent practice. My father attempted to buy him off to abandon the case, but Knightley refused. Their confrontation in the courthouse nearly escalated to physical violence. Knightley ultimately prevailed, forcing my father to pay devastating damages, which absolutely enraged him. They've remained bitter enemies ever since."

"That explains his reaction when I described your circumstances," Adler mused. "He promised to resolve your case with unprecedented speed and thoroughness."

"I don't doubt it!" I couldn't suppress my satisfaction. "But my father's arrogance continues to astound me."

"He operates like a traditional patriarch in business," Adler commented.

"He's a predator, Adler. Neither my siblings nor I endorse his methods. My brother has managed to implement ethical reforms within our legitimate enterprises, but while my father maintains influence,

he’ll continue operating by his own ruthless standards," I said, sympathizing with my brother’s constant struggle to mitigate our father’s questionable practices.

"Would you and Lila like to join me for lunch?" Adler offered.

"I appreciate the invitation, but I need focused time with Lila. This situation has created tremendous stress between us."

Adler dropped me at headquarters where I retrieved my vehicle. During the drive home, I called Lila, but she preferred staying in, so I promised to bring lunch. I stopped at an upscale restaurant, placed our order, and continued home.

I discovered Lila deeply absorbed in her legal studies when I arrived—wearing glasses I’d never seen before. As I approached, she quickly removed them.

"Keep them on," I said gently, replacing them on her face. "This is a new discovery."

"I lost a contact lens," she explained with obvious frustration. "I’m ordering replacements tomorrow. Fortunately my prescription isn’t severe, so I don’t require them constantly."

"Why the disappointed expression?"

"I dislike how I appear in glasses," she admitted with a frown.

"Well, I find them incredibly appealing," I teased. "They make my brilliant girlfriend look like a distinguished legal scholar."

"I am distinguished!" she countered, her beautiful smile returning.

And how desperately I needed that smile.

Chapter 454: Poisonous Reunion

Daniel’s POV

My peaceful days had shattered like glass against concrete. Dominic finally returned from his extended business in Sicily and summoned all of us to dinner at the Thorne family’s private dining room. His intention was to get updates about Gemma’s situation, but the conversation took a sinister turn when he revealed that her ex-boyfriend had been making death threats against her—and against Lila. That information sent rage coursing through my veins like molten steel.

After returning to my penthouse, I tried to discuss the threats with Lila, but she dismissed them casually, claiming she barely remembered being threatened. How does someone forget a death threat from a desperate man with nothing to lose? But before I could press the issue further, my little temptress distracted me with her irresistible touch, and I allowed myself to be drawn away from the subject.

The next morning, anxiety and concern ate at me like acid. Then Sasha called, transforming my worry into pure fury.

"Hello, darling husband! Have you sorted out our marital situation yet?" She was clearly savoring every moment of this torment.

"Sasha, crawl back to whatever cesspit spawned you and pretend I never existed!" I snarled before ending the call. The phone rang again immediately.

"You used to have better breeding," she purred with mock disappointment. "Daniel, I’m still legally your wife, so the least you could do is take me to a proper establishment and treat me with the respect I deserve."

"Respect? Go straight to hell, Sasha! Forget I exist. Whatever sick game you’re orchestrating, I’ll crush it. Now find something else to occupy your twisted mind and leave me in peace—I have real work to do." I had zero patience for her psychological warfare today.

"You’d better meet me for lunch today, or I might pay an unexpected visit to that sweet little plaything you’ve been bedding." Sasha’s threats were becoming increasingly brazen, and my restraint was hanging by a thread.

"What the hell do you want from me, Sasha? I don’t have time for lunch meetings."

"I want to move back into our matrimonial home. That’s why we need to discuss terms. Luxury hotels aren’t suitable for permanent residence."

"What matrimonial home are you fantasizing about?"

"Don’t play dumb with me."

"You’re the one living in a fantasy! Don’t you dare set foot near my building or Lila. If you do, what happens next will be far worse than anything you’re prepared for."

"Don’t threaten me, Daniel."

"Don’t threaten me, Sasha."

"I’ll give you some time to compose yourself, but this matter needs resolution soon."

"Soon, you’ll be nothing but a nightmare I’ve forgotten, you poisonous witch!"

I slammed the phone down with my head pounding like a war drum. Leaving the precinct, I drove straight to Caleb’s corporate office. We had arranged to discuss the escalating threats from Gemma’s psychotic ex-boyfriend, but with everything spiraling out of control, I lost my composure and treated Gemma with inexcusable harshness.

Now my little one was livid with me. When she returned that evening and announced she would be sleeping in the guest bedroom, I nearly came unhinged. She was withdrawing from me, and I had only myself to blame. She refused to even acknowledge my presence.

But Sasha was relentless in her pursuit of contact. When she called repeatedly, I decided confronting whatever twisted scheme she had brewing might be the fastest way to end this nightmare permanently. I drove to her hotel, answering her latest call during the journey.

"Finally. I was about to visit our home personally and escort that little nymph out myself," Sasha spoke as if she owned everything in my life.

"I warned you to stay away from her."

"And I told you we needed to have a proper discussion."

"Wait in the hotel lobby. I'll be there shortly."

I drove through the city with rage burning in my chest like wildfire. When I arrived, Sasha was waiting in the opulent lobby like she belonged there. I approached and took the leather armchair across from her.

"What do you want? I know this performance isn't motivated by genuine love like you claim."

"Daniel, how can you treat your wife so callously?"

"I know your methods too well, Sasha. What is my father paying you for this charade?"

"Don't be juvenile, Daniel. I am your legal wife!"

"Drop the theatrics, Sasha! You disappeared for years after stealing a fortune in cash and assets, and now suddenly you remember you're married to me and claim to love me? I don't believe a word of it. Either be completely honest about your motivations, or I'll resolve this situation through other channels."

"I am being honest. I love you, I always have. Don't you remember how perfect we were together?"

"I've come to realize we were never perfect together. We were simply comfortable with familiar dysfunction."

"That's not what you whispered after making passionate love to me." Her eyes glittered with calculated provocation.

"Imagine how spectacularly wrong I was!" I feigned shock, which clearly infuriated her.

"Seriously, Daniel? Is this how you're going to behave? Come on, for the sake of our history, let's have dinner at an exclusive restaurant with fine wine, and enjoy each other's company like we used to."

"That's absolutely not happening, Sasha. I'm not the same man anymore, and I have zero interest in dining with you. I'm only here attempting to handle this diplomatically."

"Handle this diplomatically." She laughed with bitter mockery, making me want to wrap my hands around her throat. "Daniel, the only acceptable solution is for you to send that little nymph back to wherever she came from and restore me to my rightful position as your wife."

"Have you considered that I could pursue divorce proceedings again?"

"For that, you'd need to locate where I'm actually residing, which you cannot." She laughed with supreme confidence.

"When did you transform into such a despicable creature without me noticing?" Her corruption disgusted me completely. My father and she were definitely conspiring together.

"When did you become so melodramatic?" She laughed directly in my face with contempt.

I stood to leave, but she called after me with venom.

"Daniel, you have until next Friday. If you don't comply with my demands, I'm going after your precious little nymph personally."

I spun around instantly.

"You actually believe threatening her will force me to submit to your will? It won't. If you make that mistake, what you receive from me will be exponentially worse than anything you're imagining. Touch her, and I'll expose every single one of your father's illegal operations. And you know I'm aware of every dirty detail." It was time to deploy serious pressure. Her father was involved in numerous questionable ventures, and I would absolutely use that leverage—she worshipped him and wouldn't risk destroying him.

"You wouldn't dare drag my father into our personal business!" Her entire demeanor shifted to panic.

"Then don't drag Lila into ours!" I responded with steel in my voice. "Are you actually trying to manipulate me, Sasha? Me, of all people? Push me further, and I'll detonate this entire situation."

I walked away without a backward glance. How had I misjudged someone so completely? When I married Sasha as a young man, I was still working within my father's organization and believed she was my perfect match. But I was already planning to join law enforcement, which I did not long after our wedding. From that point until our divorce, she made my existence miserable, constantly pressuring me to abandon police work and return to the family business.

Years ago came the breaking point—she issued an ultimatum: either her or my detective career. I chose my badge, so she filed for divorce, seized everything she could legally claim, and vanished completely. Initially, I felt devastated, but that pain quickly transformed into relief as I found fulfillment in my profession. Sasha became a distant memory, someone I rarely contemplated—until now, when she's returned to torture me again. She was driving me toward madness, but I would end this. I just needed patience while the investigation and legal machinery did their work.

## Chapter 455: I Love You

Lila's POV

I couldn't maintain my anger at Daniel despite how furious I'd been about his confrontation with Gemma. His concern for my safety in this dangerous world was genuine, even if his heavy-handed approach with the informant had been completely wrong. After just one night apart, I already missed him with an intensity that surprised me.

Entering our heavily secured penthouse with determination to make peace, I found it strangely quiet. The reinforced steel door clicked shut behind me as I searched each room—the kitchen with its bulletproof windows, our bedroom with its panic room entrance—but Daniel was nowhere to be found. The emptiness felt wrong since he should have returned from the precinct by now.

"This is weird," I muttered to myself, checking the encrypted phone he'd given me for any missed messages.

After securing my purse in the hidden safe and removing my shoes, I took a long shower in our marble bathroom, trying to wash away the tension of another day navigating between my law studies and the Thorne Group's legitimate front operations. I slipped into one of Daniel's dress shirts afterward, needing his scent around me even if he wasn't physically present. When the digital clock showed he was definitely late by his usual standards, worry crept in. In our world, being late could mean anything from a raid gone wrong to a family meeting called by his father. I reached for the secure phone and dialed his number.

"Hi, little one," his sleepy voice answered after several rings.

"Big guy, are you okay?" Concern flooded through me at his groggy tone. In the Martinez family hierarchy, weakness was dangerous.

"Yes. I think I fell asleep. Where are you?"

"At home. And you?" I heard rustling through the encrypted connection as if he was moving, but then silence followed. "Daniel?" The call suddenly disconnected, sending a chill down my spine.

"I'm right here, little one." His warm hand appeared on my waist, making me jump slightly as I turned. Despite his position as a police inspector, Daniel moved with the silent precision his family had trained into him since childhood. "I came home early because I missed you. I lay down in the guest room where you slept last night and fell asleep breathing in your scent from the pillow."

"Daniel..."

"I was waiting for you to return," he continued, lifting me effortlessly with the strength that came from years of both police training and family enforcement duties. His voice trembled with emotion. "I can't do this—having you sleep in another room, upset with me. I can't function without you. Forgive me! I behaved terribly toward Gemma, but these threats against the families have me on edge. I'm terrified something might happen to you in this life we live. I love you, Lila. I love you in ways I never thought possible."

"What did you say?" My heart stopped as he looked deeply into my eyes with that intense stare that had intimidated countless suspects.

"I said I love you, Lila. My heart beats only for you. I've waited my entire life for you—I was made for you. I can't lose you, my little one. I love you!"

Tears streamed down my face without warning. I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him, floating on those words I'd longed to hear. Joy overwhelmed me, almost too much to contain. His arms held me tightly against his powerful frame, his kiss giving me everything his guarded heart contained.

"Do you forgive me, love?" he asked again. My smile was so wide I could barely speak. "Lila, talk to me," he pressed, looking confused by my silence with that commanding tone he used when interrogating suspects.

"My love! You have no idea how long I've waited to hear those words. I love you so much, Daniel, sometimes I feel it might overflow and consume me. You won't lose me—ever—because I love you too, and I can't exist without you."

His dark eyes glistened with unshed tears as he smiled—a beautiful, genuine smile I rarely saw him display outside these walls.

"You love me?" he asked, and I nodded enthusiastically.

"It was torture keeping it inside all this time. I feared you'd leave if you knew, that you'd see my feelings as a complication to your work with the police and your family obligations."

"I will never leave you, little one. You are my life." His lips found mine again with the possessive intensity of a man who'd claimed his territory.

Time lost meaning as we embraced, absorbing the intensity of emotions flowing between us while the city's dangerous undercurrent pulsed beyond our fortified walls.

"I don't want to let you go," he whispered in my ear as he carried me to the living room sofa, settling me on his lap. "But I need to feed you."

I laughed at his perpetual concern for my wellbeing, a protectiveness that went beyond normal boyfriend territory into something primal. He retrieved his encrypted phone and quickly ordered dinner from the Italian restaurant the Thorne family used for secure deliveries, then set it aside to hold me again.

After we ate, he took me to bed, clinging to me as though our brief separation had lasted years. I felt the same desperate need for closeness.

"Daniel, I'm sorry for pulling away yesterday," I said, nestling against his chest. "I never want that distance between us again. I promise that no matter how big any problem becomes, we'll talk until we find a solution. No more silent anger."

"That's good, because I can't bear it either," he replied softly. "Today was hell, thinking you might leave because I acted like the controlling bastard my father raised me to be. When I'm being stupid, please tell me. And no matter how angry you are, don't go to sleep mad at me or away from me."

"Never again," I promised, having learned my lesson—punishing him only punished myself more.

"Oh, little one, how I love you!" Daniel scattered kisses across my face and neck, making me smile with anticipation.

"I love you, big guy." His contented sigh preceded another deep kiss.

His large hands explored my body reverently while his lips followed, tasting every inch of my skin. Gently, he removed the shirt I'd borrowed, then discarded his own clothing. When he positioned himself above me, his eyes and smile radiated pure happiness.

"My little one, only mine," he murmured as he joined our bodies with unprecedented tenderness, entering me slowly, allowing me to feel every sensation. When fully connected, he gazed into my eyes and declared once more, "I love you!"

Chapter 456: Mothers Violent Threats

Lila's POV

I drifted into Thorne Group's legal department humming softly, my heart lighter than it had been in months. The world seemed painted in brighter hues after last night with Daniel, when my detective finally opened his guarded heart to me completely. How could anything feel ordinary after hearing those three precious words from a man who ruled both sides of the law?

"Girl, that inspector of yours must have worked some serious magic," Jude appeared at my desk, his knowing smile making me blush. As one of Thorne's financial analysts who handled our legitimate investment portfolios, Jude had become my closest friend in this complex world of shadow businesses.

"It's love that's magical, Jude," I beamed, unable to contain my joy.

"Spill everything, beautiful," he said, settling into the leather chair across from my mahogany desk.

"He loves me, Jude. He actually loves me!" The words tumbled out like champagne bubbles.

"And that's breaking news how exactly, Tiny Cipher?" Xavier's voice cut through our conversation as Thorne Group's consigliere materialized beside us like a well-dressed specter. "Everyone except you two blind fools figured that out months ago."

"What do you mean?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

Xavier leaned against my desk with the predatory grace that made him so effective at negotiating both legitimate contracts and underground territories. "Only you and the good inspector were oblivious. The rest of us watched you two circle each other like a pair of lovesick wolves."

I shot Jude a questioning glance.

"Don’t look at me like that," Jude protested, raising his hands defensively. "I kept my mouth shut like a proper gentleman."

"He didn’t need to say anything," Xavier continued, adjusting his Italian silk tie. "Anyone with half a brain could see how you two gravitated toward each other at every family gathering. So Martinez finally grew a pair and confessed?"

"Since when did you become the office matchmaker?" Jude teased, earning my grateful laugh.

"Yes, he told me everything, and I shared my feelings too. Nothing can tear us apart now." My voice carried absolute certainty that my fairy tale had finally begun. "Now both of you have actual work to do for this organization."

"I’m going, I’m going to call your boy and offer my congratulations," Xavier rose with characteristic smoothness and headed toward his corner office where he orchestrated Thorne’s most delicate operations.

As my attention returned to Jude, I noticed the dark shadows beneath his usually bright eyes. "What’s wrong? You look like you’ve been through hell."

"Port’t slept properly in days, Tiny Cipher," he sighed heavily. "Have you talked to Nora recently?"

I paused, realizing I’d barely seen Nora lately. She’d been spending most of her time with Ruby, and both had been mysteriously absent from our usual gatherings at the penthouse. "Not in a while, actually. Why do you ask?"

"We had a massive fight. For days now, she'll only speak to me when Thorne business demands it." His attempt at a casual shrug failed miserably.

"Want me to talk to her?" I offered, concerned for both of them.

"Not yet. Don't want to drag you into our mess when you're finally happy." His smile looked more like a grimace.

"I'm here whenever you need me," I assured him as he nodded weakly and retreated to his office where he managed the more traditional investment accounts that kept Thorne Group's legitimate facade spotless.

I was contemplating ways to help my friend when the elevator chimed and a delivery man approached with an elaborate arrangement of white orchids and deep red roses—flowers that would make any mafia princess swoon. The card bore Daniel's bold handwriting, and my heart melted at his thoughtfulness even amid his demanding caseload.

The morning proceeded peacefully in our marble-appointed offices until my phone buzzed with my mother's name flashing across the screen. I realized I hadn't spoken to her in days and actually missed her voice, despite everything. I answered warmly.

"Hi, Mom—"

She cut me off with razor-sharp precision. "Explain to me exactly where you're living, Lila." Her tone could have frozen champagne.

"What?" My mind went completely blank.

"Lila, where are you living?" she repeated, her voice rising to that dangerous octave I remembered from childhood. "I provided your address to Connor so he could pay you a proper visit, and imagine my shock when he returned saying the doorman claimed you don't reside there anymore."

"Mom, I moved in with a friend. It seemed safer than living alone." I decided against mentioning I was cohabiting with my boyfriend—she might actually hire someone to drag me home.

"What friend? Have you moved into some degenerate boarding house full of drinking and loose morals?"

"No, Mom. I'm staying with Gemma. I've mentioned her before." I committed to the fabrication—there was no conceivable way she could discover I was living in Daniel's fortress-like penthouse.

"Is she the one living with her mother?" Gemma no longer lived with her mother, but that detail could remain buried.

"That's right, Mom," I confirmed, praying the interrogation would end.

"Well, that shows some sense at least. Someone responsible will be monitoring you. Give me the address—Connor is quite eager to visit."

"Absolutely not!" The words erupted before I could stop them.

"What did you just say to me, young lady?" Her voice turned lethal.

"Gemma's mother doesn't permit male visitors," I improvised desperately.

"Now that's a proper parent," she approved with grudging respect.

"But provide me the address regardless." Her demand left me scrambling for options.

"Mom, I'm not giving you my location," I finally stated, bracing for nuclear warfare.

"Lila, don't test my patience!" Her voice reached glass-shattering levels.

"Mom, you threatened to drag me home by my hair and lock me away. I won't tell you where I live. Dad knows my location for emergencies—" She cut off my explanation mid-sentence.

"You've gotten far too big for your boots, young lady! I am your mother! You owe me complete obedience and respect. How dare you vanish without explanation? Have you completely lost your mind, Lila?"

Her screams echoed through the phone loud enough to draw concerned looks from passing colleagues.

"I'm sorry, Mom, but I won't provide the address." I maintained my ground though my entire body trembled like a leaf.

"Mark my words, Lila, I will locate you eventually. When I do, I'll give you such a thrashing you'll be soaking in ice baths for weeks. And just when you think it's finished, I'll beat you again and drag you by your hair to the altar to marry Connor!" Her voice had transformed into something inhuman—no mother should ever threaten her child with such venom.

"Mom..." Tears streamed down my cheeks, my hands shaking uncontrollably. Suddenly, someone gently removed the phone from my grasp.

"Ma'am, while you may be Lila's mother, understand that she has powerful friends who will shield her from harm. You won't lay a finger on her. Now go find some housework to occupy yourself instead of terrorizing your hardworking daughter who, unlike some people, doesn't have time for such destructive nonsense."

I turned to see Jude ending the call, his face etched with protective fury as he studied my tear-stained face.

"Are you absolutely certain that psychopath is actually your mother?" Jude asked with such genuine concern that I briefly questioned everything—after all, what kind of mother threatens her own daughter that way?

"Right now, I wish she wasn't," I admitted through my sobs. Jude knelt beside my chair and enveloped me in a fierce, protective embrace.

"Don't worry, Tiny Cipher. We'll keep you safe," he promised, his words filled with the loyalty that bound Thorne Group's inner circle together.

Chapter 457: One Way Ticket

Daniel's POV

My relationship with Lila represented everything I had fought to build outside my family's shadow—pure, honest, untainted by the Martinez legacy of corruption and manipulation. Yet Sasha's presence threatened to drag both Lila and me back into that world of political marriages and judicial puppetry. Every day I delayed solving this crisis increased the risk of Lila discovering the full extent of my family's influence over the legal system that was supposed to protect her.

The conversations with my private attorney and the federal contacts investigating document fraud had yielded frustratingly little progress. My patience was wearing thin when my office door burst open without so much as a courtesy knock.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I snapped, not bothering to mask my contempt.

"It's Friday, darling husband." Sasha's lips curved into that practiced smile she'd perfected during our years of political theater. She examined my desk chair with theatrical disdain before settling into it as if claiming territory. "I came to see if you've grown tired of playing house with your little college girl." Her manicured fingers traced the armrest mockingly. "What a charmingly rustic police station this is."

"Get out, Sasha. Stop this harassment campaign."

"Oh, Daniel," she purred with false sweetness, "don't take that tone with your lawfully wedded wife. You know how emotional I become when treated poorly. I might cause quite a disturbance—and we both know how talented I am at creating memorable scenes."

I knew exactly what she meant. Sasha's dramatic outbursts were legendary among our social circle, and the last thing I needed was her staging one of her performances at the precinct.

"What exactly do you want, Sasha? You clearly understand I won't be welcoming you back into my life. Why persist with this charade?"

"Daniel, I'm your wife according to both church and state. I deserve the privileges that come with that position. Sharing your home happens to be foremost among them."

"That will never happen. Face reality—you know it's only a matter of time before I dissolve this farce permanently."

"What are you planning, Daniel?" Her eyes sharpened with suspicion. She knew me well enough to recognize when I was working multiple angles.

"I'm not the one who specializes in elaborate schemes. You're the expert at manipulation, deception, and forging legal documents. Let me be crystal clear, Sasha—when your house of cards collapses, my father won't shield you from the consequences. He'll cut ties to protect the family name." I was confident that any investigation into judicial corruption would never touch the Martinez patriarch directly, but Sasha wouldn't be afforded such protection.

"What exactly are you orchestrating, Daniel?" Suspicion clouded her features.

I smiled cryptically. "Perhaps you should have a heart-to-heart with your father about recent developments."

"Don't play games with me, Daniel. I know every one of your tells." Her voice hardened with menace. "Let's speak plainly. When are you sending your teenage distraction back to whatever suburban playground she came from?"

"Sasha," I leaned forward, allowing steel to enter my voice, "I've made myself clear. Come anywhere near Lila, and I'll unleash everything I have against your father's operations. Imagine how crushing it would be for him to spend his golden years in federal prison because his daughter couldn't accept reality."

"Keep my father out of your vendetta, Daniel." Her posture stiffened defensively.

"I will, provided you keep Lila out of yours. Let’s negotiate a temporary ceasefire. Give me some breathing room. Return to Greenleaf, spend quality time with your parents, reconnect with your roots. Meanwhile, I’ll have the necessary conversations with my father and work toward a permanent solution. Does that seem reasonable?" I needed to buy precious time for the federal investigation to gain momentum.

"You’re not going to outmaneuver me that easily, Daniel."

"Sasha, you’re too intelligent for this self-destructive behavior. Surely you realize that remaining here making my life miserable will only escalate tensions for everyone involved. Show some good faith and grant me this time. I’ll negotiate with my father, and then we’ll settle everything definitively—whether our marriage continues or not. I’m being more than fair." My calm exterior concealed my desperation to remove her from Lila’s orbit.

"How much time are we discussing, Daniel?"

"Some time, perhaps?"

"That’s an eternity, Daniel."

"It’s exactly the timeline my father specified for resolving complex family matters. Since he holds the most influence in this situation, his schedule seems appropriate. In the meantime, you can travel, indulge in all those expensive hobbies you’re so passionate about." I couldn’t entirely suppress my disdain, but she appeared to be considering the proposal.

"Some time, Daniel. When I return, you’ll have ended this midlife crisis with that child." She spoke as if her victory was already assured.

"Some time, Sasha, and when you return, we’ll have our final conversation." I had no intention of changing my position—I simply needed her gone.

"Agreed, provided you personally drive me to the airport." Her sudden smile told me she was calculating some advantage. "Come now, Daniel. I don’t have transportation in the city. The least you can do is ensure I reach my departure gate safely."

"It has to be immediately," I insisted, formulating a plan to guarantee she actually boarded that flight to Greenleaf.

"I need to collect my belongings from the hotel." She rose with practiced grace.

I opened the door eagerly, desperate for her swift exit. Fortunately, Adler was manning the front desk.

"Adler, I need you to accompany us," I called to my colleague. He glanced between Sasha and me, understanding flickering across his features.

"Of course, Inspector Martinez." He didn’t question my unusual request.

"Who is this man? Why is he joining us?" Sasha demanded imperiously.

"Inspector Adler. He’s coming along to ensure everything proceeds smoothly. Now let’s go." I gripped her arm with firm authority.

"This wasn’t part of our arrangement, Daniel!" she protested.

"Don’t create a spectacle at my workplace," I warned through clenched teeth. "The agreement was airport transportation, which I’m providing, but my colleague is joining us for security purposes."

"Are you actually afraid to be alone with me, Daniel?" Her laugh was deliberately provocative.

"Think whatever helps you sleep at night." I opened the patrol car’s rear door and guided her inside with unmistakable finality.

"What is this, Daniel? I refuse to ride in a police vehicle! Daniel?" She frantically attempted to open the door. Adler chuckled as he settled into the passenger seat.

"Save your energy, ma'am. Those back doors are security-locked," Adler explained with obvious satisfaction. "And I'd recommend against provoking Inspector Martinez further—patience isn't among his notable virtues. Talk too much, and you might find yourself in our holding cell."

"What holding cell? Are you completely insane?" Sasha's outrage was palpable.

"The detention facility, ma'am—our secure prisoner transport area. Not comfortable, and the aroma is quite offensive." Adler was clearly enjoying the exchange. Sasha stared at him in horror.

"Listen carefully to Inspector Adler, Sasha. I have zero tolerance for dramatic scenes, as you well remember." I started the engine with those final words of warning.

Sasha complained relentlessly during the entire journey to the hotel. After waiting quite a while in the opulent lobby, she finally emerged with four enormous designer suitcases. I couldn't comprehend why she required such excessive luggage, but at least she was departing. She immediately began protesting as I loaded her expensive cases into the patrol car's secure compartment.

"Don't damage my luggage, Daniel!" She hovered anxiously between her belongings and the vehicle.

"Sasha, get in the car." I grabbed her arm and directed her firmly into the patrol car. "Now remain silent, or you can ride in the transport cage while your precious suitcases occupy the comfortable seat."

Chapter 458: The Parasite Deception

Daniel's POV

I slammed the reinforced door of the unmarked surveillance vehicle after securing the last of Sasha's designer luggage in the bulletproof trunk. We were headed to the private aviation terminal, and while Adler beside me was clearly relishing every moment of this operation, I was barely containing my fury. In the backseat, Sasha continued her relentless complaints like a spoiled mafia princess who had never been denied anything in her privileged life.

"Daniel, this treatment is completely beneath my station!" she protested, shifting restlessly against the leather seats like a caged predator. Her constant movement was testing what little patience I had left after dealing with her manipulation tactics for weeks.

Adler caught my eye with that dangerous glint I recognized from our most challenging undercover operations. "Miss, you might want to limit your movement on those seats. We just finished transporting a rival family's informant last night who'd been hiding in the industrial district for quite some time. Port't had a chance to properly sanitize the vehicle yet. He was in quite a deteriorated state."

I immediately understood Adler's tactical improvisation and decided this psychological warfare approach could prove highly effective.

"Wait, was this the vehicle we used for Roxie?" I asked, creating a fictional identity on the spot.

"Exactly that one," Adler confirmed smoothly. "Poor bastard hadn't seen proper facilities in ages. Been surviving in abandoned warehouses, scavenging from restaurant dumpsters. I heard they had to completely decontaminate him at the safe house."

Through the rearview mirror, I watched Sasha's expression transform into absolute revulsion.

"Decontaminate? What kind of condition was this person in?" I inquired, already anticipating Adler's creative response.

"Parasites!" he announced matter-of-factly. "Complete bodily infestation. Head to toe contamination."

Sasha immediately erupted into hysteria. "Daniel, stop this vehicle immediately! I refuse to remain in here with potential parasites! How dare you subject me to these disgusting conditions! Release me from this contaminated vehicle!"

"My apologies, miss," Adler continued, clearly enjoying his performance. "I should have informed Inspector Martinez beforehand. Just try to minimize contact with the upholstery. Those parasites have a particular affinity for expensive hair treatments like yours."

I had to concentrate intensely on navigating through the city traffic to prevent myself from laughing outright. By the time we reached the exclusive aviation complex and I opened Sasha's door, she practically launched herself from the vehicle, frantically brushing at her clothing as if battling invisible invaders. The spectacle was absolutely magnificent. I calmly retrieved her luggage and arranged it on a waiting cart, while Adler decided to escalate his psychological operation.

Leaning toward Sasha with theatrical concern, he whispered dramatically, "I probably shouldn't mention this publicly, but when you arrive at your destination, don't bring those bags indoors immediately. Have them professionally sterilized and quarantined."

"Why would that be necessary?" Sasha demanded, her eyes filling with panicked tears.

"Roxie had several street animals with him in the holding facility. All carrying various infestations. Those creatures could have contaminated your luggage during transport. Better to exercise extreme caution and have everything thoroughly sterilized."

"There were animals too? You transport diseased creatures in there?" Her voice had reached a pitch that was drawing attention from other travelers.

"Sometimes our operations require relocating animals to secure facilities," Adler explained with perfect official authority. "And frankly, if Roxie couldn't maintain his own hygiene, you can imagine the condition of those unfortunate animals."

Sasha was now scratching herself compulsively, convinced she was covered in imaginary infestations. When she attempted to approach me for a farewell embrace, I strategically stepped backward.

"Better maintain distance, Sasha. Remember the parasite risk—highly transmissible," I warned with feigned medical concern.

She appeared completely defeated, exhausted by her own panic, bearing no resemblance to the calculated manipulator who had strutted into police headquarters earlier attempting to leverage corrupted legal documents. Adler had executed this operation flawlessly.

"I'll be back soon, Daniel," she declared as she prepared to board her private flight to the Greenleaf family compound. "That's my final offer. I'll return before long." I chose not to dignify her ultimatum with any response.

"Don't forget to consult medical professionals for preventive treatment," Adler called after her, dramatically scratching his own scalp. Sasha immediately began clawing at her perfectly styled hair before rushing toward the boarding area.

I kept my focus fixed on the departure gate, determined not to look away until I witnessed that aircraft taxi away with her aboard.

"What was the real strategy behind all this theater, Martinez?" Adler finally inquired once she had disappeared from view.

"I needed breathing room, Adler. Time for our investigation team to make progress on the corruption case," I sighed heavily. "We negotiated a temporary arrangement—she spends time with her family's political allies, and when she returns, we'll allegedly discuss reconciliation. But honestly, I'm hoping she never sets foot in this city again."

"Brilliant tactical thinking! With any luck, our legal team will resolve the judicial manipulation before she returns. But why did you specifically request my assistance? And why use the surveillance vehicle?"

"I understand Sasha's psychological profile too well. If I'd been alone with her during this entire process, she would have created a public spectacle that could compromise our family's reputation. And we used the surveillance vehicle because there's absolutely no possibility I want even microscopic traces of her presence in my personal car where Lila might encounter them."

"You demonstrate impressive strategic foresight," Adler chuckled appreciatively.

"Apologies for pulling you away from active cases for this personal matter."

"No apology necessary. That was exceptionally entertaining. She'll be imagining parasites and infestations for days." He burst into hearty laughter, and I found myself joining in despite everything.

"Where exactly did you develop that elaborate scenario?" I asked, wiping tears of laughter from my eyes.

"That situation actually occurred some time back during a major bust. Every officer who used that surveillance vehicle ended up with genuine infestations—we all had to undergo complete decontamination, including head shaving. My wife nearly left me when I brought parasites home to our children," Adler explained through his laughter. "After that incident, I ensure all vehicles receive regular professional sanitization, but this particular one hasn't been serviced recently. So realistically, contamination remains possible."

We continued laughing as we headed toward the exit, both of us knowing this tactical victory had bought us precious time to dismantle the corruption threatening everything I'd built with Lila.

## Chapter 459: Family War Council

Daniel's POV

The weight of deception pressed down on my shoulders as I drove toward Greenleaf, navigating through the winding roads that led to Martinez family territory. I had managed to slip away from Sasha's surveillance temporarily, but my mind churned with unrest. After considerable deliberation, I decided a Sunday visit to my parents was unavoidable to address the sudden reappearance of my not-quite-ex-wife. My strategy was straightforward: drive to the family estate, confront my father about this judicial manipulation, and race back to Brooklyn—back to Lila.

I despised myself for deceiving her, claiming I was handling a case when I was actually confronting ghosts from my past. But what alternative did I have? If Lila discovered that Sasha had somehow nullified our divorce through my father's corrupt judicial connections and I was technically still bound in marriage, she would abandon me without hesitation. Her unwavering moral principles wouldn't tolerate such complications. I couldn't risk losing her, not when she had become my entire world.

Gregory waited in his silver Audi at the estate gates, his familiar face a welcome sight amid the chaos surrounding our family.

"Gregory, brother, thanks for the escort," I said, embracing him firmly.

He returned the embrace with equal intensity before releasing a weary sigh. "Man, being the family disappointment around here is brutal! I've officially joined you and Sybilla in the black sheep brotherhood."

"What transgression knocked you from your throne?" I asked, genuinely intrigued.

"Sloane and I refuse to produce heirs on command, and apparently that brands us as traitors to the bloodline," he explained as we approached his vehicle. "Mother keeps insisting I'd comprehend their urgency if I understood family legacy. Life was infinitely simpler when I was the golden successor."

I couldn't contain my amusement. Throughout our childhood, Sybilla and I endlessly heard how we should mirror Gregory's perfection. He represented the ideal Martinez heir, the benchmark against which we were measured and consistently found deficient. Hearing "Why can't you demonstrate Gregory's discipline?" haunted our adolescence.

"Never imagined witnessing this moment," I taunted. "The day Saint Gregory tumbled from his pedestal."

"Let's stop at my place before confronting the patriarchs," Gregory suggested as we drove through the secured compound. "Sloane wants to see you, and she's boycotting family gatherings these days. Plus, there's intelligence you need before walking into the lion's den."

"Sloane is avoiding family meetings? The situation must be more volatile than I realized."

"You have absolutely no comprehension," Gregory replied ominously.

During the drive, he detailed how our parents relentlessly pressured him about continuing the bloodline. Our mother had apparently informed Sloane she should abandon her legal career to become a "proper family matriarch"—whatever that meant in the antiquated world our parents inhabited, where wives were expected to manage social appearances while husbands conducted business.

When we arrived at Gregory's residence within the compound, I was surprised to find Sybilla waiting there as well.

"This reception committee is making me apprehensive," I remarked.

"You don’t understand the magnitude," my brother muttered as Sloane and Sybilla rushed to greet me.

Sloane embraced me tightly before inquiring, "Daniel, how many bedrooms does your Brooklyn apartment have?"

"Three. Why?" I replied, puzzled.

"Because you’re our emergency refuge," she declared with a half-serious smile. "When we finally break and flee your parents’ tyranny, we’re seeking asylum at your place."

"Who would have predicted you’d become the household rebel, Sloane?" I laughed at her expression of mock indignation.

"Your parents are impossible! Gregory’s approaching forty—don’t they understand we’ll produce heirs when we’re prepared, not when they mandate it?"

"They don’t comprehend anything that contradicts their grand design," I explained. "They’ve always achieved their objectives through influence and manipulation. Defiance from their own children represents uncharted territory."

After Sloane finished expressing her frustration about my parents’ obsession with grandchildren and traditional family roles, Sybilla shared her predicament regarding the arranged marriage our parents were orchestrating with another prominent family.

"Is the situation really that advanced?" I asked, disturbed by how far this political alliance had progressed.

"That insufferable Grant haunts our house constantly now," Sybilla lamented, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Mother’s announced to everyone in our social circle that we’re courting and practically engaged. Apparently, I’m the only person who didn’t receive notification about my own romantic status."

"Now for the main attraction," Gregory announced with grim satisfaction. "The saga of the most rebellious Martinez heir. I know Father's strategy."

"So do I. Sasha's already made contact," I admitted, watching their expressions shift from curiosity to shock.

"He's moving aggressively," Gregory observed. "He tracked her down in Boston and brought her back to New York. But what's his ultimate objective? After all this time since your divorce..."

I proceeded to update them on everything—Sasha's absurd claims, the fabricated family emergency, and her insistence that we remained legally married due to Father's judicial connections. By the time I finished, they were equally amused and horrified.

"And how did Lila react to this chaos?" Gregory asked pointedly. "Father's furious about you living with her, incidentally. He acquired that information through private investigation."

"Naturally he did," I muttered. "That explains how Sasha possessed such detailed knowledge about my life. But Lila doesn't know anything about this situation yet. She doesn't even know I was previously married."

"You must tell her," Sloane advised firmly. "If she discovers this from another source, she'll leave you. I certainly would."

"The complication is Lila's relationship with her mother is already toxic. Her mother raised her under oppressive control and constantly undermines her confidence. They're at war, and I don't want to add to her burdens." I ran a hand through my hair. "Plus, she's only eighteen. I'm terrified she'll flee when she learns the truth, regardless of how she discovers it."

"Wait—" Sybilla leaned forward. "Are you in love with her?"

"It transcends that," I confessed. "I love her completely. She's extraordinary—beautiful, intelligent, compassionate. Somehow that little one has become everything to me."

"Little one?" Gregory chuckled. "Since when do you prefer petite women?"

"First time for everything. She’s about five-three," I smiled fondly. "But her presence dominates any room."

"We must meet her!" Sloane declared excitedly. "She must be exceptional."

"Why don’t you all visit during the holidays? She’d adore meeting you," I suggested.

"I’m already planning my itinerary," Sybilla beamed, momentarily forgetting her own troubles.

Glancing at my watch, I sighed. "Time to face the music."

"Father’s arranged a family lunch today," Gregory confirmed. "They don’t know you’re coming, but I told them Sloane would join us."

"You’re attending after all?" I asked Sloane, surprised.

"After everything we’ve discussed, absolutely. Someone needs to watch your back," she replied with determination.

With allies beside me, I steeled myself for the confrontation ahead. Whatever my father had orchestrated, I would protect what mattered most—my future with Lila.

Chapter 460: Family Lines Drawn

Daniel’s POV

The tension was suffocating as our convoy pulled up to the Martinez family estate. The imposing iron gates, flanked by stone lions, opened to reveal the sprawling mansion where I’d grown up learning the delicate balance between legitimate business and underground power. My parents’ surprise was

evident when they saw all four of us emerging from the armored vehicles at their doorstep. My mother rushed forward with open arms, her designer dress rustling as she engulfed me in a tight embrace.

"Son, you're finally back!" she exclaimed, her voice thick with emotion and the weight of family expectations that had been building for months.

I gently disengaged from her grasp, maintaining the respectful distance I'd cultivated since choosing law enforcement over the family's shadow empire. "Don't get excited, Mom. This is just a conversation, not a reconciliation. I'm returning to Port Harbor tonight," I stated firmly, watching disappointment flicker across her carefully maintained facade. Her manicured hand rose to cup my cheek, the gesture so familiar yet now feeling like a chain from my past.

"When will you understand where your true loyalty belongs?" she asked, her eyes pleading with the same fervor she'd used when I first announced my intention to become a police inspector.

"That place isn't within these walls anymore, Mom," I replied, moving past her to acknowledge my father with a curt nod. He stood in the marble foyer like a king surveying his domain, every inch the calculated patriarch who'd spent decades weaving political connections and judicial influence.

He smiled with that smugness I remembered from childhood negotiations. "I believe you'll reconsider your position soon enough, son."

"Is that because of Sasha and your judicial arrangements, Dad?" I responded with a cynical smile, letting him know I was no longer the naive boy who once believed in his version of family honor. "I'm curious how she managed to nullify our divorce decree through your pet judges."

"From my understanding," my father began with the practiced ease of a man who'd orchestrated countless legal manipulations, "you withdrew the divorce proceedings because of her pregnancy claims. You signed all the necessary paperwork, or so the records indicate. Unfortunately, that irresponsible woman disappeared and subsequently lost my potential grandchild." He delivered this fabrication with such conviction that anyone unfamiliar with the Martinez family's web of corrupted officials might have believed him.

"Is that your version, Dad? That's all your contacts in the courthouse told you?" I pressed, meeting his calculating gaze directly. The marble floors and crystal chandeliers of our family home suddenly felt like a gilded prison.

"That's what the legal documents reflect," he stated firmly, his hands clasped behind his back in a pose that had intimidated business rivals and political enemies for decades. If I hadn't grown up watching him orchestrate the downfall of competing families through judicial manipulation, I might have been convinced. My father was the ultimate puppet master, and bluffing was as natural to him as breathing.

"Interesting, because Sasha explicitly told me you orchestrated everything through your network of compromised judges. Is she lying, Dad? Because I'm absolutely certain I never signed those documents, and as a police inspector, forgery of legal documents is a federal offense that even family connections can't sweep away." My voice remained steady despite my rising anger, but my father didn't so much as flinch.

"If that's the case, proceed with your investigation. Sasha and whoever assisted her should face the full consequences of such actions." His composure was impeccable, the result of years managing both legitimate business interests and shadow operations. Whatever involvement he had in the judicial corruption, he'd clearly insulated himself with multiple layers of plausible deniability. "Now, to the matter at hand. The four of you arriving together—is this a rebellion against family authority, or a realization that we've been protecting your interests all along?"

"Neither," Gregory interjected, using the diplomatic tone he'd perfected during his years managing the family's legitimate pharmaceutical enterprises. "We're simply here to enjoy a peaceful Sunday lunch with our parents, away from the complications of business and politics."

"As you wish, children. Let's proceed to the dining room," my mother directed, leading us away from the marble foyer toward the formal dining room where so many family decisions had been made over elaborate meals.

Initially, lunch progressed smoothly with my father discussing legitimate business matters with Gregory—pharmaceutical patents, hospital acquisitions, and the intricate web of healthcare investments that served as the perfect cover for more questionable activities. The façade of normalcy was shattered, however, when Grant made his unwelcome appearance, striding into our family sanctum without invitation.

"Good afternoon, everyone," he announced with unmistakable arrogance. "I apologize for the intrusion, but I couldn't resist taking my future bride for an afternoon drive through the estate."

He approached my sister with predatory confidence, attempting to kiss her cheek, but she turned toward me with desperate eyes silently pleading for intervention. His family controlled waste management and construction throughout the tri-state area, using government contracts as their primary money laundering operation.

"Well, look who's returned from playing cop. The misguided Daniel Martinez. Ready to face family responsibilities, future brother-in-law?" his condescending tone made my blood boil, especially knowing his family's reputation for violence against women who dared resist their advances.

"Who the hell do you think you are walking into my family's house uninvited?" I snarled, rising from my seat with the controlled aggression that had served me well in both police interrogations and family negotiations. "Let me clarify something—I will never be your brother-in-law, thankfully! I won't allow my sister to be sold into a marriage she doesn't want, especially to someone from a family known for treating women like property." I positioned myself protectively in front of Sybilla, my hand instinctively moving toward where I usually carried my service weapon.

"Mind your tone, Inspector Martinez. You have no authority in family matters. Your sister will marry me regardless of her personal feelings. Want to know why? Because our families have agreed to merge territories, and my father-in-law recognizes the strategic value of this alliance." His face contorted into that cruel smile I'd seen criminal enforcers use before delivering threats. "Besides, I've grown rather fond of the idea of taming a Martinez daughter."

"We'll see about that. Touch her inappropriately, or if my father continues pushing this arranged marriage, there will be severe consequences. Don't mistake my badge for weakness," I said, my voice dropping to the threatening growl that had intimidated countless suspects during interrogations.

"Are you threatening a respected businessman, Inspector? Careful, or I might report you to Internal Affairs for harassment. My family has connections there too," he mocked, his words confirming what I'd always suspected about his family's influence within the police department.

"Enough!" My father's hand slammed against the mahogany table as he rose, his authority filling the room like a physical presence. "Daniel, your mother and I will handle all matters concerning your sister's future. Grant, these are not appropriate manners for a guest in my home. We're having a private family gathering."

"But sir, I merely wanted to escort my bride-to-be around the estate and discuss our engagement timeline. My family is eager to formalize this union," Grant persisted, his excessive eagerness raising every investigative instinct I'd developed during my years in law enforcement.

"Your desperation to marry my sister is curious, Grant," I observed with the analytical detachment I used when questioning suspects. "Tell me, have you grown tired of your reputation for gambling debts, violent encounters, and the prostitution rings your family operates through those massage parlors?"

"My personal activities are none of your concern, Martinez! I conduct my affairs as I see fit," he retorted defensively, his reaction confirming I'd struck a nerve. His family's criminal enterprises were notoriously sloppy, generating constant legal exposure.

"Mother," I pivoted, knowing she possessed the traditional values that even crime families paid lip service to, "surely you want a suitable husband for your daughter. What qualities should such a man possess?" My question clearly made everyone at the table uncomfortable, the tension thickening like smoke.

"This discussion is inappropriate, Daniel!" my father attempted to interrupt, recognizing where I was leading the conversation.

"Indulge me, Dad. You claim to know what's best for your children. Explain how Grant qualifies as an ideal husband for Sybilla. Don't bother denying his reputation—everyone in the five families knows about his violent, self-destructive lifestyle. Or has he miraculously reformed since his recent assault charges?" I pressed, determined to protect my sister from becoming another casualty of inter-family politics.

"Nothing has changed," Gregory contributed with quiet authority. "He's still boastful about his conquests, constantly hosting parties with questionable associates, engaging with prostitutes from his family's operations, drinking excessively, gambling away family profits, and other destructive behaviors. He's unemployed except for occasional enforcer work, and his father recently paid substantial hush money to settle multiple assault allegations from women Grant encountered during his binges."

"And these weren't isolated incidents. Is this your definition of a honorable husband, Mom?" I demanded, noticing Sybilla shrinking beside me as tears threatened to spill. I fixed my gaze on my mother, who looked helplessly toward my father for guidance.

Finally, unable to maintain silence under the weight of family tradition and maternal instinct, my mother confirmed exactly what I suspected—this marriage served my father's territorial ambitions rather than my sister's welfare.

"A honorable husband should be faithful, hardworking, respectful, and free from the vices that destroy families—gambling, excessive drinking, and violence against women," she admitted reluctantly, her words carrying the weight of old-world values. "But his family assured us Grant would abandon his reckless lifestyle after marriage."

I studied Grant's smug expression with the disgust I reserved for the worst criminals I'd arrested.

"That's highly unlikely given his psychological profile. What exactly are they offering you, Grant, to supposedly abandon your destructive habits and become a responsible husband?"

"That's confidential family business, Martinez," he replied through gritted teeth.

"Exactly as I suspected—financial incentives and territorial agreements behind these empty promises of reform," I declared, my investigative training allowing me to read the situation clearly. "My sister isn't going anywhere with you today."

"Don't interfere in family politics, Daniel," my father commanded, his voice carrying the authority that had commanded respect throughout the underground hierarchy for decades. "She's spending time with her approved suitor, which doesn't concern your law enforcement career."

"You won't sacrifice her happiness for territorial expansion," I countered firmly, watching my father calculate the political ramifications of opposing me publicly.

After a tense moment that seemed to stretch forever, he made a strategic retreat rather than risk further exposure of family business in front of Grant. "Grant, today isn't convenient for courtship activities. As I mentioned, we're having private family time. Perhaps another occasion you can escort Sybilla through proper channels. For now, return to your father and inform him we'll schedule future meetings appropriately," he dismissed Grant with a wave that brooked no argument, much to the younger man's obvious displeasure.

"Yes, sir," Grant reluctantly complied, but attempted once more to force physical contact with my sister before I stepped between them, my imposing frame blocking his advance completely.

The message was clear: family politics or not, some lines would never be crossed while I drew breath.