Mafia Mask 471

Chapter 471: Midnight Phone Call

Lila’s POV

I had barely arrived at Thorne Group’s legal offices and hadn’t even settled behind my desk when Jude materialized like a shadow, startling me half to death.

"Lila," he spoke in a voice so hollow it sent chills down my spine.

"Aaaaahhh!" I spun around to find him looking like he’d been through hell—dark circles shadowing his bloodshot eyes, his usually immaculate appearance completely disheveled. "Madonna mia, Jude! You scared the life out of me!"

"Sorry," he mumbled, his shoulders slumped in defeat. "Didn’t mean to."

Concern immediately replaced my fright. "Hey," I said gently, lifting his chin with my finger. "What’s going on with you?"

"Can we get some espresso?" he asked, his voice small and fragile like a child’s.

"Of course." I guided him toward the break room, prepared us both a strong cup from the Italian machine, and waited for him to speak. "Tell me what’s happening."

"Nora is leaving," he blurted out, the words seeming to cause him physical pain.

"What do you mean ’leaving’?" I asked, trying to make sense of his statement.

Jude’s voice trembled. "She says the families are putting too much pressure on us. That she can’t handle being caught between our families anymore. She’s going back to her parents’ estate in Sicily."

A tear escaped down his cheek, and my heart broke watching him try to discreetly wipe it away.

"Wait—what? When did this happen?" I was completely blindsided. Their alliance had been one of the strongest in our circle.

"She doesn't want anyone in the families to know the real reason," he continued, ignoring my question. "She hasn't made her final decision yet and doesn't want the capos calling her father, trying to convince her to honor the arrangement. She'll return when—if—she decides what she wants."

By now, tears were flowing freely down his face.

"But people will notice she's gone," I reasoned. "The families talk."

"She's telling everyone her father is sick and needs care. It's not entirely a lie—her father is quite ill," he explained, staring down at his untouched espresso.

"And you're okay with this lie?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "You're actually agreeing to this 'time apart' nonsense?"

"What choice do I have, Lila? She's my wife. I love her. If she's questioning whether she can live this life, what can I possibly do except give her what she's asking for?" His helplessness was palpable.

"Is there any timeframe for this separation?" I asked, still struggling to process this absurdity.

"No. She didn't specify, so I guess it's... open-ended." His voice cracked on the last word.

"So you're just supposed to wait here, playing the role of devoted husband and pretending everything's normal while she's in Sicily deciding your fate?" The unfairness of it all made my blood boil.

"Exactly. She's submitting her resignation to Dominic today and catching a private flight tonight. When I get home, she'll be gone." Jude looked so utterly broken that I had no idea how to comfort him.

"But what triggered this, Jude? This couldn’t have come out of nowhere."

"All she said was that she doesn’t know if she can love someone in a world where every decision is made by the families. That she’s suffocating under the weight of tradition and needs distance to think clearly about whether she wants this life. She promised to let me know once she reaches a decision." He sighed deeply as fresh tears tracked down his face.

"Jude, you should at least tell the guys the truth. You need your brothers right now." I truly believed someone with more experience in family politics might offer better advice than I could.

"Please, Lila. You’re my confessional, remember?" His pleading eyes made it impossible to refuse. "If word gets back to our don that his arrangement is failing..."

"Of course, Jude. I won’t tell anyone. I’ll help you through this—I’ll always be here for you."

I wrapped my arms around him, and he sobbed against my shoulder for a long while. When we finally returned to work, he had composed himself behind his professional mask. I wished I could do more than simply listen, but for now, that seemed to be all he needed.

Throughout the day, I kept checking on Jude discreetly. Thankfully, the men had planned their weekly card game at the penthouse, which might provide some distraction. I decided to call Daniel to brief him on the situation—the public version, of course—and ask him to look out for Jude.

"Inspector Martinez," he answered formally.

"Hey, Big Guy, it’s me. Got a minute?" I asked.

"Oh! Sure, Tiny One." His tone was oddly distant.

"Everything okay?" I questioned, weary of how often I’d been asking that lately.

"Yes, fine. What's so urgent that you're calling me during work hours?" Daniel sounded distracted, almost dismissive, and my mind instantly began creating worst-case scenarios.

"Big Guy, Nora has left for Sicily indefinitely to care for her sick father," I explained, maintaining Jude's cover story as promised.

"That's terrible! How serious is it? Is she holding up? How's Jude taking it?"

"Whoa, too many questions at once." I interrupted before I got flustered. "I don't know the medical details. She's managing. But Jude's devastated."

"I can imagine. How can I help?"

"Well, you guys have cards tonight..."

"Cards?" Daniel sounded confused. "Right, poker with the guys. Completely slipped my mind."

"Are you okay? You seem distracted." I tried to keep my tone light despite my growing concern.

"Just case work."

"I'll be quick then. Could you and the guys avoid bombarding Jude with questions? Try to keep things normal, maybe cheer him up a bit?" When he didn't respond, I pressed, "Daniel? Can you do that?"

"Yeah, yeah, of course. Sorry, I've got urgent paperwork here. But don't worry, we'll look after Jude."

"Thanks, Big Guy. I won't keep you longer."

I hung up with a sinking feeling in my stomach. Daniel had never spoken to me so dismissively before—he didn't even say goodbye or offer his usual endearment. Was he growing tired of me? Would I soon be

in the same position as Jude, watching someone I loved walk away from our world? My mind raced with theories, each one worse than the last.

Despite my emotional exhaustion, I dragged myself to the girls' gathering that evening. Gemma was bubbling with excitement about her engagement to her boyfriend and their upcoming society wedding, and I couldn't let my personal worries ruin her moment. So I plastered on a smile and showed up, though I left early citing a headache.

Since I had my car, I didn't bother calling Daniel. At the penthouse, I showered and crawled into bed, where my thoughts turned into a tornado—all negative, all pointing toward an inevitable heartbreak.

Lately, Daniel had been behaving strangely—working excessive hours, taking mysterious calls, and now this emotional distance. The signs seemed clear.

I was deep in my apocalyptic thoughts when I heard Daniel enter the bedroom. He went straight to the bathroom, and I listened to the shower running for a while. When he finally slid into bed beside me, all he did was briefly run his fingers through my hair before settling on his side. No kiss, no embrace—nothing. He simply lay down and fell asleep, while I remained awake, paralyzed by fear.

The end felt inevitable. Perhaps he hadn't ended things yet only because I'd moved in with him and he thought I had nowhere else to go. But I could find another place. Maybe Gemma's brother would let me stay at the family compound until I found my own apartment.

As I lay there ruminating in the darkness, Daniel's phone vibrated on the nightstand. He got up, left the room to answer it, and when he returned, he didn't come back to bed. Soon after, I heard the penthouse door open and close.

He had left—in the middle of the night—without a word.

Chapter 472: All Pretenses Abandoned

Daniel's POV

After the federal judge scheduled that crucial divorce hearing, my existence as a Martinez family member became a living nightmare. Sasha spiraled deeper into her manipulative games, growing more

unhinged with each passing day. Meanwhile, my father ramped up his political pressure campaign, demanding I attend regular family council meetings at the Greenleaf estate—an utterly unreasonable demand given the delicate balance I was trying to maintain between my police duties and family obligations.

Even our regular poker nights at Thorne's private club, which used to provide sanctuary from the chaos, had devolved into collective therapy sessions. I found myself venting about the impossible situation with my father's judicial interference and Sasha's escalating threats. Jude couldn't stop brooding about Nora traveling overseas to handle her father's business crisis. Dominic was drowning in his own family's territorial demands. Only Caleb and Finn seemed to have achieved some semblance of stability in their operations. Xavier, oddly enough, remained uncharacteristically quiet throughout the evening, making me suspect he was dealing with his own family complications.

When Zoe mentioned that Lila had returned to the apartment early with a severe headache, I decided to abandon the game. Arriving home to our fortified penthouse, I found her already asleep in our bed. Not wanting to disturb her much-needed rest, I slipped carefully between the sheets without my usual protective embrace. Sleep remained elusive, and then my secure phone began its insistent buzzing. I didn't need to check the encrypted caller ID to know it was Sasha.

I retreated to the reinforced living room before answering. As predicted, she was in full hysterical mode, hurling threats and ultimatums through the scrambled connection. Recognizing she wouldn't cease until I confronted her directly, I agreed to meet immediately. She directed me to one of those exclusive establishments that wealthy power brokers frequented to conduct their shadowy business dealings.

I spotted her instantly, surrounded by her usual entourage at a table near the main floor. Preferring to maintain tactical advantage, I selected a more secluded booth and sent her an encrypted message to approach alone if she wanted meaningful conversation.

"Darling husband!" Sasha announced loudly as she approached, flanked by two equally insufferable associates from prominent families. Her slurred pronunciation and unsteady movement confirmed she'd been indulging heavily in premium liquor. I knew from bitter experience that alcohol stripped away her carefully constructed facade, revealing the calculating predator beneath.

"I see you acquired the designer wig," I remarked coldly, intending to humiliate her. "Did you inform your companions about your recent scalp condition?"

Her eyes flashed with dangerous malice. "Did you enlighten your little protégé about your legal wife?" she countered viciously.

"What do you want, Sasha? Why the hell are you summoning me during operational hours?" My patience was evaporating rapidly.

"That's hardly appropriate language for your lawful spouse. Come along, ladies, make yourselves comfortable," she gestured to her companions, which only intensified my irritation.

"They are absolutely not sitting anywhere near me!" I snapped. "Your two little accomplices can turn around and disappear from my sight, or I'll make them flee in a decidedly unfriendly manner. And I'll still remove that artificial hair from your skull right here, before this entire establishment." The threat carried enough menace to send her associates retreating with indignant expressions.

"You're becoming increasingly intolerable, Daniel!" Sasha pouted dramatically. "I demand to understand what this federal hearing represents that you somehow managed to arrange."

"And you're becoming increasingly pathetic! If I'm so intolerable, why are you desperately clinging to this farce of a marriage?" I demanded, my restraint completely shattered.

"Oh, you know what, I'm exhausted from maintaining pleasantries," she said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "You want to know why I contact you during your intimate moments? Because I know you're with her, and I'm hoping you'll have explosive arguments when another woman calls. You want to know why I refuse to dissolve this union? Because your father controls vast financial networks and promised me a lifestyle befitting royalty if I maintain this legal bond. You even possess attractive features, impressive physique, and a prestigious bloodline. But the truth, Daniel, is that I never desired to marry you—I simply had to secure what was most advantageous for my position. You're insufferable, always have been. A rigid enforcer who lacks appreciation for sophisticated pleasures. And a complete brute! There, I've spoken honestly!"

"Excellent! Since the pretenses are abandoned, let's address what truly matters," I replied with icy precision. "I cannot tolerate you either. I married you because I believed I felt affection, even convinced myself it was love, but I realized that was never genuine. I will not reconcile with you, and I will mobilize every resource at my disposal to eliminate you from my existence. And let me clarify that your psychological warfare isn't succeeding—Lila and I don't engage in conflicts because of your calls." The reality was that Lila consistently assumed the police department was contacting me for urgent cases, but Sasha didn't need that intelligence.

"But you haven’t revealed your marital status to her yet. Or have you? I seriously doubt it. I could handle that disclosure for you," she threatened with a triumphant smirk.

"I already warned you never to approach her." I slammed my fist on the reinforced table, my voice rising to dangerous levels.

"Well, Daniel, you may despise me, but you’ll remain legally bound to me. You can wager your father is already deploying his judicial connections to sabotage your divorce proceedings. So, darling, it would be wise if we negotiated terms soon." Her confidence was deeply troubling—she possessed information I lacked.

"Negotiation? You’re genuinely proposing to make a deal?" I asked, already anticipating the answer from her smug expression.

"No, what your father guaranteed me exceeds anything you could possibly offer. You couldn’t even approach his level of influence." Her victorious smile made my blood reach dangerous temperatures.

"Suit yourself, but when he abandons you to handle the consequences alone, don’t come seeking agreements or clemency." I stood and departed that insufferably noisy establishment, ignoring Sasha’s desperate shouts behind me.

Returning to our secure apartment, not wanting to disturb Lila’s rest, I collapsed on the reinforced couch with my mind racing about whatever scheme my father and Sasha were orchestrating. When I awakened the following morning, Lila had already departed for her classes without our customary goodbye embrace or leaving any communication.

In the subsequent days, we barely exchanged words. She left early for Thorne’s legal department and returned exhausted from her law studies. Though deeply concerned about our growing emotional distance, I hesitated to confront the situation directly, sensing her mounting suspicion. The weight of her unspoken doubts created crushing pressure in my chest, adding to my escalating stress. I knew I needed to resolve this crisis swiftly before everything I valued most slipped beyond my reach.

Chapter 473: Political War Begins

Daniel’s POV

I’d spent the better part of a week trying to repair the damage with Lila. Her withdrawal cut deeper than any blade—quiet, distant, always claiming exhaustion or burying herself in law textbooks. The suspicion flickering in those amber eyes was impossible to miss. Desperate to bridge the chasm between us, I took her back to the Thorne family’s private estate upstate—the same secluded retreat where we’d celebrated her birthday. A weekend away from the suffocating politics of our families and the constant threat of exposure.

The getaway worked its magic slowly. Her genuine smiles returned, and we remained inseparable during those precious days. Still, beneath the surface intimacy, I could sense her lingering doubts about the Sasha situation. The questions she was too afraid to ask hung between us like shadows.

Monday arrived with the brutality of a sledgehammer. I strode into the precinct with one crystal-clear objective: eliminate the Sasha complication from my existence permanently. This marriage fraud had to be buried before it destroyed everything I’d built with Lila. I’d barely settled into my office when Adler intercepted me, his expression spelling catastrophe.

"Daniel, we’ve got a serious problem," he began, studying my face as if calculating how violently I might detonate.

"What fresh hell is this, Adler?" I tossed my pen onto the desk and leaned back, already bracing for impact.

He didn’t sugarcoat the poison. "Your old man’s convinced the governor to transfer you back to Greenleaf. The Commissioner’s fighting it tooth and nail, but he’s losing ground fast. Looks like he’ll have to cave within days."

"Son of a bitch!" My fist connected with the armrest, the sound echoing through my office. "My father’s got no boundaries when it comes to controlling my life. This reeks of Martinez family manipulation."

"That’s exactly what this is," Adler confirmed grimly. "I’ve been pushing the Commissioner to keep resisting, but the pressure from Albany is enormous. Nobody wants to cross someone with your father’s reach into the political machine."

"Keep applying pressure," I commanded, my mind already calculating countermoves. "I'll activate some of my own connections. See what cards I can play from my end."

Adler studied me with genuine concern. "You planning to negotiate with your father directly?"

"That would be a waste of breath and ammunition. But I've got other allies in this city who owe me favors. Check what flexibility the Commissioner has left, and keep me informed of any angles where I can apply leverage."

After Adler departed, I sat alone in the mounting tension, contemplating my next strategic move. When he returned hours later while I was briefing Dominic about the ongoing search for his missing father, the defeat written across Adler's features told me he had no progress to report. The transfer threat remained very real.

Once Dominic and Adler left my office, I realized the time had come to cash in political debts. I despised mixing genuine friendship with personal advantage, but desperation left me no alternative routes. I grabbed my secure phone and arranged an emergency lunch with Xavier and Caleb.

When the appointed hour arrived, I was already positioned at our usual table in the back corner of Torrino's, nursing a scotch and my escalating anxiety.

"Well, if it isn't the mighty Inspector Daniel Martinez gracing us mere mortals with his presence!" Xavier announced as he approached, that trademark smirk lighting up his face.

"You're still an insufferable comedian," I shot back, while Xavier's laughter filled the space around us. "Caleb, how do you tolerate this clown?"

Caleb shrugged with practiced amusement. "Honestly, I question that decision daily."

"Come on now," Xavier said, dropping into his chair with theatrical confidence. "You both worship the ground I walk on." His expression shifted to deadly serious. "For you to call an emergency meeting saying you needed our help, this must be significant. What's the situation?"

"I’m facing a major threat to everything I’ve built," I admitted with a heavy exhale.

"Another crisis?" Caleb chuckled darkly. "What could possibly top an ex-wife who’s legally not your ex and a tyrannical crime boss father?"

"Nothing surpasses that combination of nightmares," I conceded. "But my tyrannical crime boss father has decided to leverage the governor into transferring me back to Greenleaf, where he can monitor my every breath."

Caleb cut me off with a raised hand. "Say no more. I’ll contact the governor personally this afternoon. Xavier, your father needs to make that call too. He and the governor have deep ties from their Wall Street days. Two influential voices carrying more weight than one."

"Absolutely," Xavier nodded with fierce determination. "Dad would be thrilled to help. He’s always despised your father’s heavy-handed control tactics. Too obvious, too messy for his taste."

"I’m in your debt," I said, feeling the first wave of relief wash over me in days.

"Don’t insult us with that talk," Caleb said firmly. "You owe us nothing. If anything, the debt flows the other direction—you’ve saved my son Max, my wife, and me from situations that could have destroyed our family. You’re our guardian angel in a badge; we need you staying right here in the city."

"Thanks, both of you. You’re the finest friends a man could ask for," I said, genuine gratitude warming my voice.

By lunch’s conclusion, they’d committed to handling the political warfare and keeping me updated on every development. I returned to the precinct feeling cautiously optimistic, though I understood the real battle with my father was just beginning.

The following days erupted into full-scale political warfare. My father pulled strings aggressively on one front, while Caleb, Xavier and his father, Dominic, and Zoe’s father formed a formidable counter-alliance. The power struggle intensified with each passing hour.

My father’s inevitable call came exactly as predicted—brimming with volcanic fury.

"You had the audacity to turn one of my oldest friends against me?" he snarled the instant I answered.

"I did nothing of the sort," I replied with calculated calm, leaning back in my chair.

"Don’t play innocent with me! Black just stormed out of my office promising to help you by any means necessary. He’s been my friend for decades, even when he disagreed with my methods."

"Well, Dad, his son happens to be my close friend too, and we share similar values about loyalty and respect."

"You’re developing into quite the political strategist, Daniel. You should channel these connections toward benefiting the family business instead of clinging to that pathetic police station."

"These aren’t connections, Dad. They’re genuine friendships built on mutual respect. Your underhanded manipulation tactics won’t work on me."

The line went dead. I sat there, exhausted by the constant warfare—the endless battle with my father’s control, Sasha’s toxic presence poisoning my relationship, the delicate balancing act I maintained with Lila. Something had to break soon.

Chapter 474: Blood and Questions

Lila’s POV

Daniel and I had been finding our rhythm again lately. He’d been more attentive, reminiscent of our early days together, but I could sense something still weighed heavily on him. Whatever darkness he was wrestling with remained locked away, despite his insistence that everything was fine. Meanwhile, the preparations for Gemma and Dominic’s wedding kept our entire circle busy with the elaborate planning that befitted a union between two prominent families.

I was leaving the exclusive boutique in the Diamond District with the girls after finalizing our wedding attire when my phone vibrated. Seeing Daniel's name flash across the screen, I stepped away from our group to take his call privately.

"Tiny one, finished with your shopping expedition?" His voice carried that familiar weight that had become so commonplace recently.

"Yes, we're just wrapping up. Gemma's arranged for her driver to take me back to the penthouse."

"I could send my detail to collect you instead," he offered. Lately, he'd been insisting his security team escort me everywhere—to Thorne Group's offices, to law school, and back home—claiming it gave us more time together and kept me safe. Because of this heightened protection, my own vehicle had been sitting unused in the building's secure garage.

"No need. I'll see you at home," I replied.

"I miss you," he said, his words sending warmth through my chest. Even though we shared the fortified penthouse and saw each other daily, hearing those words from someone like Daniel always affected me deeply.

I was smiling at his declaration when suddenly chaos erupted around me. A figure on a motorcycle roared past, violently ripping my phone away and slashing at me with a blade in one fluid motion. If not for Gemma's bodyguard's lightning-fast reflexes pulling me backward, the damage would have been catastrophic. As it stood, the knife caught my forearm. I screamed in shock as warm blood began streaming down my arm.

"Stay completely still, Miss Sullivan," the guard commanded, maintaining his protective stance over me. "Let me assess the damage." Tears of fright streamed down my face as he examined the wound, produced a pristine handkerchief from his jacket, and pressed it firmly against the gash. "Apply steady pressure here to stem the bleeding."

Gemma rushed over, her face etched with concern and fury. After her security team briefed her on what had transpired, we headed directly to Mount Sinai Hospital. During the ride in her armored sedan, I gradually regained my composure. I mentioned to Gemma that I'd been speaking with Daniel when the

attack occurred, and one of her guards assured me that Dominic would immediately notify him about the incident.

Somehow, Daniel had arrived at the hospital before us. He was already there when our convoy pulled up, rushing to embrace me with unmistakable panic and worry etched across his sharp features.

Dominic arrived shortly after and informed us that a trusted surgeon was standing by. Daniel held me protectively, practically carrying my weight. His phone kept buzzing insistently until he finally answered on the fifth attempt. What followed left me stunned—he erupted in absolute rage, shouting at whoever was on the other end with a ferocity that made even the hospital security take notice. I trembled against him, startled by the violent intensity of his outburst. After ending the call abruptly, he immediately contacted Adler to inform his lieutenant that he'd be unreachable while staying with me.

The doctor administered ten precise stitches, but my mind remained fixated on who could have triggered such explosive fury in Daniel. Was this mysterious caller connected to his recent stress? Could he be involved with someone else behind my back? No, I refused to believe Daniel would betray me—at least, I desperately hoped he wouldn't. By the time we returned to our secure penthouse, I couldn't contain my burning questions any longer.

"Tiny one, I'll order dinner from Russo's, then help you shower carefully around the bandages..." Daniel began, but I interrupted before losing my nerve completely.

"Who was it, Daniel?" I demanded.

"What are you referring to?" He looked genuinely puzzled.

"On the phone—who made you explode like that at the hospital?" I pressed, watching his expression shift from confusion to careful hesitation.

"It was business-related, nothing that should concern you," he said, pulling me into his strong embrace.

"Really? Because I've never witnessed you that enraged about business before." I persisted, needing concrete answers.

"My beautiful little one, I was terrified about you and furious about what happened. Someone dared to hurt you, and according to the bodyguard, it could have been far worse. I was angry because nothing and no one was going to prevent me from being at your side today." His explanation felt incomplete.

"Are you certain that's everything?" I challenged directly.

"Everything? Lila, do you comprehend how much danger you faced today?" His frustration bubbled over intensely. "You could be in surgery right now with life-threatening injuries or worse. I panicked imagining what might have happened. I was furious that you became a victim of the same violence I fight against every single day. I was terrified that someone managed to harm you despite all our precautions. It's not just one thing—it's absolutely everything!"

His dark eyes revealed a fear I'd never witnessed before. I studied his face intently, trying to process everything he'd revealed. Genuine concern radiated from every line of his expression, along with an anxiety about something I couldn't quite identify. Taking a shuddering breath, he pulled me closer, resting his chin atop my head protectively.

"Were you really that worried something worse had happened?" I asked softly.

"Tiny one, I imagined every nightmare scenario possible. I nearly lost control when Dominic called and told me you'd been injured in what looked like a targeted attack. Even though he assured me you were stable with only a superficial wound, I only began to calm down when I could see you breathing with my own eyes. The time between Dominic's call and holding you felt like an eternity. My heart nearly stopped completely." His voice carried such raw sincerity that it shattered something inside me. This level of protective concern, this depth of genuine feeling—it could only stem from true love. If he felt this intensely about me, he couldn't possibly be deceiving me.

"Regarding that call—that truly was all there was to it," he insisted with unwavering firmness.

I sensed his honesty, but by now I was so deeply moved by his concern that the mysterious phone call no longer seemed important.

"Now I'm going to draw you a bath, feed you properly, and make love to you—slowly and carefully—to make up for how much I've missed you today," he murmured, sweeping me up into his powerful arms.

He spoke of love while peppering gentle kisses across my face, completely melting my defenses. Though I wasn't entirely convinced about his phone call explanation, I chose to set my lingering concerns aside. Besides, I knew him well enough to recognize that no amount of pressing would make him reveal more than he was ready to share. And true to his word, he fulfilled every promise—bathed me with tender care, fed me with patient attention, and made love to me differently than before—slowly, gently, filled with whispered promises and heartfelt declarations of love.

Chapter 475: Shadows in Morning

Lila's POV

The rich aroma of imported Italian coffee and the gentle sensation of calloused fingers threading through my hair gradually pulled me from sleep. Opening my eyes, I found Daniel perched on the edge of our king-sized bed, his powerful frame silhouetted against the floor-to-ceiling windows of his penthouse. His hand moved tenderly through my hair, and a soft smile formed on his lips when our eyes met.

"Good morning, sunshine," he greeted me, his deep voice immediately triggering memories of the previous night—how he'd whispered his devotion while our bodies moved together in perfect harmony, his words carrying the weight of a man who understood that love in his world was both sanctuary and vulnerability.

"Good morning, ray of light," I responded with a lazy smile. He leaned down to kiss me, his lips tasting faintly of the expensive whiskey he'd been nursing late into the night, before handing me a steaming mug of coffee in bone china that probably cost more than most people's rent.

Concern etched his sharp features as he asked, "How are you feeling today?"

I glanced at the professional bandage wrapping my arm, applied by the discrete doctor who made house calls for the Martinez family. "I'm fine. The wound stings a bit, but nothing serious."

"Hmm. Almost time for your pain medication." He placed a breakfast tray laden with delicacies from the exclusive deli that catered to the city's elite across my lap. "Eat."

I laughed at his commanding tone, so characteristic of a man accustomed to absolute obedience in every aspect of his life except this one. "Is that an order?"

"Most definitely." His dark eyes twinkled with playful authority, the same eyes that could make seasoned criminals confess their sins with a single glance.

Between sips of the perfectly brewed coffee, I remembered something important. "I need to report my stolen phone and block the line. I completely forgot yesterday."

"Already taken care of," he assured me, and I wasn't surprised. Daniel's connections could make problems disappear with a few strategic phone calls. He smiled then. "You have some jelly on your mouth." He leaned forward, his tongue darting out to remove the apricot preserves from the corner of my lips before placing a gentle kiss there. "Mmm! Delicious. Now I see why you're so fond of apricot jelly."

"Wait—are you telling me you've never had apricot jelly before?" I asked incredulously.

His eyes darkened with that familiar intensity that reminded me he was a man who'd seen and done things I couldn't imagine. "Not on you, but I think I'll start." He picked up the expensive jar of imported preserves, examining it with exaggerated interest that made my pulse quicken.

I stared at him wide-eyed, and he responded with a mischievous grin that transformed his usually serious face before returning the jar to the tray. "That's for another time. Today we're going to get you a new phone."

"You don't have to," I protested, finishing my last bite of artisanal toast. "I still have my old one."

"The one your mother constantly bothers you on? The one you keep turned off most of the time? No, little one. I want to be able to reach you whenever I want." His tone carried an undercurrent of something deeper than mere preference—in his world, being unreachable could mean being unreachable forever.

"You hardly ever call me anyway," I pointed out, my tone more accusatory than intended. "And you can always call me at Thorne Group."

His eyes sparkled with amusement, though I caught a flicker of something else—guilt, perhaps. "Are you complaining that I don’t call enough?"

"Yes, I am!" I declared boldly, making his smile widen despite the tension I could sense beneath his relaxed facade.

"Does my little one miss me?" he teased, clearly enjoying this, but I noticed how his shoulders remained rigid even in play.

"More than I should," I admitted, growing irritated with his smugness while simultaneously worried about the shadows I glimpsed behind his confident exterior.

He moved the breakfast tray to the nightstand with practiced efficiency and shifted closer to me, his movements carrying the fluid grace of a predator even in tenderness. "How much do you miss me?" he asked, rubbing his nose against mine in a gesture so gentle it contrasted starkly with the calluses on his hands that spoke of harder pursuits than paperwork.

I decided to be honest. "The days feel endless. Most of the time I think about skipping classes just to get home earlier, jump into your lap and beg you to make love to me."

His smile grew, but I couldn’t help adding, "Why don’t you ever call to ask if I miss you? To ask if I want you?"

"Why don’t you call me to tell me these things?" he countered. "I’d love hearing you say that every day."

"Because whenever I do call, you’re too busy to talk," I replied, unable to hide my disappointment. "Always in meetings, always dealing with something urgent that you can’t discuss."

His body tensed immediately, the smile vanishing as if I’d struck him. "Oh, my beautiful..." His voice was laced with genuine distress. "I..."

"It’s okay," I backtracked quickly, recognizing the pain that flashed across his features. "I understand your work is complicated. You can’t always answer, and you have many responsibilities." I knew better

than most that his duties as a Senior Inspector required constant attention, balancing the fragile line between the black and white worlds.

He pressed his forehead against mine and sighed deeply, as if fighting an internal battle that had been consuming him for weeks. When he met my eyes again, they were filled with sadness and something that looked dangerously close to fear. "My little one, I'm sorry. I know things are confusing right now, but please don't give up on me. Things will go back to normal as soon as..." He stopped abruptly, his jaw clenching.

"As soon as what?" I pressed, needing some clarity after months of sensing undercurrents I couldn't identify, of watching him take calls that made his face go stone-cold, of noticing how his hand sometimes moved instinctively toward his jacket when unexpected sounds came from the hallway.

"As soon as I finish this case that's consuming all my time at the precinct." He sighed and pulled away slightly, but I could see the lie in the tension around his eyes.

I knew he wouldn't elaborate further, just as I knew that whatever was really troubling him went far deeper than police work. "Okay," I conceded, not wanting to ruin our precious time together with interrogation. He was being attentive and sincere about his feelings, and despite my growing awareness that his world held dangers I was only beginning to comprehend, I could give him the benefit of the doubt a little longer.

"I'll agree to a new phone if—and listen carefully, Inspector Martinez—you can guarantee that you miss me too while you're buried in whatever precinct problems you're dealing with."

His expression transformed into something more playful, though relief flickered in his dark eyes. "Tiny one, while I'm buried in precinct problems, all I think about is being buried in you." His hand traveled down my body with possessive familiarity to my most intimate area. "I'm going to show you exactly how much I miss you, how desperately I want to be with you, and prove that no matter what I'm dealing with, you're always on my mind."

He positioned himself over me, making love to me with such desperate tenderness and consuming passion that his every move felt like both a declaration and an apology. With each thrust, each kiss, each caress, he whispered how much he missed me, how I was his only sanctuary, how his love for me surpassed anything he'd ever felt before. His voice carried unmistakable sincerity, his touches both gentle and possessive, as if he were memorizing every moment, every sensation.

Throughout the morning, he continued reassuring me that he wanted me as much as I wanted him, that his love was real and consuming. For the remainder of the weekend, his phones remained silent as he focused entirely on my needs, on making me feel secure in his affection and attention.

Yet despite his convincing displays of love, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was profoundly wrong. Something was eating at him from the inside, something far more dangerous than any police case. I hoped that beyond loving me, he would eventually trust me enough to share whatever shadows were haunting him from his family's dark legacy.

Chapter 476: Already Too Late

Daniel's POV

The investigation into the fraudulent reinstatement of my marriage certificate had reached a frustrating standstall. Weeks had passed without any meaningful progress, leaving me trapped in a web of corruption that extended deep into the judicial system. My father's influence over certain judges and court officials was proving more extensive than I had initially estimated. Meanwhile, Sasha was escalating her psychological warfare, infiltrating every aspect of my life with increasingly brazen tactics.

Every weekend brought the same demand from my father - return to the Martinez family estate in Westchester under the pretense of discussing territorial expansions and reviewing our partnership agreements with other families. He knew exactly what pressure points to apply, leveraging family obligations and business interests to maintain his control over the situation.

Lila remained outwardly composed, never pushing for answers I couldn't give, but I could see the subtle signs of her growing awareness. Her legal training made her naturally observant, and occasionally she would probe gently about the unusual phone calls and my frequent absences. Each time, I managed to redirect the conversation, but the weight of deception was becoming unbearable. At least Dominic and Gemma's wedding preparations provided some welcome distraction, their joy a stark contrast to the storm clouds gathering over my own relationship.

When Xavier extended an invitation for a relaxed Sunday afternoon at his estate - barbecue, swimming, and the kind of carefree gathering that seemed increasingly rare in our world - I had hoped for a few hours of peace with Lila and our inner circle. That hope proved naive.

"Can a man not have a single day without harassment?" I muttered, stepping away from the pool area to take yet another call from Sasha. She had bombarded me with messages since dawn, including a provocative photograph clearly designed to manipulate me. Instead of arousing any response, it only intensified my disgust and anger toward her increasingly desperate tactics.

"That's not possible, my dear husband," she cooed in that saccharine voice that made my skin crawl. "I have certain wifely privileges that need attending to."

"You're nothing to me, Sasha. This elaborate charade you've constructed with my father's help is about to crumble."

"Is it really? Listen carefully, Daniel. You want peace and quiet? I can provide that, but first I want a proper farewell worthy of a Martinez family wife."

"What exactly are you implying?"

"Don't insult my intelligence, Daniel. Our court hearing is scheduled soon. I'll grant you this divorce you're so desperate for, but I want one final evening together." The woman had clearly lost whatever remained of her sanity.

"Absolutely not. Not if you were the last person on earth. Forget it," I snapped, wondering if this was some kind of sick test orchestrated by my father.

"Very well, have it your way. If you refuse me this small request, I'll pay a visit to your precious little princess and enlighten her about our complicated situation. I'll explain how deeply you still love me, how you're simply going through a rebellious phase, but that it will pass. After all, we remain legally married, don't we? If your feelings for me were truly dead, you would have divorced me long ago instead of maintaining this arrangement."

"That's complete fabrication, Sasha!"

"Perhaps, but she'll find my version compelling. You know how persuasive I can be when necessary. And you know what will happen next? She'll be so convinced by my account that she'll never want to see you

again. Then she'll pack up and disappear from your life, and you'll have no choice but to return to my arms where you belong." Sasha's laughter was filled with malicious satisfaction.

"I warned you to stay away from her." My voice was deadly quiet, the kind of tone that made hardened criminals reconsider their life choices.

"Oh, darling! Far too late for warnings. Can you guess where I am right now? I'm in our apartment, and when your little law student princess returns home, she'll discover me here, and we'll have the most enlightening conversation. I'll take tremendous pleasure in explaining exactly why she needs to vacate my husband's residence."

"You're lying, Sasha. You couldn't have accessed MY apartment." She had to be bluffing - my security was impenetrable.

"Check the photograph I just transmitted." Her voice carried absolute confidence.

I pulled the phone away from my ear and opened her message. That venomous snake was indeed inside my home, draped across my bed in a state of deliberate undress, her smile triumphant.

How had she breached my security? This seemed impossible. My building had the kind of protection that government officials and family bosses relied on.

I would systematically destroy whoever had facilitated her access.

"How did you infiltrate my building?" I demanded through clenched teeth.

"Money opens every door in this city, even those protected by Martinez family security." Her laughter was infuriating.

"Vacate the premises immediately, or I'll dispatch units to arrest you for breaking and entering," I threatened, my rage barely contained.

"Breaking and entering? You believe I'll be arrested for occupying my own husband's residence? Even I'm not that foolish. And if law enforcement arrives, I'll create such a spectacular scandal that it'll dominate every newspaper and gossip column in the city. Your girlfriend will learn all about your secret double life through the headlines."

"I don't maintain a double life, you psychotic woman!"

"But you are concealing a wife from her. So, my dear Daniel, I strongly suggest you come home immediately to handle this situation properly." With that ultimatum, Sasha terminated the call.

I was cornered with no viable alternatives. I had no choice but to confront that serpent directly and discover how she had compromised my security systems. Most critically, I needed to remove her before Lila returned home and walked into this carefully laid trap.

I approached Lila, who was engaged in animated conversation with Ruby by the outdoor bar, and explained that urgent police business required my immediate attention but that I would return to collect her later. I couldn't risk her returning to the apartment and encountering Sasha's ambush. Though I could see suspicion flickering in her intelligent eyes, Lila didn't challenge my explanation. Relief flooded through me when Zoe convinced her to remain at Xavier's estate for the remainder of the afternoon.

After saying goodbye and promising to return soon, I pulled Xavier aside and briefed him on the volatile situation, requesting that he ensure Lila stayed put until I could neutralize the threat.

"What a complete disaster, brother!" Xavier exclaimed, shaking his head.

"You're telling me." I ran a frustrated hand through my hair.

"I'll say it one more time - tell Lila everything! This is a trap designed to destroy your relationship, and you're walking straight into it," Xavier warned, and in my heart, I knew his counsel was sound, but the paralyzing fear of losing Lila kept me locked in this destructive pattern.

"After the hearing, when the divorce is officially finalized, Xavier. Not a moment before." The words felt hollow even as I spoke them.

"You've allowed this deception to continue far too long. The women are becoming suspicious. Gemma's already been questioning Dominic about your unusual behavior patterns."

"I know, I know. Just provide cover for a little while longer. Please."

"Fine, but don't handle this confrontation alone. It's not safe, and Sasha's clearly escalating toward something dangerous."

"Agreed. I'll contact Adler for backup."

"Good. Let me know when this crisis is resolved. I'll keep Lila entertained here and manage the group, but these women are highly intelligent - they'll start demanding real answers very soon."

I departed Xavier's estate with mounting dread. Sasha was obviously orchestrating something far more sinister than simple harassment. I texted Adler to determine his location and learned he was currently at the precinct. Rather than discussing such sensitive matters over potentially monitored phone lines, I decided to drive there directly to request his assistance. It would be efficient - explain the situation, secure his backup, and then confront Sasha together.

But as I arrived at the police station and realized the tactical error I had made, a cold certainty settled in my chest. I should have called ahead and arranged an immediate meeting. Time was working against me.

I was already too late.

Chapter 477: Walls Come Crashing Down

Daniel's POV

I burst through the reinforced doors of the 14th Precinct, my pulse hammering like gunfire. The familiar scent of stale coffee and bureaucratic tension did nothing to calm my nerves. Inspector Adler was stationed near the break area, discussing case files with fellow detectives who owed their careers to family connections neither of us would acknowledge in daylight.

I caught his attention with a subtle gesture that had been perfected through years of covert operations. He followed me into his soundproofed office, the kind of room where careers were made and destroyed with whispered conversations.

Once the door sealed us in privacy, I laid out the catastrophe unfolding at my penthouse fortress. Adler's weathered face shifted from casual interest to stark alarm as I detailed how Sasha had infiltrated my supposedly impenetrable sanctuary.

"Christ, Daniel, what kind of war zone have you created up there?" Adler muttered, his detective instincts immediately grasping the political implications.

"Nothing I didn't see coming," I admitted grimly, dragging my fingers through my hair. The weight of generations of Martinez family manipulation pressed down on my shoulders.

Adler leaned forward, his expression growing darker. "Actually, your situation just became exponentially worse. I had a conversation with Zoe roughly twenty minutes ago, right after I received your cryptic message asking about my whereabouts."

My blood turned to ice. "She contacted you directly?" The barely controlled panic in my voice would have been embarrassing if the stakes weren't so astronomically high.

"Negative. I initiated contact. Needed her expertise on some domestic complications with my wife." Adler rubbed his temples, a gesture I recognized from our most challenging investigations.

"And the damage?" I pressed, feeling the familiar sensation of walls closing in around me.

"Lila inquired about your duty status, and I confirmed you weren't working today."

The ramifications hit me like a sniper's bullet. Lila now possessed concrete evidence of my deception, which meant our carefully constructed facade was disintegrating rapidly. In our world, trust was currency, and I had just declared bankruptcy.

"Damn it, Adler!" I buried my face in my hands, visualizing the nuclear fallout awaiting my return. "This is going to be an absolute massacre!"

"Don’t project this disaster onto me," he countered defensively. "How could I anticipate the chaos you were orchestrating? The entire unit warned you this strategy would implode spectacularly." He settled back in his chair, adopting the analytical demeanor that made him invaluable during crisis management. "Consider the devastation when Lila discovers your betrayal through third-party sources. Worse yet, imagine her arriving at your fortress and discovering that woman occupying your territory. We might as well start drafting your obituary!"

"Stop amplifying my anxiety beyond manageable levels!" I snapped, though his assessment was brutally accurate. "The responsibility lies entirely with me. I should have secured your silence first. Hell, I should have eliminated the Sasha problem weeks ago." I exhaled heavily, despair settling over me like a burial shroud. "Now everything lies in ruins. She’ll abandon me, Adler. Lila will walk away, and I won’t survive the aftermath."

"Regain your composure immediately!" Adler commanded with the authority that had made him legendary in interrogation rooms. "We’ll execute this systematically. Priority one: extract that liability from your premises. Priority two: develop a credible explanation for Lila that doesn’t destroy what remains of your relationship."

I nodded, his tactical approach cutting through my emotional chaos. "Affirmative. Accompany me and help neutralize the Sasha threat. Then I’ll face the consequences of explaining this nightmare to Lila. She absolutely cannot discover that woman contaminating our sanctuary."

As we prepared to depart, Adler delivered his final warning. "You’ve woven yourself into this web of deception, Daniel. I don’t foresee this ending without significant casualties."

"I’ve lost all strategic clarity," I confessed. "But removing that poison from my domain is the critical first step. And it needs to happen immediately!"

"Then we move now," Adler declared, following me toward what felt like a battlefield.

I navigated the city streets like a man racing against his own execution, violating traffic regulations and taking corners with reckless precision. Upon reaching my building, I spotted the unmarked surveillance

vehicle positioned strategically at the intersection. The officers inside acknowledged me with the subtle hand signals we used for high-stakes operations. I hoped their loyalty wouldn't be compromised because of my personal catastrophe, but that concern would have to wait.

Adler and I entered the lobby, where I immediately recognized the security guard—the same man I'd financially incentivized to forget witnessing my early morning conversation with Sasha. That transaction would definitely require future attention.

We ascended to my penthouse, and the cloying sweetness of Sasha's signature perfume invaded my senses like poison gas. The scent alone ignited a rage that threatened my legendary self-control. We moved through the living area and discovered her sprawled across my bed wearing nothing but strategically placed lingerie. The urge to defenestrate her was overwhelming. Her intentions couldn't have been more transparent—seduction remained her weapon of choice, though that particular battle had been lost years ago.

"Finally, handsome! You certainly took your time," she purred with predatory satisfaction that evaporated when she noticed Adler's presence. "What the hell is this supposed to mean, Daniel?"

Sasha rose from the bed and approached us without attempting modesty. She had always weaponized her physicality without shame. She studied Adler with calculating coldness before redirecting her attention to me.

"You were in that pathetic patrol unit that morning!" she finally placed Adler's face.

"Guilty as charged," Adler confirmed coolly. "I heard parasites forced you to sacrifice your hair." He couldn't resist the psychological warfare. "I did warn you about consequences. And between professionals, that synthetic replacement isn't fooling anyone—looks completely artificial."

Sasha glared at him with murderous intensity. Her vanity had always been her greatest vulnerability.

"Are you sharing territories now, Daniel?" The audacity of her suggestion made me want to end this conversation permanently, but Adler subtly intercepted my movement, positioning himself between potential violence and catastrophic decisions.

"Daniel, I actually believed she possessed some dignity that morning. Clearly, that assessment was entirely wrong," Adler addressed me before focusing his contempt on her. "No, sweetheart, we don't share anything. But even if we did, you lack the class for our standards and certainly no longer meet Daniel's requirements." His gaze radiated professional disgust. "Nothing personal, but we prefer women with substance, not street-level opportunists."

I suppressed a grin. I had witnessed Adler demolish hardened criminals in interrogation rooms, but this performance promised to be particularly entertaining. I decided to let him orchestrate this confrontation.

"Who do you think you're addressing, you worthless piece of garbage?" Sasha's mask of sophistication shattered instantly. Despite her privileged upbringing in a respectable political family with elite education, she had always been inherently crude—loud and profane. Her refined socialite persona was merely theater that collapsed under pressure.

"My God, Daniel, such vulgarity! I've encountered street prostitutes with superior breeding at the precinct," Adler observed with clinical detachment before addressing Sasha again. "Get dressed, and we'll continue this discussion in the living room. Or perhaps you'd prefer the patrol car waiting downstairs, where we can resolve this matter through official channels."

"Don't you dare speak to me like that!" Sasha's voice escalated, but her shouting was immediately overshadowed by an even more commanding voice from behind us.

"Well, well, well—another woman who believes she can claim what belongs to others!" Zoe appeared in the bedroom doorway like an avenging angel, and I felt my soul abandon my body. The situation was about to detonate. "Why is this woman still in lingerie in your bedroom, Daniel?"

Words refused to form, as if my voice had been surgically removed.

With crushing inevitability, I opened my eyes to see Lila standing beside Zoe, her expression radiating disgust and betrayal as she surveyed the wreckage of my life.

Behind them stood our entire circle of friends, witnesses to my complete and utter destruction.

Chapter 478: Secret Wife Exposed

Lila’s POV

I knew something was wrong when Daniel insisted he needed to handle urgent family business. The tension in his voice, the way he practically demanded I stay at Xavier’s estate, and his adamant refusal to let Zoe escort me home all pointed to one thing: he was hiding something dangerous. My suspicions were confirmed when Zoe contacted her intelligence network, and they assured us Daniel had no legitimate Martinez family meetings scheduled.

"We need to get answers," Zoe said, her eyes narrowing with the calculating look that made her Thorne family’s top information broker. "I’m done with all these family secrets and power games."

"Agreed," I replied, feeling my patience wearing thin. "I can’t handle any more mysteries or half-truths from the underworld."

Ivy leaned forward, her expression thoughtful. As Caleb’s wife, she’d learned to navigate mafia politics with surgical precision. "Instead of interrogating them separately, why don’t we corner them all together? They won’t have time to coordinate their cover stories if we put them on the spot."

"Brilliant, Ivy," Zoe’s lips curved into a predatory smile before she called out sweetly, "Gentlemen, would you mind joining your beloved women for a family discussion?"

The men approached with cautious smiles, sensing the trap awaiting them. Each settled beside their significant other, while Jude took the empty space next to me, his hand instinctively checking his concealed weapon.

Jude leaned close, whispering, "What’s happening, Tiny Cipher? When Zoe uses that tone, blood usually follows."

"Tell me something, Jude," I asked loudly enough for everyone to hear. "Are you actually my ally, or just another Martinez family soldier?"

"Damn it," Jude muttered under his breath. "I warned them this interrogation would happen."

Dominic interrupted quickly, "What's this about, Lila?"

I didn't hold back. "This is about all of you treating us like civilians who can't handle family business!"

"Especially you, Dominic," Gemma added, her voice carrying the dangerous edge of a woman who'd grown up in syndicate politics. "I specifically asked you what operations were running."

The men exchanged the kind of nervous glances reserved for made men caught between family loyalty and personal relationships. Xavier ran his fingers through his hair, looking trapped between his role as Thorne family consigliere and his friendship with Daniel. Sweat beaded on their foreheads as they silently debated what classified information to reveal.

"The game's over, gentlemen," Jude finally said. "She deserves to know the truth about the Martinez family situation."

"Long overdue, if you ask me," Zoe crossed her arms, staring daggers at Jude with the intensity that had made grown capos confess their sins.

Xavier sighed heavily. "Fine. But first, understand that Daniel kept quiet because he feared losing you, Lila. He's protecting you from a political war, not conducting any affairs."

Ruby scoffed. "Let me guess – there's another woman pulling family strings?"

"Well, yes, but it's not what you think," Xavier replied defensively, his consigliere training making him choose words carefully.

"Just tell me where he went and who he's meeting," I said, exhaustion evident in my voice.

Jude chose his words like a man defusing a bomb. "He went to your penthouse, Lila. Someone bypassed our security systems – we still don't know how, not even Daniel's contacts could trace it – and demanded a private meeting with him."

"And I’m guessing this is the same person who’s been calling him constantly, the same reason he keeps ’handling Martinez family business,’" I concluded. Jude nodded solemnly. "Who is she?"

"She’s Sasha, his wife," Xavier blurted out, immediately regretting breaking the cardinal rule of keeping family secrets.

My heart stopped. The room spun around me as I tried to process what I’d just heard. In the mafia world, marriage meant political alliances, territorial agreements, and binding contracts that went far beyond love.

"What did you just say?" Zoe grabbed Xavier’s shirt collar, her knuckles white with the grip that had once strangled a traitor.

"Easy, Zoe," Finn said calmly, recognizing the deadly stillness that preceded violence in their world. "The situation is more complicated than a simple marriage contract."

"Daniel is married?" My voice cracked as tears filled my eyes. "And you all knew? You let me become his mistress in some twisted family arrangement? What kind of people are you?" My voice rose with each question. "What have I become in this underworld?"

Caleb moved to sit in front of me, taking my trembling hands in his with the gentle authority of a family don. "Listen carefully, Lila. Daniel entered a political marriage alliance years ago and had it dissolved several years later through family lawyers."

"Make up your mind!" Zoe snapped. "Is he bound by marriage contracts or free?"

"He thought he was free," Caleb explained. "But apparently his former wife somehow had the dissolution overturned without his knowledge. From what our legal investigators discovered, she forged his signatures on syndicate documents as part of some scheme to keep him legally bound to her family’s interests."

"None of this makes sense," I whispered, trying to navigate the maze of mafia politics and family obligations.

Xavier leaned forward, speaking in the measured tone of someone explaining dangerous territory. "Lila, did you know Daniel comes from one of the most powerful syndicate dynasties on the East Coast?" I shook my head. I'd sensed his family wielded influence, but nothing of this magnitude. "His father controls vast territories and political connections. He disapproves of Daniel's choice to work in law enforcement instead of the family's traditional operations. He wants Daniel managing syndicate business alongside his brother and bound in marriage to someone who serves the family's political interests. Sasha was that choice – the daughter of his father's most trusted ally."

Dominic continued, "What Daniel suspects is that his father helped Sasha fraudulently overturn the marriage dissolution, planning to use it as leverage when the time came to force his return to the family fold. That time is now – he's pressuring Daniel to abandon law enforcement and return to Greenleaf to run syndicate operations."

I listened intently to every detail they shared about territorial disputes, political marriages, and family obligations. They explained how Daniel feared I would flee rather than fight a war against one of the most powerful crime families in the country. They apologized repeatedly for keeping syndicate secrets. When they finished, I knew exactly what I needed to do.

"To be clear, his family doesn't consider me suitable for their heir?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

"No, they don't," Xavier confirmed softly. "To them, you're an outsider who threatens their political arrangements."

I turned to Zoe. "Can you take me to my penthouse immediately?"

"What are you planning?" Zoe asked, studying my face with the tactical assessment of someone trained in family warfare.

"Exactly what you would do in my position," I replied. "And I need your backup."

Understanding lit up Zoe's eyes like a predator recognizing another predator. "Let's go! I'm with you!" She wrapped me in a fierce hug before calling out, "Ladies, we ride together!"

As we headed toward Zoe's armored vehicle, Xavier jumped up. "Gentlemen, we need to follow them!"

"Don't you dare warn Daniel we're coming!" Zoe threatened, and no one dared argue with a Thorne family enforcer in full battle mode.

During the drive through the city's shadowy streets, I prepared myself for every worst-case scenario, including finding Daniel compromised by family blackmail or political coercion. But what greeted me at the penthouse was something else entirely – a half-dressed woman desperately throwing herself at a clearly uncomfortable Daniel while he tried to maintain professional distance. What I hadn't expected was Inspector Adler's presence in my private space. How did he gain access? Had Daniel called for official backup? Those questions would have to wait. First, I needed to remove this woman from my territory – because as long as I lived there, it was my territory, and I would defend it accordingly.

Chapter 479: The Wig Unveiled

Daniel's POV

Lila stood motionless in the doorway of my penthouse bedroom, her arms crossed defensively, her face carved from marble. Her eyes were locked on Sasha, deliberately refusing to meet mine. Every instinct screamed at me to go to her, to explain the twisted web of family politics that had brought my former wife back into our lives, but Xavier's firm grip on my shoulder kept me anchored in place.

"I'm curious if fugitives from family justice receive such luxurious accommodations," Lila observed, her gaze flickering momentarily to Adler. Her voice could have frozen the Peyton River, her stare cutting through the tension like a blade. Still, she wouldn't acknowledge my presence.

Ruby stepped forward, her voice dripping with the kind of aristocratic disdain that only came from generations of bloodline privilege. "I believe, Lila, that Thorne family legal advisors should learn more effective methods for dealing with marriage-contract violators."

"What the hell is happening here, Daniel? Who are these people?" Sasha demanded from the center of the room, standing in nothing but her underwear like she owned the place instead of being a political pawn in a game far above her understanding.

Zoe advanced toward Sasha, her eyes blazing with the kind of controlled fury that had made her legendary in intelligence circles. "This, you shameless climber, is what happens when you strip down and throw yourself at a made man who belongs to someone else. This penthouse isn't your personal bordello."

"Do you have any conception of who you're speaking to?" Sasha shot back, lifting her chin with misguided confidence. "I suggest you learn some respect before you find yourself in serious trouble."

"I couldn't care less about your family connections," Zoe retorted with the harsh laugh that had preceded the downfall of more than one rival family's operation. "What I do know is that I'm going to send you scurrying back to whatever rock you crawled out from under."

"I'd like to see you attempt it," Sasha challenged, clearly having no idea that she was staring down one of the most feared women in the tristate underworld.

Something predatory shifted in Zoe's expression—a gleam that reminded me why even seasoned capos gave her a wide berth. Her lips curved into a smile that could have chilled the blood of hardened soldiers. In one lightning-fast motion, she lunged forward and grabbed what she assumed was Sasha's hair. With a single, savage yank, the elaborate wig came away in her hand like a hunting trophy.

The scene would have been tragic if it weren't so absurdly satisfying.

Sasha's hands flew up to cover her nearly bald scalp as she shrieked like a banshee. Zoe erupted into the kind of laughter that echoed through penthouse corridors, while our associates barely concealed their amusement behind carefully schooled expressions. Adler's eyes widened in genuine shock, and I found myself lowering my head and covering my eyes, knowing this situation was spiraling beyond any semblance of diplomatic control. Only Lila remained utterly expressionless, as if the chaos unfolding before her was beneath her notice entirely.

"Look at this pathetic sight! The marriage-contract fraud is practically bald as an eagle!" Zoe announced, dangling the expensive hairpiece like a battle standard.

"You psychotic witch! Return that immediately! I'll destroy your entire bloodline!" Sasha's voice cracked with hysteria as she screamed threats that would have been laughable if they weren't so desperately pathetic.

"I'd genuinely enjoy watching you try!" Zoe echoed Sasha's earlier bravado before casually tossing the wig into a corner like discarded garbage.

When Sasha lunged toward her with amateur desperation, Zoe caught her wrist with professional ease and effortlessly sent her crashing to the marble floor. Sasha hit hard, her scream echoing off the walls as Zoe crouched beside her with the casual menace of a predator toying with wounded prey.

"Here's your choice, marriage-fraud. Get dressed and leave with whatever dignity you have remaining, or should I drag you through the lobby in your underwear for the doormen and security cameras to witness?" Zoe's tone was conversational, as if she were discussing stock market fluctuations rather than threatening public humiliation.

"You're completely insane! I'll end your entire operation!" Sasha spat with the desperation of someone finally understanding they were outclassed.

"Many have tried that approach," Zoe replied with genuine amusement. "Put your clothes on. Don't force me to become genuinely unpleasant."

When Sasha made another amateur attempt to grab Zoe's hair, the intelligence specialist dodged with the fluid grace of someone trained in combat arts. She seized Sasha's pathetic natural hair and slammed her face against the Italian marble floor, eliciting another piercing scream that probably carried to neighboring penthouses. Then Zoe stood up, her movements exhibiting the deadly elegance that had made her reputation legendary.

"Come on, get to your feet. I prefer when my opponents can at least pretend to fight back," she said, sounding like she'd stepped straight out of a tactical operations manual.

"You're completely deranged! I'll ruin your family's entire enterprise!" Sasha scrambled upright and charged like an enraged amateur. Zoe sidestepped with practiced ease, delivering a precise knee strike to Sasha's thigh that sent her sprawling across the expensive Persian rug again.

"I'm growing tired of being charitable," Zoe stated with deadly calm. "Time for an education you'll remember every time you see your disfigured reflection. You're from Greenleaf—surely you've heard

the cautionary tale of Veronica, who required overseas reconstructive surgery after I introduced her face to the asphalt during a charity gala."

Recognition finally dawned in Sasha's eyes like a death sentence being read. "Zoe Miller? You're actually Zoe Miller? You're the psychopath who destroyed Veronica's face! I witnessed that massacre firsthand! You're genuinely sick!"

"Precisely correct!" Zoe placed her hand over her heart with theatrical flair. "My reputation precedes me throughout the northeastern families. Yes, I am indeed Zoe Miller of the Miller intelligence network!"

Everyone who moved in our circles knew the infamous story of the socialite whose face Zoe had systematically scraped against the pavement during what should have been a peaceful fundraising event. The Millers weren't a family to cross lightly, especially their notoriously short-tempered daughter who handled their more delicate enforcement operations.

Sasha backed away with genuine terror flooding her eyes as Zoe advanced with the focused intent of a professional hunter.

"Stay away from me, you absolute psychopath!" Sasha screamed with authentic fear. Zoe took another calculated step forward, forcing Sasha to retreat further into the corner like a trapped animal.

"Now you're beginning to demonstrate proper understanding," Zoe smiled with arctic coldness. "Though I personally prefer 'psychopath from the deepest circle of hell.' Allow me to demonstrate exactly why that reputation is well-earned." She advanced again with deliberate menace.

"Daniel, help me! Don't allow her to touch me!" It was the first time I'd ever witnessed Sasha retreat from any confrontation, but Zoe's professional demeanor would have terrified even the most hardened street soldiers.

"I warned you to disappear from our territory, Sasha. Now face the consequences of your own poor decisions," I finally spoke, my voice completely devoid of sympathy or family loyalty.

I knew Zoe possessed both the skills and inclination to permanently damage Sasha's face, but I found myself completely unable to summon any protective instincts. Sasha had violated every boundary of respect and family honor. Looking across the room, I watched Lila shake her head with a sigh that spoke of deep disappointment rather than surprise.

Then Lila approached Zoe with an expression of grave seriousness mixed with bureaucratic impatience. She moved forward with calm authority, and when she finally spoke, her voice carried the measured control of someone who had grown up navigating family politics and territorial disputes as routine business.

"Zoe, let me handle this particular problem." Ice-cold fear shot through my veins instantly. Sasha could seriously injure Lila in a physical altercation. My Lila was petite, refined—a sophisticated legal mind despite her family's underground enforcement capabilities. Sasha would overpower her through sheer desperation if nothing else. I couldn't allow that to happen.

"Are you certain about this approach, Lila?" Zoe asked, keeping her predatory focus locked on Sasha's cowering form.

"Yes, I am completely certain." Lila moved toward Sasha as Zoe stepped aside with professional deference to family hierarchy.

Chapter 480: Lila Takes Control

Daniel's POV

I tensed, every muscle in my body coiled like a spring, ready to intervene if Sasha made any move toward Lila. The smug expression plastered across Sasha's face suggested she believed she held all the cards in this twisted game, and perhaps in the corrupt judicial system she did, but I wasn't about to let her lay a finger on the woman who owned my heart.

"Lila..." I stepped forward, my protective instincts overriding everything else, but she turned to face me with steel in her gaze that froze me mid-step.

"I gave you the opportunity to handle this situation your way, Daniel, and you failed miserably. Now we're doing this my way, and you're going to stay out of it." Her tone carried the unmistakable authority of someone born into the underground nobility, leaving no room for argument and rendering me

helpless. I stood paralyzed as Lila redirected her attention to Sasha with lethal grace. "So you're the infamous Sasha? I must say, I expected someone more... formidable."

"Well, aren't you a spirited little thing," Sasha's mocking smile spread across her heavily made-up face like poison. "Did you know you're sleeping with my husband, sweetheart?"

"Your husband?" Lila responded with the kind of composure that came from years of navigating treacherous family politics. "I believe you're mistaken. He's your ex-husband. And I must commend your creativity. I've witnessed pregnancy scams, offshore account schemes, even arranged marriages for territory, but fabricating a judicial reversal? That's certainly innovative."

"Oh, so he told you about our little situation, Daniel?" Sasha taunted, her eyes flicking toward me before returning to Lila like a predator sizing up prey. "Listen, darling, this isn't some street con. He's legally bound to me through contracts that run deeper than you could possibly understand, and soon he'll grow tired of his common little mistress and return to where he belongs."

"Common?" Lila's laugh was both elegant and cutting, the kind of dismissal that could destroy reputations in our circles. "I'm not the one standing half-dressed trying to manufacture drama in another woman's home."

"Like what you see? I'm twice the woman you'll ever be, sweetheart. And if you had arrived just minutes later, you would have found my husband exactly where he belongs." Sasha's vulgar insinuations made my stomach churn with disgust.

"You know what, little girl," she continued with venomous confidence, "all he needs is one taste of what we had to remember what he's been missing and come crawling back to real family connections."

"I sincerely doubt that assessment," Lila replied with unwavering poise. "He doesn't appear particularly aroused by your theatrical display. Trust me, I'm intimately familiar with his reactions when genuinely interested."

The self-assured way Lila handled herself filled me with an unexpected surge of pride mixed with concern. "But allow me to clarify something about your pathetic divorce scam. It's approaching its expiration date. The hearing is scheduled, and your entire charade will officially crumble. Everyone in this room knows the truth: your divorce was finalized years ago, and that document you've been

parading around, claiming judicial reversal, is nothing but fabricated desperation, a last-ditch attempt to cling to someone who wants nothing to do with you. Your behavior is so pathetically transparent it almost inspires pity."

Lila's comprehensive knowledge of the situation caught me completely off guard. I glanced toward Xavier, who gestured subtly for me to remain silent and let this play out.

"My, my, aren't you an observant little thing? Almost intelligent for a nobody," Sasha sneered with increasing desperation. "Let me offer some friendly advice, sweetheart. Stay out of my way, because his parents are firmly in my corner. They'll make your miserable existence even more unbearable until Daniel eventually abandons you for someone with proper bloodlines."

"That's no longer your concern," Lila stated with the kind of finality that ended conversations in our world. "Now put your clothes on and remove yourself from my residence. Because this is indeed my home."

"You have nothing here, you pathetic social climber," Sasha laughed, lunging forward with her manicured claws extended toward Lila's face.

With surprising fluid grace, Lila caught Sasha's wrist mid-swing, pivoting elegantly as if executing a choreographed dance move. She raised her elbow and connected solidly with Sasha's jaw. While Sasha doubled over from the unexpected impact, Lila maintained her iron grip on the captured wrist, yanked her forward and delivered a devastating kick to her midsection. Sasha collapsed to the marble floor as everyone watched in stunned silence.

"Please collect your belongings and leave immediately," Lila instructed with regal authority that would have impressed any family don. "I have zero tolerance for individuals like yourself—trashy drama queens who believe the world should bow because they can throw tantrums and manipulate corrupt officials."

"You worthless nobody, I'll destroy you completely," Sasha snarled, scrambling to her feet and charging at Lila with renewed fury.

Lila simply sidestepped with dancer-like precision and swept Sasha's legs, sending her crashing down again with embarrassing force.

"I refuse to engage in street brawling," Lila declared with icy calm. "But I cannot speak for Zoe's restraint. Take my advice and salvage whatever dignity you might have left. Get dressed, leave with some semblance of class, preserve that surgically enhanced face, and when the hearing arrives, accept the divorce with grace. Go find some wealthy elderly mark to swindle while you still possess whatever looks you've purchased, because your entire world is about to collapse spectacularly."

"You bottom-feeding little bitch, I'll ruin everything you touch," Sasha hissed through clenched teeth, her composure completely shattered.

Lila had struck directly at Sasha's most vulnerable weakness—her desperate vanity and insecurity about her artificially constructed appearance.

When Sasha rose again to launch another attack at Lila, who stood her ground with unwavering confidence, Zoe intervened decisively, grabbing Sasha's arm and securing her in a professional headlock.

"You know what? I'm exhausted by this pathetic display," Zoe announced, dragging the struggling Sasha toward the exit. Before leaving the room, she called over her shoulder with dark amusement, "Ivy, dispose of this trash's belongings out the window. She can retrieve them from the street like the garbage she is."

As Zoe hauled the screaming Sasha through the apartment, Ivy followed through enthusiastically, tossing Sasha's designer clothes, shoes, synthetic wig, and expensive purse out the floor-to-ceiling windows. Lila cast one final, unreadable glance in my direction before walking out with the others.

We followed the procession as Zoe roughly escorted Sasha toward the building's exit. The elevator accommodated Zoe with her struggling captive, followed by Ivy, Lila, Gemma, and Ruby. We men took the second elevator, and panic began clawing at my chest with increasing intensity.

"What exactly does she know?" I demanded the moment the elevator doors sealed us in privacy.

"Everything, Daniel. We couldn't keep any of it from her," Jude replied grimly.

"I’m completely finished," I groaned, slamming my head against the elevator’s polished metal wall in frustration.

When we reached the ground floor, Zoe was already marching Sasha through the lobby toward the street. Upon reaching the sidewalk, she pushed her roughly onto the concrete.

"There you go. You should consider yourself fortunate this is an upscale neighborhood. Look, nobody touched your pathetic belongings. Now gather your things and disappear before I change my mind and drag your face across this pavement like I’ve done to others who crossed the wrong people." Zoe’s threat landed with brutal effectiveness as Sasha stared up at her in genuine terror.

"This isn’t over, Daniel. Not by a long shot," Sasha shouted, then turned her venomous glare toward Lila. "And you, you little homewrecker, you can be absolutely certain you won’t end up with him in the end."

Sasha turned away and approached her scattered possessions littering the sidewalk. As she bent to collect her designer items, a car full of young men drove past, taking in the spectacle. The driver honked appreciatively, and as they passed, one passenger yelled out the window, "You need some serious work done, lady."

Sasha straightened up, giving them an obscene gesture as tears of rage and humiliation streamed down her heavily contoured cheeks. The men in the car weren’t the only ones finding entertainment in her downfall. Adler, unable to contain his amusement, decided to add insult to considerable injury.

"Hey there, miss, need transportation? There’s a patrol car right around the corner. Don’t worry about your hair situation—you can finish dealing with whatever happened to it later. Looks like there’s barely anything salvageable anyway," he joked, apparently referencing some previous embarrassing incident.

"You bastard," Sasha hastily pulled on her wrinkled dress while continuing to gesture obscenely. Fortunately for her remaining dignity, a passing taxi stopped at her frantic waving.

"Goodbye, trash," Zoe shouted with obvious satisfaction as Sasha furiously climbed into the cab.

Sasha had been eliminated from the apartment and our lives, but the damage to my relationship was already done. I faced an enormous challenge in earning my little one's forgiveness, but I was absolutely certain I wouldn't give up on her, no matter what it cost me.