**Mafia Mask 461**

Chapter 461: Lines in the Sand

Daniel's POV

The situation had spiraled beyond my tolerance. My sister was trapped in this madness orchestrated by the family patriarchs, and I needed to intervene somehow. Rage coursed through my veins as I raised my voice, desperate to shatter their delusion about this arranged alliance.

"Are you both blind to what's happening here?" I challenged the moment that insufferable Grant departed from our family's private dining room. "He's going to destroy Sybilla. Do you honestly believe he'll abandon his reputation with the escort rings? He treats women like commodities in his trafficking operations. Do you have any idea how many lives he's ruined? How many families have been torn apart because of his enterprises? Is that what you want for your daughter?"

"Control yourself, Daniel. This isn't some downtown precinct where you can behave like a street cop," my father matched my volume, his voice echoing through the oak-paneled walls of our estate. "I've made it perfectly clear that your sister's marriage arrangements serve the family's territorial interests. Your own obligations, however, remain unfulfilled. It's time you returned to the organization and resumed your responsibilities as Sasha's husband."

"That will never happen," I fired back. "I don't know what judicial connections were exploited to invalidate my divorce, but I assure you I'll secure another one through legitimate channels."

"For what purpose, Daniel?" My mother interjected with calculated calmness, her diamond rings catching the chandelier light as she gestured. "To continue this liaison with that Sullivan girl? Have you forgotten the sacred bonds of our matrimonial contract?"

"THIS ISN'T SOME CASUAL AFFAIR!" My voice reverberated through the mansion, but mother remained unfazed by my outburst.

"DO NOT RAISE YOUR VOICE AT ME." She stepped closer, her steely gaze boring into mine with the authority of a crime family matriarch. "What happened to you? You and Sasha represented a powerful merger of our territories. Yes, she departed, and it devastated our alliance network. Now she's returned, seeking reconciliation and a renewal of our partnership. I expected you'd embrace this strategic

opportunity." She spoke with such conviction, as though she understood my obligations better than I comprehended them myself.

"Mother, Sasha was nothing but a beautiful deception wrapped in designer gowns. We divorced, and she walked away with a substantial settlement from our accounts. If she's suddenly reappeared in my life, it's because she wants access to our money laundering operations, and it certainly isn't for love." I wasn't falling for her manipulations again.

"Daniel, people evolve within our circles. She's matured and recognized her tactical errors. She swore to me that her commitment to this family is genuine. She wants to establish a household with you, give me heirs to continue our bloodline." My mother's obsession with legacy was becoming pathological.

"Mother, please. Sasha doesn't love me. She's a calculating opportunist, always has been. Surely you're not that naive about her motivations," I protested.

"Does it matter, Daniel?" My father interrupted, adjusting his silk tie. "Even if her motivations aren't purely romantic, you'd still have a beautiful, well-connected wife from an established crime family whom you once valued. It's hardly a burden. You could build a powerful dynasty together." My father's definition of burden invariably aligned with his territorial ambitions.

"Let me be absolutely clear. Despite your inflexibility and authoritarian methods, I love you both. However, I will never reconcile with Sasha, just as I will never return to the family operations. Cut me from the inheritance if you must, but I refuse to sacrifice my happiness to satisfy your political machinations." My conviction was unshakable.

"You don't comprehend the implications of what you're saying," my mother lamented, but I continued undeterred.

"Why can't you simply appreciate what you have? Gregory devotes himself to our legitimate enterprises and married an exceptional woman who complements our public image perfectly. Sybilla possesses the intelligence and connections to support Gregory in expanding our influence. Meanwhile, I've forged my own path through law enforcement and found contentment. Is it so difficult to accept that fulfillment manifests differently for each of us?" My frustration poured out like a dam bursting.

"Son, I'm your father and the head of this organization. I want what strengthens our position. Your marital status concerns me less than your return to overseeing our security operations." My father's tone suggested he was requesting something reasonable rather than demanding complete submission.

"Father, you don't need me managing those affairs," I replied, weary of this constant power struggle.

"But I want you! I want both my sons working together to preserve our empire. That was always my vision for the Martinez legacy." There it was—the revelation that this was merely about maintaining the family dynasty's stranglehold on the territory.

"Gregory is more than capable of handling operations without me. Besides, I can provide intelligence and protection from my current position. He knows I'm available whenever our interests are threatened." Exhausted by the argument, I attempted compromise. "Let's establish terms. I'll attend family gatherings as requested and make myself available when needed, but I remain with the police force. And I certainly won't reunite with Sasha. Most importantly, I won't abandon Lila because I love her, and I need you to respect that decision." I offered this middle ground, hoping it might diffuse the mounting tensions.

"Dad, his proposal has strategic merit," Gregory interjected from the doorway. "He maintains our connections within law enforcement."

My father contemplated my offer, his weathered hands clasped behind his back. I knew it fell short of his expectations, but perhaps it would pacify him temporarily.

"Very well, Daniel. We'll proceed on your terms for now. But that Sullivan girl—she's unsuitable for someone of your standing in our organization," my father declared.

"The 'girl,' as you dismissively call her, isn't negotiable. If you interfere in our relationship or harm her in any way, I'll sever all family ties permanently and expose everything I know about our operations." I stood my ground.

"Please, Daniel, she's hardly the caliber of woman appropriate for someone of your position. She's inexperienced, unremarkable, and far too young for our world. If Sasha doesn't appeal to you anymore, fine, but choose someone worthy of our bloodline," my father persisted.

"I've already refused your demands! Consider carefully, Father. You know I don't make hollow threats, and my position gives me access to information that could be problematic." My father glared at me defiantly, but I remained steadfast.

"You'd betray your family for some nobody who appeared from nowhere? A girl with no proven loyalty, no established connections, no distinguished heritage?" My mother appeared genuinely shocked by my defiance.

"Only you and Father are fixated on such antiquated notions. They mean nothing to me. I love her, and I won't leave her. If you attempt to separate us, I will indeed choose her over this organization," I replied, exhausted by this circular confrontation. It felt like reasoning with stone walls—utterly futile.

I bid farewell to my parents, knowing this conversation had resolved nothing. It was time to return to my life after this draining encounter. My siblings and sister-in-law accompanied me to the private airstrip. I promised my sister I wouldn't allow our parents to force this absurd political marriage upon her, then departed, fully aware that the battle was far from over. At that moment, all I wanted was to return to my existence, to my beloved, to the life I had chosen and the woman who made it worthwhile.

Chapter 462: Desperate Hunger

Daniel's POV

The drive back to my penthouse felt endless. My mind churned with dark possibilities about my father's next move, convinced the old man was orchestrating something to destroy what Lila and I had built together. I needed a strategy to counter whatever scheme he might unleash. The visit to the Martinez family estate had accomplished nothing except confirming my worst fears. Now an irrational terror of losing my little one consumed me, making my hunger for her presence almost unbearable.

I arrived at our apartment wound tight as a spring. She was there waiting, dinner arranged perfectly on our dining table. Without speaking a word, I caught her by the waist, swept her off her feet, and kissed her with desperate urgency, my heart heavy with fears I couldn't voice. She responded with equal fire, wrapping her legs around my waist as she returned my kiss with passion that matched my own.

My thoughts scattered except for one consuming need to be buried inside her, to claim her as mine completely. I pressed her against the wall, driven by primal desire.

"Oh, little one," I whispered, eyes shut tight, forehead pressed against hers while her arms wound around my neck. My hand traced down her thigh. "I need to be deep inside you right now, need to feel myself claiming every inch of you."

"Yes!" she breathed without hesitation. "I want you too. I've been aching for you all day!" I opened my eyes to find hers blazing with the same hunger that devoured me. "I need you just as much."

Those words were all the permission I required. When my fingers found her intimate heat, she was already slick and ready, which only fueled my desire higher.

"God, little one, you're perfect," I groaned, holding her gaze. "Hold on tight to me."

Keeping her pinned against the wall, I struggled to free myself from my pants. I pushed her underwear aside and positioned myself at her entrance, sliding slowly into her welcoming warmth. This was exactly what I craved, to map every curve of her body with my hands, taste the sweetness of her skin, feel her wet heat surrounding me while her soft sounds of pleasure filled my ears.

Her tongue flicked against my earlobe, setting my blood on fire like a match to gasoline. I gave in to the urge to kiss her deeply, capturing her moans as our tongues danced together. Though I meant to take her slowly and tenderly, the heat of her body against mine made restraint impossible. I thrust into her completely in one smooth motion. I needed to possess her, to fill her as deeply as she could take. She cried out, awakening something wild within me, though I worried my eagerness might have been too intense.

"Sorry, little one," I murmured, kissing along her jaw while staying perfectly still inside her. "I couldn't hold back. You make me lose all control."

"Don't apologize," she whispered against my ear with a smile. "It felt incredible. It always does with you!"

Whatever self-control I might have summoned to take her gently evaporated in that moment. I stopped thinking, stopped holding back, just feeling and moving with the passion as she surrendered herself to me completely.

Her body trembled with pleasure under my roaming hands as they explored everywhere I could reach. I tugged down the neckline of her dress, exposing her beautiful breasts, so tempting I couldn’t resist lavishing them with attention.

My mouth worshipped every part of her I could access. With each thrust, her moans echoed through the room, each sound of ecstasy driving me to move with greater intensity. She was mine, and she made no attempt to hide it, ensuring I knew she belonged completely to me.

My movements became deeper, more urgent. The softness of her flesh and the delicious tightness surrounding me felt absolutely perfect. With my powerful, rhythmic thrusts, she gave herself over completely, tightening even more around me. She climaxed with a passionate cry, gripping me so intensely that I followed immediately with my own explosive release.

The sensation was overwhelming, like being pulled in a thousand directions at once. Completely dazed by her surrender, I struggled to catch my breath while breathing in the scent of her skin pressed against mine, silently praying she would never leave me. I couldn’t survive losing her. We stayed locked together against that wall for a while, our breathing gradually returning to normal.

Finally, I carried her to the bathroom, only setting her down long enough to remove our clothes before drawing her into the shower.

Looking at her, I felt torn between confessing everything about the legal complications and my family’s pressure and begging her not to leave, or continuing to shield her from these problems as long as possible to avoid losing her.

"Big guy, what’s troubling you?" Lila’s intuition never ceased to amaze me. She had clearly sensed my increased tension and anxiety.

"Just family business, little one. But I don’t want to think about that right now," I replied, kissing her softly. I decided to maintain my silence and handle this crisis without dragging her into it. "The only thing I want is to shower with you, then feed you dinner, and afterward take you to bed where I can listen to your beautiful sounds of pleasure for hours." I loved how her whispered moans transformed into passionate cries.

"Beautiful sounds?" she responded playfully, understanding my need for lightness. She always seemed to know exactly what I needed.

"Oh, little one, you're definitely not quiet. I love hearing your passionate responses. It drives me wild knowing I make you feel that good." That was the absolute truth.

I followed through on my plan precisely, sharing an excellent meal with my girl before taking her to our bed where I delighted in her vocal expressions of pleasure for hours. Eventually, she fell asleep with her head on my chest, exhausted and satisfied. My arms held her tightly against me, wanting her as close as humanly possible.

My peace was short-lived. In the dead of night, my secure phone buzzed on the nightstand, forcing me to carefully extract myself from my sleeping little one to answer. It was my contact at the precinct calling with an emergency. I had to leave immediately. Reluctantly, I left a note explaining I was called back to the station on urgent business, changed into my clothes, and departed as angry and volatile as a caged wolf.

Chapter 463: Lice and Lies

Daniel's POV

I stormed out of the penthouse, desperate to keep my little one undisturbed by the chaos that was Sasha's vindictive return. Raw fury coursed through my bloodstream like molten steel. The sheer audacity of this woman to show up at my sanctuary and confront me like some entitled mafia princess! My trigger finger twitched with the familiar urge to end her pathetic existence right then and there—to put a clean bullet between her calculating eyes and erase her from this world permanently.

Spotting her loitering on the sidewalk outside my building like some common street hustler, I seized her designer coat sleeve and yanked her around the corner into the shadows. Blind rage consumed every rational thought, and I seriously contemplated shoving her into the path of oncoming traffic. This manipulative snake was testing every boundary of my self-control, driving me toward the precipice of violence that defined my bloodline.

"What the hell are you doing here, Sasha?" I hissed through gritted teeth, summoning every ounce of discipline not to strangle her with my bare hands in broad daylight.

"What do you think, Inspector?" Her cynical smirk nearly shattered my restraint completely. I mentally counted backwards in Italian, fighting the primal Martinez instinct to wrap my fingers around her throat and squeeze until her scheming stopped forever.

"Sasha, we negotiated terms," I reminded her, my voice strained with barely contained violence that would make my father's enforcers proud.

"Yeah, we did strike a deal, but I've reconsidered the arrangement. I'm not giving you a full month to orchestrate some elaborate trap for me through your precious Thorne allies." The calculated calmness in her voice was infuriating, as if she had no comprehension of the brutal capabilities I'd inherited from generations of Martinez family executioners.

"Trap? The only trap was the one you and my father set for me with that corrupt judge, you manipulative—"

"Leave my family connections out of this discussion, Daniel. Besides, my mother doesn't know anything about our private arrangements anyway." Her surgically enhanced face remained composed, but those cold eyes blazed with the malicious intent I remembered from our disastrous marriage years ago.

"What exactly do you want from me?" I cut straight to the chase, knowing that reasoning with Sasha was as pointless as negotiating with rival family bosses. She was spoiled and stubborn to her entitled core, completely deaf to logic when she fixated on something she desired.

"You know perfectly well what I want, darling." Her provocative smile made my skin crawl with revulsion.

"It's absolutely not happening, never again!" I needed to make it crystal clear that any reconciliation was permanently off the negotiation table.

"Are you completely certain about that? Let's go upstairs and ask your precious little nymphet what she thinks about our restored marriage certificate." Sasha pivoted toward my building's entrance, and ice-cold panic shot through my chest like a sniper's bullet.

I desperately needed to understand her sudden reappearance after seemingly accepting our previous arrangement through family intermediaries. But there was no way in hell I'd allow her toxic presence anywhere near Lila's innocent world. Just then, a yellow taxi cruised past our position, sparking a tactical idea. I flagged it down aggressively, grabbed Sasha by her expensive coat, and practically threw her inside the backseat before slamming the door shut with authority.

"Owww! What's wrong with you, you absolute brute?" she yelped indignantly, but her complaints fell on completely deaf ears.

"Are you still staying at the Summit Hotel?" I demanded.

"Yes, I am, but—"

"I'll meet you in the main lobby shortly." I pulled out a crisp hundred-dollar bill and handed it directly to the driver with practiced efficiency. "Sir, please only stop and let this passenger out at the Summit Hotel downtown." The driver nodded with a courteous smile and merged smoothly into heavy traffic.

Returning to my building's entrance, I approached the uniformed doorman with a specific mission in mind.

"Hey there, my friend, quick question—what are the realistic chances you actually saw me here today?" I asked with deceptive casualness.

"Sir, I pride myself on having excellent vision for detail," the doorman replied with a professional smile, clearly assuming I was making some kind of joke.

Taking absolutely no chances with potential witnesses, I discreetly slipped another hundred-dollar bill into his coat pocket, silently thanking whatever higher power that I'd stopped at an ATM machine earlier for cash.

"And what about now?" I pressed, allowing my serious tone to register with his survival instincts.

"I suppose my eyesight isn't nearly as sharp as I originally thought," he replied with newfound diplomatic regret.

"Absolutely perfect!" I patted his shoulder twice in appreciation before heading directly to the underground garage.

I drove through downtown traffic like a man possessed, weaving between vehicles as if being pursued by rival family assassins. Within a short time, I arrived at the upscale hotel just as Sasha was gracefully exiting her taxi cab. I immediately grabbed her elbow and steered her toward a secluded corner of the marble lobby.

"Ouch, Daniel, you're considerably rougher than I remember from before," she whined pathetically. Sasha had always complained endlessly about my directness—she preferred subtle manipulation and political maneuvering, approaches that had never suited my temperament.

"I wonder why that might be?" I replied without any trace of humor. That's precisely when I noticed something dramatically different about her appearance. "What the hell happened to your precious hair?"

The murderous look she directed at me was venomous enough to kill a rival don. Her hatred was absolutely palpable in the luxury hotel atmosphere. Sasha had always been insufferably shallow and spoiled—character traits I once found somewhat endearing but now considered completely insufferable. One thing was absolutely certain: she would never willingly sacrifice her precious locks. She was obsessively vain about those expensive treatments.

"Now you finally notice the damage?" Her fury was unmistakably evident. "Lice, Daniel, disgusting lice from that filthy police transport vehicle! I was forced to cut everything off. My beautiful hair, Daniel, my signature hair, which I always maintained with such meticulous care. Look what it's been reduced to by your negligence."

Her once luxurious, shiny brown waves had completely vanished, replaced by a severely short cut almost as cropped as my own military-style trim. It was absolutely impossible not to laugh at the cosmic justice. Somehow, my sister's elaborate revenge had manifested into glorious reality. I collapsed into a plush armchair, laughing uncontrollably like a madman. The more I laughed, the more Sasha's irritation visibly grew.

"You better stop that laughing immediately, Daniel, or I'll march right back to that building and personally wake up your precious little nymphet!" Her desperate threat sobered me slightly.

"Sasha, explain this entire situation to me. Why did you actually cut your hair?" I struggled to maintain professional composure.

"I met your sister Sybilla at the shopping mall today and we went for coffee afterward," Sasha began her tale. "My scalp had been itching constantly since Friday evening. Sybilla noticed I kept scratching and asked why I seemed uncomfortable. I told her everything about the arrest, and she was absolutely horrified by your apparent lack of consideration."

"My lack of consideration?" That accusation seemed particularly odd, since Sybilla had never tolerated Sasha's presence and always seized golden opportunities to torment her mercilessly.

"Yes, Daniel, even your own sister completely supports my position!" Sasha declared with misguided triumph. "She told me about when she had to cut her hair extremely short and your mother kept insisting it was fashionable among young European girls, but it was just a convenient excuse so nobody would discover she had gotten lice."

This elaborate story struck me as highly peculiar and completely fabricated. Sybilla never had lice in her entire privileged life. When she was a teenager, she'd rebelled against family expectations by locking herself in her bedroom and cutting her waist-length black hair, desperately wanting a fashionable bob cut our traditionalist mother had strictly forbidden. The disastrous DIY attempt with school scissors was absolutely catastrophic, forcing my mother to summon an emergency hairdresser who could only salvage the damage by cutting everything extremely short—which, fortunately, suited my sister's bone structure perfectly.

"Sybilla explained that these parasitic lice lay microscopic eggs completely invisible to the naked eye, and the only effective solution is cutting your hair drastically short. In severe cases, when you wait too long to address the infestation, you might even need to shave everything completely off," Sasha continued, clearly horrified by the prospect. "She personally found a live louse crawling in my hair, then graciously accompanied me to an upscale salon in the mall where I had to sacrifice everything."

I couldn't laugh openly or betray my sister's brilliant deception—Sasha would literally murder Sybilla if she discovered the truth. My sister had gone too far this time, though the elaborate prank was absolutely hilarious and Sasha certainly deserved every bit of humiliation. The severely short cut looked absolutely terrible on her shallow features, emphasizing her naturally protruding chin like some cartoon

witch, making her nose seem disproportionately large and her eyes appear unnaturally small. Hair truly frames the face, and definitely not everyone can successfully pull off short styles.

"Look, Sasha, I'm genuinely sorry about the situation, I had absolutely no idea this would happen." I forced complete sincerity into my voice while internally suppressing overwhelming amusement.

"The absolute worst part is I can't even get professional extensions because it's far too short now. And I haven't managed to purchase a decent wig yet," she lamented pitifully, almost earning a moment of sympathy from me. "And it was specifically because of your complete lack of consideration that I decided to return early and end this ridiculous deadline arrangement."

I didn't believe that explanation for a single second. I desperately needed to call Sybilla immediately and discover exactly what had transpired in our hometown after my strategic departure.

Chapter 464: Quarantine Deception

Daniel's POV

I was almost certain my father had orchestrated Sasha's return solely to make my life miserable, but I needed concrete proof. What was he actually offering her in exchange for this charade? Everyone knew reconciliation was impossible—even if this marriage facade succeeded temporarily, divorce was inevitable. Yet they both persisted with remarkable determination. Why?

"Sasha, Adler himself confirmed I had no prior knowledge about the surveillance van's contamination," I stated calmly, trying to reason with her as she continued ranting about the lice incident.

"You could have used your personal vehicle, Daniel," she snapped, her eyes blazing with indignation.

I shrugged casually. "Not possible. Both tires were slashed during my last case. The garage was handling repairs at headquarters." The fabrication rolled off my tongue effortlessly.

"Whatever," Sasha dismissed with a wave. "I've reconsidered my position and I'm back now. Kick that little whore out because I'm reclaiming our penthouse immediately." She spoke with such presumption, as though the property had always been hers by right.

"That’s absolutely not happening," I declared firmly. "And remember what I warned you—if you go anywhere near her, your father’s shipping operation will receive some very unwelcome visits from federal agents."

Her complexion instantly paled. "Leave my father’s business out of this, Daniel."

"Then keep Lila out of it," I countered steadily. "Be straight with me, Sasha. What actually convinced you to change your mind? It certainly wasn’t about your hair—you would have preferred hiding away until it grew back."

"I simply reassessed the situation," she replied, raising her chin defiantly. "Tomorrow I’ll show up at our building with my belongings. If you don’t want me having a confrontation with your little plaything, remove her first."

"I already told you that’s not going to happen!" My patience was rapidly diminishing.

"What’s it going to be then, Daniel? Because I will create an absolute scene at your building’s entrance." Her threat sparked an idea. I retrieved my phone and snapped her photograph.

"Listen very carefully, Sasha. Starting right now, an unmarked police unit will be stationed at my building entrance around the clock with one specific mandate: preventing you from approaching my girlfriend or causing any disturbances. If you come within fifty feet of my building, they’ll arrest you immediately and transport you to headquarters in their surveillance van. Then you might experience another lice outbreak and lose whatever pathetic strands you have remaining." The threat was precisely calculated to keep her at bay, at least for now.

"Daniel!" Her eyes widened in shock. "You wouldn’t dare do that."

"I just did. Photo and instructions already transmitted to my unit. They follow my orders without question." I slipped the phone back into my jacket with deliberate nonchalance.

"And will you keep your little girlfriend locked away forever?" Sasha challenged. "She’ll have to venture outside eventually."

"Absolutely correct. Rest assured, an unmarked unit will always be in proximity, and you won't get within shouting distance of her. Only try it if you're prepared to risk those few pathetic wisps still clinging to your scalp." I maintained complete composure while watching horror spread across her features.

"Daniel, this entire situation needs resolution at some point," Sasha said, desperately searching for an escape route.

"And it will be resolved—entirely on my terms. Now tell me honestly why you abandoned our arrangement." I had regained complete control, which steadied my nerves considerably.

"You're completely insane!" she huffed indignantly. "I already explained—because of your actions, I was forced to cut my hair, and I refuse to let you escape without consequences."

"My fault? Give me a break, Sasha! You chose to cut it off. Why not wash it thoroughly, use proper treatment, or explore alternative solutions? Cutting wasn't your only option." Her theatrical tantrum was exhausting me.

"You understand nothing about lice infestations or hair treatment, Daniel. Sybilla assured me that over-the-counter medications don't eliminate microscopic lice eggs—only cutting would guarantee complete removal." She spoke with absolute certainty.

Internally, I was laughing hysterically. Sybilla had completely lost her mind with this elaborate prank. If Sasha ever discovered the truth, the resulting explosion would be catastrophic. Neither Sasha nor my siblings nor I had ever dealt with lice during childhood, leaving her completely ignorant about standard treatment procedures.

"Fine, Sasha. Let's move beyond the lice issue before you start scratching again. Just give me the truth—why did you really return?" I pressed harder.

"Can't you figure it out?" She laughed coldly. "Don't you have any theories whatsoever?"

"Actually, I’m absolutely certain my father orchestrated this entire scenario," I said, hoping to extract additional information.

"Your father..." She paused theatrically. "He visited me this afternoon and mentioned the family gathering. I was deeply hurt that my devoted husband was in town without visiting me, with no invitation to the family dinner..."

"Sasha, what exactly is my father offering in exchange for making my existence miserable?" I decided complete directness was my most effective approach.

"Your father understands I’m the ideal wife for you. He strongly disapproves of your sordid little affair with that girl," she responded cynically, then locked eyes with me. "Your father will provide me with anything I desire once you return to his sphere of influence."

"’Anything’ is remarkably vague. Be specific about what you want," I demanded.

"Whatever I desire," she replied slowly with a hollow, bitter laugh. I knew she wouldn’t reveal more details.

"You know I won’t return—not to him and definitely not to you. So why continue this charade?"

"Because I want to and because I can! By tomorrow evening, I’ll have your precious little girlfriend running for the mountains, and your beloved police force won’t prevent me. Care to make a wager?" She believed herself in complete control, but I wouldn’t allow that delusion to persist.

"Inserting yourself between my father and me is extremely dangerous territory. You might get seriously hurt in the crossfire. And I’ve already warned you—stay completely away from her. The lice situation will seem absolutely trivial compared to what awaits you in this war." As I spoke, I deliberately scratched my head, knowing exactly how suggestible Sasha had always been. As expected, she immediately mirrored my action.

"Why are you scratching like that?" she asked, suddenly alarmed.

"I was in that surveillance van too. Maybe I'm infected as well, and if so, my car and penthouse are probably contaminated too..." I scratched again, more visibly this time.

"Get out immediately, Daniel! Leave right now! Shave your head completely and don't return until there's absolutely zero chance of lice remaining! And get your residence and vehicle professionally disinfected!" Sasha was approaching hysteria.

"That could require considerable time, Sasha. From my understanding, I'll need medical consultation, prescription medication, and complete quarantine to prevent spreading the infestation further. My case might be significantly worse than yours, considering I spent much longer in the surveillance van." This fabrication bought me invaluable time.

"How long does quarantine typically last?" She had retreated behind the leather armchair, maximizing distance between us.

"Standard quarantine protocol means an extended period at minimum," I replied, scratching again for maximum effect.

"Just leave, Daniel. I'll contact you later. Get away from me immediately." She practically begged, rushing toward the elevator while frantically scratching her head.

"As you wish," I replied with deep satisfaction, speaking to myself since she had already vanished into the elevator, too consumed with phantom itching to hear my final words.

## Chapter 465: Family Schemes Unveiled

Daniel's POV

The precinct hummed with early morning activity as I settled into the worn leather chair behind my desk. After tracking down Sasha and dealing with her theatrics, returning home seemed pointless. Dawn was breaking over the city, and I would need to head out for patrol duty soon anyway. No sense in disturbing my sweet Lila's peaceful sleep. But someone else certainly deserved to have their morning disrupted. I pulled out my secure phone and dialed the number I had memorized since my teenage years in the family business.

"Daniel, good morning! Have you finally developed some common sense?" My father's voice carried that trademark authority that had commanded respect in boardrooms and back-alley negotiations for decades. He had always been an early riser, no doubt already stationed in his mahogany-paneled study with his morning intelligence reports spread across the antique desk.

"Father, my judgment was never impaired," I matched his controlled tone with practiced ease. "I am calling to clarify a misconception you seem to harbor. Sasha represents a dead end in every sense. I will never reconcile with her, and if she continues to harass Lila, I will formally renounce my position in the Martinez syndicate. Stop deploying her as your operative. The strategy is fundamentally flawed and only serves to antagonize me unnecessarily."

"Well, at least I have succeeded in provoking some reaction from you." His deep laughter resonated through the encrypted connection, revealing that he sought far more than simple irritation from his eldest son.

"I believed we had negotiated a temporary ceasefire yesterday?" The previous day's diplomatic efforts appeared to have been completely wasted.

"Oh, my son, I have indeed honored that armistice. I am accepting your proposals regarding legitimate business operations and providing support for your brother when circumstances warrant it. For the foreseeable future, naturally. But Sasha? I bear no responsibility for her independent activities." His voice maintained that unnervingly steady cadence that had intimidated adversaries across three decades of organized crime leadership.

"Certainly, Father. You possess exceptional intelligence, so demonstrate it accordingly. Weaponizing Sasha against me could produce catastrophic consequences for the entire family structure. Consider this an official warning - if she or any other individual continues to target Lila, I will permanently sever all connections to this organization. That concludes my message. Have a productive morning." I terminated the call, having delivered my ultimatum with crystal clarity.

Time crawled past as I observed the wall clock, watching patrol officers filter in and out of the squad room. With my current caseload running ahead of schedule, I decided to disturb another notoriously early riser - though perhaps not quite this early in the morning.

"If someone requires elimination, handle the disposal yourself. No need to call requesting authorization," Sybilla answered, her voice thick with interrupted sleep. Her legendary hatred for premature awakening only made me laugh harder at her characteristic greeting.

"Nobody requires termination, but thanks to your handiwork, someone might require hair restoration treatments," I chuckled, hearing her distinctive laughter bubble through the secure line.

"Dear God, big brother, you certainly know how to brighten my disposition!" She laughed with genuine amusement. "Speak quickly so I can return to my dreams. I was having the most wonderful fantasy about that devastatingly handsome detective from that police procedural we binged together. I desperately want to reconnect with him."

I could not suppress my laughter. Sybilla had always maintained obsessive fascinations with television programs, developing intense crushes - her preferred term for these platonic infatuations - on various fictional characters. Currently, she was completely fixated on some ruggedly handsome tactical officer in a specialized law enforcement series.

"Amusing coincidence, I know someone who bears an uncanny resemblance to that character," I said, thinking immediately of Xavier Black. "Actually, you know him quite well - it is Xavier from the Thorne organization." The silence that followed was deafening.

"Simply state your purpose, Daniel. It remains practically nighttime. What exactly do you require?" Her impatience suggested that her cheerful mood had evaporated once she fully comprehended the ungodly hour.

"Little sister, I find myself curious about what possessed you to arrange that coffee meeting with Sasha yesterday."

"How did you discover that encounter?" Genuine surprise colored her normally controlled voice.

"That deranged woman is currently residing in a holding cell downstairs. And for heaven’s sake, when she realizes you orchestrated that parasite rumor, she will demand your head on a silver platter." I remembered their explosive confrontation at the exclusive downtown social club during the final months of my marriage to Sasha.

"I never initiated any parasite rumors. But you understand how that unstable woman operates. She was compulsively scratching herself, and I merely observed aloud that I thought I detected something suspicious."

"But you never actually observed any parasites?"

"Absolutely not. If I had witnessed genuine infestation, I would never have remained in her vicinity. However, I still escorted her to the premium salon and strongly suggested the dramatic haircut solution."

"Sybilla, you are positively diabolical!" I could not contain my admiration for her cunning.

"I learned tactical manipulation from the acknowledged master. And that master is currently orchestrating elaborate schemes against you." I knew she referenced our father without question.

"What intelligence have you gathered?" My tone shifted to complete seriousness.

"Sasha confided that Father provides substantial support for her activities. So I performed my innocent act, claimed I was exhausted watching you demonstrate such ingratitude toward him, and similar manipulative nonsense. She then revealed that Father is providing significant financial assistance to her father - apparently his legitimate businesses face serious bankruptcy proceedings," Sybilla had always excelled at extracting sensitive information while maintaining perfect cover.

"That explains her persistent campaign," I concluded with growing understanding.

"Precisely. But I overheard Father briefing Mother yesterday evening, after your departure, that Sasha represents merely a temporary obstacle in your path. He fully understands that reconciliation remains impossible and does not actually desire that outcome, but he believes she will successfully accomplish the separation between you and Lila. Those were his exact words." Sybilla remained my most valuable intelligence asset within the family hierarchy.

"Eavesdropping again? Some childhood habits truly never fade." Since her earliest years, Sybilla had mastered the art of covert surveillance. When something captured her interest, she would investigate with relentless determination. I had discovered her countless times listening outside our parents' private conference room.

"Are you questioning my methodology? You require actionable intelligence, I am providing comprehensive reports!" She feigned indignation with practiced skill.

"Thank you, little sister. But exercise appropriate caution - you remember how creative Father becomes with his disciplinary measures." I recalled the numerous punishments she had endured from our father over the years - severe but occasionally bizarrely humorous, always designed to place her in maximally embarrassing situations.

"If you maintain silence, I maintain silence!" Her standard mutual protection agreement.

"Did you uncover what specific promises he made to Sasha?"

"Money, big brother, substantial money. The motivation always reduces to financial considerations. And apparently not modest amounts either. Mother complained to him that she believed he was compensating Sasha excessively merely to create complications for you. He apparently plans to partner with her father to prevent complete financial collapse and provide her with a permanent monthly stipend for comfortable living arrangements in Boston." Sybilla possessed surprisingly comprehensive knowledge.

"Mother speaks truthfully. That represents excessive payment for simple troublemaking duties. Something fundamental does not align with standard protocol," I concluded, knowing Father never distributed family resources frivolously.

"That represents the extent of my current intelligence. But I have developed a working theory. Perhaps he is creating an elaborate illusion for Sasha, making extravagant promises he never intends to honor."

"A sophisticated deception? Ultimately leaving her with nothing?" Possible strategy, though Sasha would create unprecedented chaos if she discovered such betrayal.

"That represents my working hypothesis. But now I absolutely must return to my tactical law enforcement fantasy. Excellent conversation, big brother." Sybilla disconnected abruptly, leaving me contemplating her revelations in the quiet precinct. Father clearly had additional schemes in development, and I needed to identify every single component of his master plan.

Chapter 466: Still Married Crisis

Daniel’s POV

Tonight marked the monthly gathering of the Thorne family women, which meant the men would convene for our traditional card game at Xavier’s secure compound. After escorting Lila to the heavily guarded Thorne estate where the ladies held their private council, I drove through the industrial district to Xavier’s fortified warehouse headquarters.

"Finally, the inspector honors us with his presence!" Xavier’s commanding voice echoed through the reinforced steel doors as I entered the dimly lit meeting room.

"Evening, brothers," I muttered, dropping heavily into the leather chair reserved for Martinez family representatives. Dominic, ever the considerate friend, slid an ice-cold bottle of imported beer across the polished mahogany table, which I accepted gratefully and drained half of immediately.

"What’s weighing on you, detective? You look like death warmed over," Jude observed, his sharp eyes studying me with the practiced assessment of a seasoned enforcer.

I exhaled deeply, feeling the weight of my burden. "Is it that obvious?"

"Brother, we recognize that expression intimately," Caleb interjected, adjusting his cufflinks with practiced ease. "Dominic and I have worn those exact features, and it invariably involves complications with the women in our lives."

This was precisely what I needed - to unburden myself to the only men who understood the delicate balance between family loyalty and personal desire before the pressure destroyed me completely.

"It’s not directly Lila’s fault, but the situation I’m facing could drive her away permanently," I confessed, taking another long pull from the bottle.

"That sounds ominous." Xavier’s eyes narrowed as he leaned forward, his fingers steepled. "Did you finally inform her about your Sasha problem?"

Xavier was the sole member of our circle privy to my complicated history with Sasha. He'd witnessed the entire debacle firsthand, even attended that disastrous wedding ceremony at the Martinez family chapel.

"No, and believe me, this situation is far more catastrophic than that," I replied grimly.

"This cannot possibly conclude favorably, Daniel," Xavier warned, stating what we all knew but refused to acknowledge.

Finn's brow furrowed in confusion. "Who exactly is Sasha?" He paused, accessing his mental files. "Wait, there was a Sasha who operated in our territory some time back. If memory serves, my contacts mentioned she was some wealthy socialite who married into significant power, extracted a considerable fortune, then relocated to Boston's financial district."

"Pleasure to make your acquaintance," I said with bitter humor. "I'm that significant power."

Their expressions shifted to collective shock. "Mother of God!" Jude exclaimed.

"Precisely," I nodded.

Dominic looked ready to commit violence on my behalf. "So you haven't informed Tiny Angel that you're divorced? Daniel, what a catastrophic mess! She's going to annihilate you when she discovers this."

"The complication is," I took a steadying breath, "I recently learned I'm not actually divorced at all."

Xavier burst into incredulous laughter. "That's impossible! You're divorced. The day those papers were finalized, you celebrated like you'd won the lottery. Gregory and I were both present at your freedom party."

"I believed I was divorced as well. But yesterday Sasha materialized like a vengeful spirit and thrust annulment documents in my face," I explained, feeling the familiar tension building behind my eyes.

"Mother of God!" they chorused in unified disbelief.

Finn, always requiring complete intelligence, pressed for comprehensive details. "Step back a moment. You were actually married?"

I recognized the necessity of providing the complete picture. "Sasha is the daughter of my father's longtime business associate. We were raised within the same circles, attended the same exclusive institutions, were considered inseparable. We began our romantic involvement as teenagers and married when I came of age. The union deteriorated rapidly. I believed I'd been legally free for years until she suddenly reappeared in my existence like a nightmare made manifest. Somehow, she managed to invalidate the divorce decree without my knowledge or consent through connections in the judicial system. Apparently, I remain legally bound to her, and I had no awareness of this development."

"I warned you!" Xavier slammed his fist against the table with enough force to rattle the glasses. "I consistently told you she was a viper! A spoiled princess with zero substance beyond her father's connections. But you defended her, claiming she was 'misunderstood.' Well, that 'misunderstood' woman is now systematically destroying your life!"

His anger was justified - Xavier had repeatedly cautioned me about Sasha's true nature, but I'd been too blinded by youthful foolishness to heed his warnings.

"Now she's returned claiming her rightful position as my wife and threatening to expose everything to Lila. Can you imagine the devastation when Lila discovers I'm still married?" I buried my face in my hands.

"Of course we can visualize it!" Finn exclaimed. "She'd exile you faster than you could blink, and all our women would make our lives absolute hell in solidarity. Especially Zoe - that woman could start a war."

"This represents complete disaster," Jude stated with characteristic bluntness.

"I'm attempting to contain the situation until I can reinstate the divorce proceedings. Then perhaps I can reveal the truth to Lila with greater delicacy," I explained my strategy, though it sounded inadequate even to my own ears.

Caleb shook his head gravely. "Brother, I'm uncertain about that approach. I believe you should inform her immediately, or this will detonate spectacularly in your face with maximum collateral damage."

Deep in my core, I knew his assessment was accurate, but the thought of telling Lila I remained married terrified me beyond reason. She would never grant me the opportunity to explain properly.

"Let's establish the complete tactical picture," Xavier declared, producing a bottle of premium tequila and arranging shot glasses for everyone. "We require something stronger for this particular conversation."

I spent the following time detailing the entire catastrophic situation - my household dynamics, Sasha's sudden reappearance, and the impossible position I found myself occupying. Cards were completely forgotten as my brothers listened with intense focus.

"Your father is pushing this succession obsession beyond reasonable limits," Xavier commented after I finished. "Even the golden son suffers now. But your sister endures the worst treatment - you and Gregory possess the strength to resist, but forcing Sybilla into marriage with that worthless Grant Barlow represents pure cruelty."

"When did you last encounter Sybilla?" I asked, finding his characterization curious given recent developments.

"Years ago? Probably at your wedding ceremony," he replied.

"She's evolved beyond the little girl you remember, but you're absolutely correct - forcing her into that union is unconscionable. Gregory and I will prevent it from occurring." I sighed heavily. "Right now, gentlemen, I require solutions because losing Lila isn't negotiable."

"Where do matters stand with investigating the divorce fraud?" Jude inquired.

"Encountering obstacles at every turn. The attorney who orchestrated this disappeared completely, and the judge who signed the annulment has conveniently retired. Forensics confirmed my signatures were forged, and my legal counsel filed to reinstate the divorce decree, but the presiding judge is conveniently on extended vacation," I explained, frustration evident in every word.

"Tell Lila everything, Daniel. She might surprise you with her resilience," Jude suggested.

I considered his counsel carefully. "And simultaneously handle her mother's inevitable interference?"

"That woman represents pure evil incarnate," Jude shuddered. "Tiny Lila doesn't deserve any of this chaos. She's genuinely good-hearted."

"Lila is extraordinary," I smiled despite the circumstances, thinking of her strength. "But I cannot reveal this until the divorce becomes official."

"This will conclude badly," Finn warned ominously. "Zoe treats Lila like blood family..."

"Afraid of Zoe's wrath, Finn?" Dominic teased, though his expression remained deadly serious. "Because I certainly maintain healthy respect for her capabilities."

"Gentlemen, please don't compound this situation beyond its current impossibility," I groaned.

By evening's end, they had all pledged to maintain my secret and provide whatever cover became necessary. I understood they risked their own relationships to assist me, and my gratitude ran deeper than words could express.

Chapter 467: Sweet Midnight Diversion

Lila's POV

Spending time with my girlfriends always lifted my spirits, but tonight my thoughts kept drifting to Daniel. The Martinez family business had been demanding more of his attention lately, with territory disputes and family politics consuming his every waking hour. He desperately needed relief from the constant pressure of managing both his legitimate police work and the underground obligations that came with his bloodline.

When he arrived at Ivy’s penthouse to collect me, I immediately recognized the familiar tension carved into his handsome features. Rather than asking about his troubles and receiving the standard "family business" deflection, I decided on a more effective approach. I would give him something far more enticing to occupy his mind.

"There’s my dangerous man," I purred, sliding across the leather seat to press my lips against his in greeting.

"Every second feels like an eternity when you’re not beside me," he responded, his voice carrying that gravelly undertone that never failed to send electricity coursing through my veins.

"Then take us home immediately. I hope you weren’t planning on getting any rest tonight," I warned with a knowing smile.

His dark eyes sparked with immediate interest. "Is my little one feeling particularly wicked this evening?"

"And I haven’t touched a drop of alcohol," I replied, delighting in the rich laughter that rumbled from his chest. My strategy to redirect his focus was already succeeding.

"Then I remain unconvinced of your supposed wickedness," he challenged, firing up the powerful engine of his black sedan.

I accepted his challenge with one of my own. "Are you doubting my capabilities?"

"Possibly," he said with mock skepticism. "Exactly how wicked are we discussing?"

I leaned closer, my breath warm against his ear as I whispered, "The kind that involves elevators." His expression instantly transformed to one of shocked fascination.

"You cannot be serious," his eyes widened with surprise.

Taking his large hand in mine, I guided it along my thigh, sliding it beneath my flowing dress until his fingers discovered nothing but soft skin. His expression shifted to pure masculine appreciation when he realized I had removed every barrier between his touch and my most sensitive areas.

"No undergarments? You tempting little vixen. Have you been like this throughout the entire evening?" He paused at a traffic signal, leaning over to brush his lips against my ear while his skilled fingers began their exploration, slowly caressing my already responsive flesh.

"I removed them just before you arrived. A sudden burst of inspiration struck me," I admitted, my heartbeat already accelerating under his masterful ministrations.

"Care to elaborate on this inspiration?" He resumed driving as the light changed, his fingers never ceasing their delicious torment that was rapidly pushing me toward the edge of reason.

"Perhaps. That depends entirely on what those talented hands of yours intend to accomplish," I challenged, noting how desire was darkening his intense gaze.

"Oh, my sweet little one, I'm going to have you crying out my name before we even reach our destination." He knew my nature intimately—silence was impossible when he brought me to the heights of ecstasy.

I was already surrendering completely, becoming increasingly wet with each calculated stroke as my body responded eagerly to his expert touch. He slipped one finger deep inside me and released a low growl of approval.

"Perfect. Open yourself wider for me. Let me feel exactly how hot and needy and ready you are," he commanded in that authoritative tone, adding a second finger and establishing a rhythm that had my entire body trembling with desperate want.

With practiced precision, he alternated between penetrating me deeply and circling that most sensitive bundle of nerves that made me see stars. The overwhelming pleasure was stealing my ability to form coherent thoughts, leaving me focused solely on the incredible sensations he was creating. His relentless fingers worked their magic throughout the entire drive home, pulling back whenever I approached release, leaving me desperate and aching for completion.

By the time we descended into the building's private underground garage, my most intimate areas were hypersensitive and thoroughly drenched with need. The garage remained dark and completely deserted at this late hour. Daniel exited the vehicle, walked purposefully around to my side, and opened my door. His kiss was absolutely consuming, hungry and possessive in a way that claimed complete ownership.

"You failed to make me scream your name," I teased breathlessly against his lips.

His smile was pure wicked seduction. "Who mentioned anything about being finished?"

I remained seated, still secured by my safety belt, when he captured my mouth in a kiss that perfectly balanced desperation with raw desire. It was commanding, possessive, making my body respond as though I existed solely for his pleasure.

His hands traveled slowly up my arms before cupping my breasts, reminding me vividly of our very first kiss when everything between us was new and terrifying. Now, there existed no fear—only the certain knowledge of what exquisite pleasure awaited.

His mouth moved to my ear, teeth gently grazing my sensitive earlobe, sending powerful shockwaves straight to my core. I wanted him with an intensity that rivaled a desert wanderer's desperate thirst for water. He traced a path of kisses down my neck, alternating between soft lips and gentle teeth, creating sensations that left me yearning for so much more.

A single finger slipped beneath the neckline of my dress, brushing against my already hardened nipple and drawing a soft moan from deep in my throat.

"Still not hearing my name," he murmured against my heated skin, smiling between each kiss.

He tugged my neckline downward, exposing my breasts to the cool air before covering one with his warm, skilled mouth. While he sucked and licked one nipple to painful hardness, he expertly rolled the other between his fingers. His mouth seemed designed by the gods solely for my pleasure. As he moved between both breasts, squeezing them possessively in his large hands, my moans grew increasingly louder and more frequent.

"I’m still waiting to hear my name," he reminded me, one hand continuing to worship my breast while the other slid deliberately up my thigh.

That wandering hand pushed my dress upward, gathering the fabric around my waist and leaving me completely exposed to his hungry gaze. When his finger traced lightly over my center, I gasped in pure anticipation.

He released my safety belt and pivoted me until I sat facing him, legs positioned outside the car. There in that confined space, with my dress bunched around my waist and my breasts spilling over the lowered neckline, Daniel gazed at me with absolute worship. The pure adoration blazing in his eyes made my heart overflow with love for this powerful, dangerous man who belonged entirely to me.

Chapter 468: Screaming His Name

Lila’s POV

Daniel slowly lifted his head, his dark eyes surveying every inch of my exposed skin with that dangerous smile I’d come to crave. I lay completely bare beneath him, offering myself entirely to this man who commanded both the streets and my heart.

"Time to make you scream my name, little one," he murmured, his voice carrying that edge of authority that made powerful men in boardrooms and back alleys alike submit to his will.

He gently parted my thighs, his calloused hands—hands that had pulled triggers and signed arrest warrants—now treating me with reverence. His warm breath ghosted over my most sensitive flesh, and even that small contact had me trembling with need.

"Please," I whispered breathlessly, my fingers clutching at the expensive silk sheets of our fortified penthouse. "I need you, Daniel."

"Tell me what you want, baby girl," he commanded softly, his inspector’s voice now thick with desire. "My mouth or all of me?"

"Everything," I answered without hesitation, knowing that in his world of calculated risks and deadly precision, I could trust him completely with my vulnerability.

"Whatever my beautiful girl wants," he promised. "But first, I'm going to taste every drop of sweetness when you come for me." His head lowered, and I felt his lips brush against me like a whispered oath.

My breath caught as I tried to muffle my sounds, acutely aware that even in our secure tower, enemies might be listening. But Daniel's tongue worked against me with the same methodical intensity he brought to interrogations, licking and sucking until rational thought abandoned me completely. My hips moved against his mouth instinctively, chasing the release that danced just beyond reach.

His hands traveled upward to cup my breasts, his thumbs circling my nipples as he continued his exquisite assault below. When his tongue thrust inside me with the rhythm of possession, I lost all semblance of control. Fire raced through my veins, and when his lips returned to that perfect spot, I shattered completely, his name torn from my throat like a confession.

"There's my name," he said, lifting his head with satisfaction gleaming in his eyes—the same look he wore when closing a case. "Though I don't think that was quite loud enough. Let me try again."

He stood and unbuckled his belt with the fluid efficiency of a man accustomed to action, pushing down his pants and underwear in one smooth motion. Even now, seeing him fully revealed never failed to steal my breath.

"Don't look at me like that, not right now, little one," he chuckled, noting my hungry stare and the disappointment that must have crossed my features.

He knew me too well—how I loved pleasuring him, watching his composure crack knowing I was the cause. Instead, he began teasing me, his body brushing against mine as he whispered dark promises.

"I'm going to take you now, hard and deep, the way we both need it. You're going to call my name, beg me for more, and I'm going to give you everything."

His words and the deliberate way he positioned himself nearly sent me over the edge again. I could only gasp his name as I gazed into those storm-gray eyes that had intimidated crime lords and corrupt officials alike.

"Daniel..." The word had barely left my lips before he entered me in one powerful thrust that claimed me completely. "God!" I cried out, no longer caring who might hear. As he moved inside me with delicious force, I found myself pleading, "More... please, more..."

"You feel incredible," he groaned, his control finally cracking. "So perfect for me, my dangerous little girl."

He leaned forward, capturing my breast with his mouth while his body continued its relentless rhythm. My skin felt hypersensitive, every touch sending shockwaves through me. He found that perfect angle that made me see stars, that spot only he had ever discovered.

I was balanced on the knife's edge of release, savoring our connection—this man who ruled the gray spaces between law and chaos, who protected me from enemies I'd never even know existed, who made every nerve in my body sing with desire for more of his touch.

"Let go, baby girl. I'm close—come with me now." His command was all I needed. In that moment, I contracted around him, pulling him deeper as waves of ecstasy crashed over me. I screamed his name like a declaration of war, a testament that I belonged entirely to him in this dangerous world we navigated together. "Yes... DANIEL! DANIEL!"

I felt him grow impossibly harder above me, his powerful body trembling as he reached his own climax, spilling himself deep inside me—marking me as his in the most primal way possible, reminding me that only he could take me to these heights, that only he knew my body better than I knew it myself.

He collapsed against my chest, his face damp with sweat and his heart racing like he'd just survived another shootout. I could feel his pulse thundering against my skin—proof that our encounter had shaken him as much as it had me.

"Damn, little one," he smiled with satisfaction. "That's exactly how you scream my name."

I laughed at his obvious pleasure, noting how the tension had finally left those sharp features. My dangerous detective was relaxed again, if only temporarily. He adjusted our clothing before gathering me into his arms—a gesture I appreciated since my legs felt utterly useless.

"I think I've completely worn you out. That elevator fantasy will have to wait for another day," he teased, observing my heavy-lidded state. "Lila?"

"Mmm?" I mumbled against his chest.

"You're becoming more addictive and insatiable every day." He pressed a kiss to the top of my head as I chuckled softly.

"That's entirely your fault, inspector."

"My fault for awakening a beautiful little monster. Though I think I've satisfied her for now."

"Don't be so sure," I countered drowsily. "Just give me a hot shower."

His rich laughter filled our secure sanctuary. But I wasn't joking—I really did need that shower, and soon after, I found myself straddling him on our bed, proving just how insatiable I could be when it came to this man who'd made me his queen in a world of beautiful dangers.

Chapter 469: Shadows and Secrets

Lila's POV

I woke to the sensation of Daniel's powerful frame pressed against mine, his muscular arms creating a protective barrier around me as he slept. Even in rest, his handsome features carried traces of the tension that had been weighing on him lately—the burden of navigating between his duties as a senior inspector and his obligations to the Martinez family's underground empire.

"What shadows are haunting you, my love?" I whispered, studying the sharp contours of his face, momentarily softened by sleep.

I carefully slipped from his embrace, unwilling to disturb the precious rest he desperately needed. After preparing my morning espresso and getting ready for my shift at Thorne Corporation, I heard his footsteps approaching the kitchen. He appeared in the doorway, dark hair attractively disheveled, those intense eyes still heavy with sleep that had been too brief.

"Why didn’t you wake me, little one?" he murmured in that commanding voice that never failed to send shivers through me, bending to press his lips against my neck.

"You’ve been pushing yourself beyond limits. The Martinez family business and your police work—you need rest," I replied, wrapping my arms around his neck and breathing in that familiar scent of expensive cologne mixed with something uniquely him.

"What I need is more time with my beautiful woman," he said, nuzzling the sensitive curve of my neck, his kisses making me seriously question my commitment to showing up at Thorne’s legal department today.

"Nothing would make me happier," I sighed, "but I have responsibilities at the firm and law classes tonight."

"When will you be mine again?" His tone carried that possessive edge that marked him as a man accustomed to having his demands met.

"Tonight belongs to you entirely, big guy." I smiled as he effortlessly lifted me onto the granite kitchen counter.

"Perhaps I need something to sustain me until then." His hand traced tantalizingly along my thigh beneath my pencil skirt.

"You know I want nothing more, but there’s no time." I reluctantly pulled away from his touch. "But we have the holiday next week—we’ll have all the time we desire then."

"I’ve always been particularly fond of holidays," he murmured, continuing his assault on my neck with those addictive kisses.

"Daniel, why are there unmarked surveillance vehicles stationed around our building?" I asked, remembering the black SUVs I’d noticed positioning themselves strategically for the past several days. I felt his body go rigid against mine.

"You noticed our security detail." He lifted his head to capture my lips before moving away to pour himself coffee from our expensive Italian machine.

"It’s rather difficult to miss."

"Just a necessary precaution. After Gemma’s former associate made threats against you following the territory dispute, I refuse to take any chances with your safety," he explained, his tone carefully controlled in that way that told me he was managing information.

"Is that what’s been consuming your thoughts?" I finally asked directly, earning a deep sigh that seemed to come from somewhere profound within him.

"Tiny one, I couldn’t survive if anything happened to you." His piercing gaze locked with mine as he caressed my cheek with his thumb, and I saw something flicker there—fear, perhaps, or guilt.

"Nothing will happen. That psychopath has probably moved on to easier targets by now," I assured him, though we both knew men like that didn’t simply forget perceived slights in this world.

"I doubt that. Regardless, I want you protected and close to me." He kissed my forehead with a tenderness that contrasted sharply with the steel beneath his words.

"If it provides you peace of mind, I understand completely. But I really must go now." He helped me down from the counter with practiced ease. After quickly touching up my lipstick and gathering my briefcase and law texts, I gave him a swift kiss. "See you tonight."

As my hand touched the reinforced door handle, his voice stopped me cold.

"Tiny one," he called. I turned to see him leaning against the kitchen doorframe, his eyes blazing with an intensity that made my breath catch. "Don’t forget that I love you."

I couldn’t help myself. I dropped everything to the polished floor and ran back into his arms. He caught me effortlessly, rewarding me with that devastating smile that never failed to turn my bones to liquid.

"I love you too, big guy. I can’t fathom existing without you." His kiss left me breathless and weak-kneed, tasting of coffee and promises.

When we finally broke apart, he set me down gently and collected my belongings from the floor with the same care he showed everything connected to me.

"I’d escort you to the garage, but I’m hardly dressed for public appearances," he grinned, gesturing to his silk boxers. It took every ounce of willpower not to drag him back to our bedroom, but professional responsibility won the internal battle. I hurried away before temptation could change my mind.

The days progressed with notable improvement in Daniel’s demeanor. He seemed less burdened and worked no overtime shifts at the precinct. We spent an inseparable weekend together—he assisted with my corporate law assignments, and Sunday brought dinner at an exclusive Italian restaurant owned by family associates. But as Monday dawned, chaos quickly followed.

First came my mother’s call, demanding my address and announcing her intention to visit during the holiday. I refused again, triggering her predictable fury. I’d grown accustomed to her perpetual anger, but providing her with my location would likely result in her making good on threats to drag me back to the Sullivan family compound by force.

Shortly after, my father called—concerned as always, but reminding me I’d overlooked something crucial.

"Dad, it’s wonderful to hear from you. How are things?" I asked warmly.

"I’m managing, sweetheart, though your mother is making life challenging. She’s determined to obtain your address."

"And I won’t provide it, Dad, exactly as you advised. I’m concerned she’ll follow through with her threats."

"Of course, honey. But what about your old man? Won’t you share your new location with me?"

"Oh, Dad. With everything happening, I completely forgot I hadn’t told you." Then I remembered he believed I was living with Gemma. The truth would have to emerge. "Dad, there’s something else I forgot to mention."

"What is it, Lila? Is everything acceptable?" Concern immediately colored his voice.

"I hope so." Gathering courage, I announced, "After returning from my trip, Daniel asked me to move into his penthouse, and I accepted."

"And you didn’t tell me because you forgot, or because you feared my reaction?" he asked seriously.

"I genuinely forgot, Dad. Are you upset?"

"That depends entirely. Are you happy?"

"Extraordinarily happy, Dad."

"Then I have no objections whatsoever. Give me your address—I’ll visit soon."

The conversation proved easier than anticipated. My father had always prioritized our happiness above family politics. I provided the address and ended the call, relieved to have finally revealed the truth.

"Lila, the boss called," Jude announced, emerging from his office.

"Which boss?" I asked, since neither Xavier nor Caleb was present at Thorne today.

"Caleb," Jude laughed. "He’s inviting us to lunch at his estate and giving us the afternoon off."

"Time off on Monday?" I laughed incredulously.

"Yes, he’s not coming into the office today, and with the holiday approaching, executive operations will be quiet," Jude explained.

"Who am I to refuse unexpected freedom?" I grabbed my purse and departed with Jude, both of us laughing.

"Take my car. I’ll bring you back for yours later. We can talk during the drive." Jude seemed unusually subdued, clearly needing to discuss something, so I readily agreed.

During the drive, he confided that tensions remained elevated between him and Nora, though they’d agreed to maintain appearances publicly. My heart ached for my friend—his devotion to his wife was evident, but their relationship was clearly struggling under pressures I couldn’t fully understand.

Upon arriving at Caleb’s private compound, we encountered an unexpected scene: Gemma and Zoe physically confronting one of Dominic’s former associates who’d apparently caused problems. Breaking up the altercation proved challenging until Daniel arrived and restored order with the quiet authority that commanded respect in both legitimate and underground circles.

After lunch, we organized an impromptu gaming tournament. I was dominating the competition, thoroughly enjoying the guys’ shocked disbelief at losing to me, when Daniel received a call that summoned him to the precinct despite his scheduled day off.

"Tiny one, I need to leave. Stay and enjoy yourself—I’ll return for you," Daniel told me before departing, but something in his expression troubled me.

I nodded, but something felt fundamentally wrong. Something was happening, and Daniel was deliberately keeping me in darkness. His absence stretched endlessly. When he finally returned, his earlier serenity had vanished completely, replaced by visible worry that he couldn’t quite mask. His continued silence frustrated me increasingly.

At home, I headed straight for our master bathroom, too upset to engage in conversation. I was washing my hair when I felt him step into the shower behind me.

"What's troubling you, little one?" he asked, taking the expensive body wash and beginning to soap my skin with those careful hands.

"Nothing," I answered curtly, continuing to rinse shampoo from my hair. I heard his resigned sigh echo off the marble walls.

The heaviness in my chest threatened to overwhelm me completely. I wanted to curl into a ball and cry until this suffocating tightness dissipated, but pride prevented me from letting him witness my tears. He gently washed my body, his touch memorizing every curve with tender attention that only intensified my hurt—despite our physical intimacy, he still wouldn't trust me with whatever demons plagued him.

After showering, I silently donned silk pajamas and slipped under our Egyptian cotton sheets, foregoing our usual intimate conversation and goodnight rituals. I lay with my back toward him, eyes closed but mind racing with possibilities I didn't want to consider.

The mattress dipped as he joined me, pulling me against his chest and holding me tightly against the warmth of his skin.

"Goodnight, little one. Don't forget that I love you," he whispered, pressing a gentle kiss to my damp hair.

Silent tears escaped despite my efforts to contain them. Something was terribly wrong—I could feel it in my bones—and his refusal to confide in me only deepened my growing fears. What dangerous secret was he protecting me from? And why wouldn't he trust me enough to share the burden?

## Chapter 470: Walls Close In

Daniel's POV

Sasha had resumed her relentless campaign of psychological warfare. The brief reprieve following her humiliating lice infestation was nothing more than the calm before a more vicious storm. Each passing day brought fresh waves of anxiety as I watched Lila's growing suspicion that something fundamental was fracturing between us.

But as any seasoned member of our world knows, when you think you've hit rock bottom, there's always another level of hell waiting below. I was at the precinct, having just wrapped up interrogation documents and booking procedures for a suspected arms dealer, when Chief Adler strode into my office accompanied by Dr. Knightley, the attorney wrestling with my labyrinthine marital nightmare.

"The very man I've been praying to encounter!" I declared upon spotting the lawyer, unable to mask the desperation that had become my constant companion. "Dr. Knightley, please tell me you've arrived bearing miraculous news."

"Inspector Martinez, I do bring developments, though they may transform your existence into something considerably more... volatile for the foreseeable future," he replied with the cautious tone of a man who'd spent decades navigating the treacherous waters where legitimate law intersected with family influence.

"More volatile than the current circus? That seems mathematically impossible. But please, enlighten me about this latest catastrophe."

"The presiding judge has mandated a formal hearing requiring both you and Sasha to appear before his bench. He insists on hearing directly from each party involved. I accompanied the court officer who served her the official papers today at that overpriced hotel she's been haunting. The woman's reaction was... theatrical, to put it diplomatically," Dr. Knightley informed me, his words hitting like a sledgehammer to my already battered psyche.

"Hold on. Shouldn't His Honor simply review our motion, grant her reasonable time for response, then render his decision based on documentation? What's driving this sudden desire for courtroom drama?" I demanded, already dreading the inevitable spectacle Sasha would orchestrate before a captive judicial audience.

"Typically, yes—family court judges prefer working exclusively with written submissions and legal briefs. However, they retain discretionary power to schedule hearings with both parties present. In your particular situation, given that the previous judge conveniently retired under questionable circumstances, this new appointee wants to hear directly from both parties involved," Dr. Knightley explained while I mentally calculated how many additional stress fractures this would create in my already crumbling facade.

"Outstanding. When does this judicial inquisition commence?" I asked, my irritation bleeding through whatever professional composure I'd been maintaining.

"In the coming months. We'll need extensive preparation, which translates to numerous strategy sessions between now and then. But I must caution you, Daniel—this woman is absolutely livid. She may attempt various forms of leverage against you before we reach that courtroom," the attorney warned.

"Your concern is noted and appreciated."

"There's additional intelligence. I consulted with Detective Adrienne before arriving here. They still haven't located the attorney who allegedly processed your annulment years ago. She's planning to bring Sasha in for formal questioning, though I recommended she execute this move rapidly, before our scheduled hearing. If your father orchestrated this legal manipulation, as I strongly suspect, once he becomes aware of an active investigation, he'll likely retreat and cease his interference."

"I'm questioning that tactical approach. Wouldn't tipping our hand now simply provide them adequate time to eliminate evidence and construct alibis?" I challenged, concerned about telegraphing our moves to adversaries who'd spent generations perfecting the art of legal evasion.

"Negative. Your father operates with surgical precision and calculated risks. If we move swiftly enough, he won't chance exposure, particularly when he discovers that both the investigating detective and presiding judge are completely incorruptible—rare commodities in our current system. Without his backing and protection, Sasha will likely capitulate and accept the divorce terms—she might even confess everything to Detective Adrienne. Furthermore, with an active investigation providing cover, the judge will feel significantly more confident about reinstating your original divorce decree," Dr. Knightley elaborated with the confidence of someone who'd spent decades watching family patriarchs choose strategic retreat over pyrrhic victories.

"So essentially, we're banking on Sasha having a complete psychological breakdown and self-destructing spectacularly," I sighed, rubbing my temples where a persistent headache had taken up permanent residence.

"More or less," the lawyer chuckled with dark amusement. "But soon enough, you'll finally be free of these chains."

This revelation meant I couldn't come clean to Lila as quickly as I'd desperately hoped—I'd need to maintain this exhausting deception for at least several more months. Dr. Knightley gathered his files and

hurried off to another appointment, leaving Adler seated across from me, studying my haggard features with barely concealed entertainment.

"What's causing that predatory grin, Chief?" I inquired, noting his scrutinizing examination of my obvious misery.

"Your academy instructor position officially begins soon," he announced with unmistakable satisfaction.

"Already?" I groaned like a man facing execution.

"Indeed. We're having lunch with the Deputy Commissioner in the coming days. He'll personally provide all operational instructions." There was no escape route—the Deputy Commissioner had pulled considerable strings to secure this assignment for me, and I was honor-bound to fulfill my obligations regardless of personal convenience.

"Absolutely fantastic, another commitment. I'm already drowning in complications, and now I must engage in professional networking too."

"Oh, you absolutely do. That networking represents precisely what's preventing your father from having you transferred out of law enforcement entirely," Adler laughed with genuine amusement at my mounting predicaments.

"This entire situation is becoming completely nightmarish," I muttered, knowing my mood would deteriorate exponentially once these teaching obligations commenced.

"There's one additional small matter..." Adler was clearly savoring my escalating suffering.

"Dear God, what fresh hell awaits?" I rolled my eyes with theatrical despair.

"That favor you owe me." I had desperately hoped he'd forgotten about our arrangement.

"You're actually calling in that debt?" I asked, finding the timing almost comedically cruel.

"Absolutely. Here's the assignment—I need someone to deliver a comprehensive lecture about public safety and police work from our Homicide and Personal Protection Division. The audience consists of law students at a legal conference in the coming weeks..."

"Why select me for this particular torture?" I despised public speaking with every fiber of my being.

"Because you possess exceptional qualifications, you owe me a significant favor, and I have absolutely no intention of sacrificing my Friday evening lecturing idealistic students. Besides, it's crucial for law enforcement to participate in these community outreach events and cultivate public support." Clearly, Adler detested lecturing even more than I did.

"Chief, these students represent the future of our legal system—you should personally inspire them with your vast experience and wisdom." I was desperately grasping for any excuse to escape this assignment.

"That's precisely why I'm not attending—that particular future doesn't inspire confidence. I've already submitted your credentials. Here's the comprehensive folder with all necessary information and background materials. Make your presentation worthwhile, plus additional time for student questions and discussion."

"What an absolute waste of valuable time! An entire evening of my existence!" I banged my forehead against my desk in theatrical frustration.

"Consider the positive aspect—little Lila will be there watching you perform." Adler was thoroughly enjoying my unending streak of misfortune.

I shot my superior a look that could have melted steel. I despised giving lectures. I despised mandatory socializing. And I particularly despised owing favors that came due at the worst possible moments. The coming months were shaping up to be absolutely unbearable in every conceivable way.