Mafia Mask 481

Chapter 481: Lila Takes Control

Lila’s POV

I watched the black sedan carrying that woman disappear around the corner, but my problems were far from over. Everyone from Thorne’s security team stood around the building entrance, eyes locked on me, waiting for my reaction. Thankfully, Zoe understood without me saying a word.

"Tiny One, are you going to handle this the way I would?" Zoe’s piercing gaze searched my face for any hint of uncertainty. She’d grasped my decision from the start. Since day one, Zoe had been more than just a friend within the Thorne organization—she was my confidant, my advisor, my surrogate big sister in this world of power plays and family politics.

"You know it, Zo," I confirmed with unwavering resolve.

"Good! That’s what I wanted to hear!" She nodded approvingly, her expression sharp with the kind of satisfaction that came from knowing someone was about to get exactly what they deserved. "If you need anything—anything at all—just call and I’ll mobilize whatever resources you need faster than you can blink." Zoe then turned to the others, clapping her hands with authority. "Alright, people, show’s over! Return to your posts. There’ll be updates tomorrow through proper channels." She herded everyone away with her characteristic efficiency that had made her invaluable to the Thorne family’s operations. "Adler, did you arrive in your own vehicle?"

"Actually, I came with Daniel. He picked me up from headquarters. There’s a department car right there, though," Adler explained, answering something I’d been wondering—if he arrived with Daniel, it meant Daniel hadn’t wanted to face that woman alone. Even a seasoned inspector from the Martinez family needed backup when dealing with his manipulative ex-wife.

"Forget the department car," Zoe waved dismissively. "Come with Finn and me. We’ll drop you at headquarters and discuss strategy over coffee." I knew Zoe wanted more than coffee—she wanted all the intelligence she could gather—but I didn’t mind. She’d compile a comprehensive report for me later anyway.

Everyone dispersed with quick acknowledgments as I entered the luxury high-rise. Daniel trailed behind me silently, his usual commanding presence diminished by guilt and uncertainty. I stopped at the concierge's mahogany desk, my stance rigid with purpose.

"I need to review the security surveillance immediately," I demanded, my voice carrying the authority I'd learned from watching Thorne family meetings.

"I apologize, Miss Sullivan, but I'm not authorized to provide access to those recordings," the concierge replied, making me want to reach across the marble counter and remind him exactly whose building this was.

"Is that so? Fine." I pulled out my phone, leaned against the counter, and sent a message to our building administrator. He appeared at the front desk shortly—the kind of response time that only came with serious financial backing. Daniel just watched me, silent and wary, probably realizing for the first time how effectively I could navigate power structures when necessary.

"Lila! How are you?" The administrator greeted me with his usual deference. Soren was a sharp middle-aged financial manager and former prosecutor whose discretion and efficiency had made him invaluable to residents who valued privacy above all else. We frequently encountered each other in the secured garage when I returned from law school.

"Hello, Soren. Sorry to disturb your Sunday, but this is urgent. I thought it better to contact you directly rather than having Daniel exercise his law enforcement authority," I apologized, aware that even family connections had their limits and protocols.

"No inconvenience at all! That's precisely what I'm here for. What assistance do you require?"

"An unauthorized individual gained access to my apartment today through deception and bribery. When I requested to review the security footage, the concierge denied access. I'm certain you understand the serious implications of this security breach," I spoke firmly, certain of one thing—Daniel hadn't authorized that woman's entry.

"This is completely unacceptable, Lila! And for the record, all residents maintain full access rights to surveillance records concerning their property." Soren shot a disapproving look at the concierge before ushering me into the private security office.

Daniel approached cautiously as we reviewed the digital recordings. The footage clearly showed Sasha offering a substantial cash payment to the concierge to gain building access. The hallway camera captured her using a key to unlock our apartment door. But how did she obtain a key? That was something Daniel needed to explain immediately. Before I could turn to question him, he spoke:

"Soren, what disciplinary measures will be implemented regarding this breach?"

"The concierge will be terminated immediately, effective now," Soren replied without hesitation, understanding that any security compromise in a building housing this level of clientele was unacceptable.

"Excellent. I've already contacted a specialized locksmith to replace all security systems. He should arrive soon. Could I obtain copies of this surveillance material?"

"Absolutely. I'll transfer the files to your secure account immediately."

We thanked Soren and proceeded to the apartment. Daniel remained silent the entire time, the weight of his deception hanging between us like a physical barrier. When we entered, the sickening cloud of her expensive perfume assaulted my senses—a scent that didn't belong in our sanctuary. I immediately opened the balcony doors wide, letting the evening air sweep through and purge the contamination from our space.

When I turned back, Daniel sat on the leather sofa watching me intently. Waiting. His face etched with distress, his powerful frame tense, his dark eyes pleading for understanding he hadn't earned. His anxiety seemed to grow with each moment of my calculated silence. I moved deliberately toward him and sat down, maintaining distance, but before I could speak, the intercom chimed—Soren announcing the security specialist's arrival.

While Daniel handled the lock replacement and upgraded security protocols, I tackled the bedroom systematically. I opened the smaller balcony door to eliminate any lingering trace of her presence from the air. I stripped the imported linens, stuffed them into disposal bags, and meticulously reorganized everything her intrusion had disturbed. After conducting a thorough sweep of the entire apartment for any remaining evidence of her violation of our privacy, I disposed of the contaminated items and returned to the living room just as Daniel was concluding business with the security technician.

"Here." Daniel sat beside me and extended a set of specially designed keys. "I had them upgrade both the main entrance and service entrance with military-grade systems. These are yours." I took them and placed them deliberately on the glass table. "Lila, please, just allow me to explain—"

"No, Daniel! Your speaking privileges are revoked for now. It's your turn to listen." I fixed him with an unwavering stare.

"Understood." He exhaled heavily, the sound carrying years of regret. "Would you prefer to relocate? Maybe you'd rather leave and never return—"

"Will you be quiet?" I snapped with surprising force. "I'm not going anywhere. This is my home. Unless you want me gone."

"Never, Lila! Not in a thousand lifetimes!" His gaze locked with mine, desperate and sincere.

"Then remain silent and listen." I settled back into the sofa, my posture controlled and authoritative.

Despite my outwardly composed voice, fury burned inside me—not just at him, but at that calculating woman who thought she could manipulate Martinez family politics and Thorne family resources to her advantage. Daniel watched me carefully, clearly desperate to defend himself but respecting my demand for silence. I organized my thoughts with the precision I'd learned from observing family negotiations.

"Your associates informed me of everything I should have heard from you directly. I'm hurt that you didn't trust me with the truth." He started to interrupt, but I raised one finger and he immediately fell silent. "I understand how she gained building access, but not how she possessed a key to our private residence. Explain that, Daniel."

"I never provided her with access, Lila. I swear on my family's honor. My father must be involved—I visited the family compound recently for what I thought was routine business." His eyes never left mine, searching for any sign of forgiveness.

"Right, your 'confidential meetings' that I assumed were law enforcement matters." My voice betrayed the depth of my hurt. "For the record, your colleagues told me about the marriage, the divorce

proceedings, the legal manipulation you were unaware of, your parents' political pressure, and how they've prejudged me without meeting me. They attempted to justify your deception. Is there anything else I should know?"

"No, Lila. That's everything. They knew the complete situation and shared everything with you." Daniel's voice carried the weight of exhaustion.

"Excellent, we'll save time then. I've heard their explanations for your behavior, but now I want to hear directly from you, Daniel. I want you to tell me why you concealed all this. Why did you lie to me?" I remained firm despite the tears threatening to surface. I needed to hear it from him—needed to understand why a man from one of the most powerful families in the city hadn't trusted me with the truth that affected both our lives.

Chapter 482: Trust Her Love

Daniel's POV

Dread consumed me as I faced Lila in the secure confines of my penthouse. Her caramel eyes, normally warm and inviting, now resembled storm clouds gathering over the city skyline. Those beautiful eyes that once looked at me with such adoration now held pain and betrayal—pain that I, a man sworn to protect her from the brutal world of organized crime, had caused. I was certain this conversation would be our last. My heart felt as though it was physically tearing apart in my chest, bleeding with the anticipation of losing the only light in my dark world.

I had never been a liar before Lila entered my life. In the treacherous landscape of mafia politics and police work, honesty had always been my anchor. Yet fear had driven me to conceal truths that should have been shared from the beginning. The cruel irony wasn't lost on me—I had lied to prevent losing her to the Martinez family's web of corruption, and those very lies might be what drove her away from me forever. The worst part wasn't even the prospect of her leaving; it was knowing I had hurt someone I cherished above the complicated loyalty I owed to badge and blood.

"Lila, I..." I closed my eyes briefly, gathering courage before meeting her gaze again. "I never intended to cause you pain, but I've done exactly that, and it's destroying me. When Sasha reappeared with those fraudulent marriage documents, all I wanted was for her and my father's judicial manipulation to vanish without you discovering the extent of the Martinez family's corruption. I was terrified that learning about the fake marriage restoration would make you leave."

I swallowed hard, the weight of my family's criminal legacy pressing down on me as I found it difficult to continue but forced myself to press on.

"You're young, raised with traditional values despite your family's underground connections. I genuinely believed you would walk away not just because of the divorce situation being orchestrated by corrupt judges, but simply knowing the depths of political manipulation my father commands. The mere thought of losing you to the ugly reality of our world has been unbearable."

Lila remained motionless on the leather sofa, her expression unreadable as she absorbed every word. Her silence in the soundproofed room urged me to continue explaining the tangled web of organized crime politics.

"You became everything to me. My happiness, my reason for breathing in a world where most relationships are transactions. Like an angel I dared to desire who, by some miracle, chose a man caught between the badge and the syndicate. I exist solely to be with you. Everything before you—my dual life, my identity as both Martinez heir and police inspector—was meaningless. Nothing else matters to me anymore."

I felt vulnerability strip me bare as I continued, knowing the surveillance equipment in my apartment would never record words spoken in this room. "I don't care if my parents accept you into their political schemes. I'd sever ties with the entire Martinez operation without hesitation if necessary. Every lie I told was born from fear of losing you to their world. Every fabricated hospital shift was actually me keeping Sasha and her judicial allies away from you. Each supposed overtime case was me working to shield you from my parents' potential cruelty and their attempts to use you as leverage. I would do anything to protect you from the family business, but in trying to both protect you and keep you, I ended up hurting you instead. And I know you won't forgive me for that."

A tear escaped despite my efforts to maintain the stoic facade required by my position. The emotional dam was breaking.

"Do you have so little faith in what I feel for you?" Her voice was quiet yet penetrating, cutting through the silence of the reinforced walls. "Do you really believe your parents' corruption or some woman manipulated by dirty judges could make me stop loving you?"

Her eyes never left mine as she continued, "Answer me, Daniel. Do you think my love is that fragile?"

"No, little one. I know your love is genuine. But I feared your beliefs would ultimately pull you away when you learned how deep the judicial corruption goes," I admitted, holding her gaze while fighting every instinct to look away.

"If you know I love you, why couldn't you trust in that love?" Her words cut through my defenses like a blade. "Can't you see how I've changed—how you've changed me? My beliefs pale in comparison to my feelings for you! I abandoned those beliefs when I gave you my virginity, when I moved into your guarded fortress without demanding marriage, not caring if someday the Thorne alliance might require you to discard me. I left everything behind when I fell for you, and I've never once regretted it."

Her words crushed me with their truth. My heart collapsed in my chest as I realized my monumental mistake. She had given me nothing but evidence of her love—her trust, her body, her future—while I had failed to reciprocate that trust even as I protected her from bullets and betrayal. Tears flowed freely down my face as the reality sank in: I hadn't lost her because of my family's corruption, but because I hadn't trusted in her love enough to be honest about the war I was fighting on her behalf.

"I'm such an idiot! A complete fool!" I buried my face in my hands, overwhelmed with self-loathing. "I've lost you because of my own stupidity."

"It's astounding, Daniel," she continued, "that you—a man who navigates both police politics and mafia hierarchies—can't see what's right in front of you." I looked up, confused by her meaning. "You're sitting there lamenting that you've lost me, yet you haven't done a thing, haven't said anything to keep me from walking away."

Her words illuminated my final error—I had surrendered without fighting for her. In an instant, I slid from the couch to kneel at her feet, desperately clutching her hands in mine.

"What are you doing?" she asked, startled by my sudden movement.

"Lila, please forgive me," I begged, voice breaking. "Give me another chance to make this right. I can't erase my family's corruption, but I can correct my mistakes. Let me give you reasons to stay."

"Daniel, get up right now and sit on this couch!" she commanded with unexpected authority that reminded me she was Sullivan family royalty. When I remained kneeling, she repeated more firmly, "Now, Daniel!"

I complied, settling back beside her. What happened next nearly stopped my heart—she climbed onto my lap, facing me directly. Her hands cradled my face, forcing me to look into her eyes.

"What will it take for you to trust in my love?" she asked earnestly. "When will you understand that I love you just as deeply as you love me? I believe in your love so completely that I would jump off a cliff if you promised to catch me. I never said I was leaving, but I need to know that you trust me as I trust you. Without that trust, we'll fall apart. And we're too perfect together to let that happen."

Unable to restrain myself any longer, I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her close. My lips found hers in a kiss filled with desperation, need, and a love too vast to be contained within the confines of organized crime politics. It was a love that needed to be expressed, shared, made tangible between us. When her tongue met mine, responding with equal passion, pure happiness flooded my soul. She was mine, and she would remain with me. I vowed in that moment never to doubt her love again.

Chapter 483: Trust Restored

Lila's POV

When Xavier stepped forward to defend Daniel, insisting he had acted to protect rather than betray, relief flooded through me like a tide. Whatever scheme had unfolded around us, my Daniel hadn't broken faith with me. His methods, however misguided, stemmed from love and protection, not deception.

As the Thorne family associates explained the intricate web of corruption—repeatedly emphasizing how Daniel had been consumed by the terror of losing me to his father's political machinations—I began to grasp the magnitude of his desperation. While I could understand his fear of the Martinez family's ruthless power plays, I struggled to accept why he hadn't trusted that our bond was strong enough to survive even the darkest family secrets.

Listening to him bare his soul, his voice cracking as he confessed his overwhelming love, I realized that his terror had been all-consuming. It had blinded him to every possibility except the worst outcome—that I would flee from the brutal realities of his world. His panic had devoured all rational thought, leaving him fixated solely on the nightmare of losing me to his family's corruption.

I couldn’t deny his assessment of my principles was accurate. I would never knowingly become involved with a married man, regardless of the circumstances. But his situation defied simple categorization—remarkably, he hadn’t even realized the legal binding still existed until someone else appeared with those falsified court documents. What stunned me further was learning about the extraordinary reach of influence that Xavier said Daniel’s father wielded throughout the judicial system.

I left Xavier’s secure Thorne facility with fierce determination burning in my chest. I wouldn’t allow that scheming woman to claim victory or achieve her goals. Daniel belonged with me, and I refused to surrender him because of some elaborate family conspiracy or his complicated past entanglements. He needed to learn to place complete trust in me, though I wasn’t certain how to make that breakthrough happen. But watching him collapse before me, falling to his knees in anguish, convinced me he had absorbed this harsh lesson and wouldn’t repeat such a devastating mistake.

I settled onto his powerful frame, gazing into his tear-filled dark eyes, and promised him my love possessed more strength than anything the underground world could unleash against us. It remained unwavering, passionate, and wasn’t disappearing.

When he kissed me, the raw emotion behind it overwhelmed my senses. I couldn’t contain my own tears any longer. What we shared transcended explanation or rational understanding—just as he always declared, we were destined for each other, and nothing could alter that fundamental truth.

"I love you beyond measure, Lila, beyond everything," he whispered when we finally separated, both gasping for breath.

"I love you too, Daniel, more than life itself," I replied through my tears, matching his emotional intensity.

"Oh, my beautiful little one, my heart, please don’t cry. Forgive me, tiny one, forgive me for being such a fool?"

"Never doubt my devotion again. Never again, do you understand?"

"Never again!" He pulled me into his protective embrace, holding me securely as we simply existed together, absorbing each other’s presence in the aftermath of our ordeal. "Let’s leave this place, little

one. We'll stay at a hotel tonight and find another penthouse tomorrow. I'll put this apartment on the market immediately."

"Why?" I asked, puzzled by his sudden suggestion.

"Because I believe you'll keep glancing around and remembering what happened today, what that creature did in our home. You've already disposed of the bedding," he explained, and I couldn't suppress my laughter. Daniel always approached everything with such dramatic intensity. He stared at me as if I'd completely lost my mind.

"Daniel, I'm not abandoning our sanctuary!" I said, still amused by his extreme proposal. "Yes, our sanctuary. I adore this penthouse. It's where I gave myself to you completely, where we built our life together, and it's where we're staying. I threw out the sheets because that viper's expensive perfume was so overpowering it wouldn't wash out even with industrial cleaning."

"But, little one, I can purchase another luxury apartment for us. I don't want you dwelling on that unpleasant confrontation," he protested earnestly.

"Yes, Xavier mentioned you could buy half of the city without even consulting your father for approval," I said seriously. "And honestly, I don't care about your family's wealth. We're remaining right here because I love it here. Or are you planning to keep obsessing over that pathetic performance?"

"Tiny one, wherever I am, the only thing that truly matters is having you beside me."

"That's precisely how I feel. We're not relocating anywhere; we're continuing our lives in this place. But just for tonight, we'll sleep in one of the guest rooms, only because that nauseating perfume is still contaminating our master bedroom."

"And which room do you want to use tonight?"

"The one on the far side."

"Then let’s retire to bed. I need to be inside you and hear your sweet sounds to reassure myself that everything’s restored between us." He rose with me still cradled in his arms, securing me with one muscular arm around my waist and his other hand supporting my thigh.

In the guest bedroom, he untied my silk blouse with urgent fingers, unfastening each pearl button before letting it fall carelessly to the marble floor. His hands moved to my designer jeans, releasing the clasp and sliding down the zipper until they pooled at my feet, leaving me standing in just my sapphire blue lingerie set.

His hands explored my body with reverent hunger, cupping my curves, tracing my waist, and caressing my breasts until I couldn’t suppress my soft moans of pleasure.

"Mmm, those sweet little sounds," he murmured, his mouth teasing my earlobe while his tongue found that sensitive spot behind my ear that made my entire body tremble with desire.

I tugged at his black t-shirt, lifting it upward, needing his assistance to pull it over his broad shoulders. My fingers fumbled with his jeans in my eagerness. Meanwhile, Daniel unhooked my bra, first one clasp then the other, letting the expensive lace fall away.

"These tan lines. They look exquisite on you." His finger traced the outline from my throat down to my breasts before he cupped them in his large hands, lowering his head to taste one with his warm mouth.

Between caressing, kissing, and tasting my skin, he lifted me and carried me to the king-sized bed. He positioned himself above me and hooked his thumbs into my matching panties, slowly—torturously slowly—sliding them down my trembling legs.

"So beautiful," he whispered with reverent admiration. Without breaking our intense eye contact, he shed his remaining clothes and positioned himself between my thighs, his powerful frame casting shadows in the moonlight.

His skilled hand slid between us, fingers exploring me with practiced precision, watching my reactions with obvious satisfaction. His expert touch heightened my arousal until I was desperate to feel him completely.

"So beautiful. So ready, so perfect for me." I gazed at him, fully aroused and prepared to claim me, my eyes reflecting my overwhelming desire. "But first, I want to taste every inch of you."

Chapter 484: Choosing Forever

Daniel's POV

I gazed down at Lila standing before me in my penthouse, the city lights casting shadows across her delicate features. This young woman had completely transformed my world, turning the cold fortress I called home into something warm and alive. Her decision to stay by my side through the chaos of Sasha's legal manipulations and enemy schemes still amazed me. Most women would have fled at the first sign of the darkness that surrounded the Martinez name, but not my little one.

She had chosen to face the corrupt judges my father controlled, the twisted family politics, and the dangerous world where law enforcement and organized crime danced their eternal waltz. More than that, she had forgiven me for hiding the truth about the bogus marriage certificate, for trying to shield her from the uglier aspects of my dual existence as both inspector and Martinez heir.

Looking at her now, I no longer saw the frightened law student who had stumbled into our operations during a previous rescue mission. Instead, I witnessed the emergence of a woman who understood power, who could navigate the treacherous waters between legitimate business and our shadowy enterprises. She had evolved into someone who could stand beside me in both worlds.

My heart pounded as I studied her face, those caramel eyes filled with desire and trust. Despite everything we had endured, the threats from rival operations, the revelations about her true parentage in the Sullivan dynasty, she remained here with me. This beautiful creature had chosen to bind her fate to mine, knowing full well what that meant in our world.

I leaned down and captured her mouth in a fierce kiss, pouring all my gratitude and possession into the contact. Our lips met with desperate hunger, reflecting the intensity of surviving another attempt to tear us apart. This was not the tender romance of civilians but the raw passion of two people who had stared death in the face and emerged victorious together.

Her soft moans against my mouth drove me to madness as I tangled my fingers in her golden hair. I traced her lower lip with my tongue, feeling her surrender completely to my touch. My hands found the curves of her breasts as I deepened our kiss, our tongues dancing in the rhythm of lovers who had overcome impossible odds.

"I love you, little one," I whispered against her lips, my voice rough with emotion. "Every morning I wake up grateful that you chose to stay in my world. I know what I am, what this life demands, but I want nothing more than forever with you."

"I love you too, big guy," she replied with that radiant smile that never failed to stop my heart. "Through police raids and family conspiracies, through courtroom battles and underground politics. I'm not going anywhere."

I returned my attention to her skin, trailing kisses along her jawline before moving to her neck, tasting the sweetness that had become my addiction. When I reached her breasts, I took a hardened peak into my mouth, drawing those sounds from her throat that made me feel more powerful than any badge or family name ever could.

The gentle suction caused her to arch beneath me, her fingers gripping my shoulders with desperate need. I alternated between her breasts, worshipping each one with reverent attention, marveling at how this delicate woman had become the center of my universe.

My thumb found her warm center while I continued my ministrations above, feeling her respond to every touch with increasing fervor. The trust she showed in these vulnerable moments humbled me completely. Here was the heiress to a money laundering empire, choosing to give herself completely to a man who straddled both sides of the law.

"How perfect you are," I murmured appreciatively before shifting lower, continuing my worship of her body with increasing intensity. Her responses encouraged me as I focused on bringing her pleasure, feeling her body tense and pulse around my fingers as I brought her to the edge.

Within moments, she surrendered completely, her grip tightening on the silk sheets as waves of ecstasy coursed through her. Watching her come undone beneath my touch filled me with a satisfaction deeper than any successful raid or family victory.

"You're absolutely breathtaking," I whispered while positioning myself above her trembling form.

The need to claim her completely overwhelmed every other thought. Aligning our bodies, I joined with her in one smooth motion, feeling her welcome me with a tremor that spoke of trust and desire intertwined.

While capturing her lips once more, I established a rhythm that started gentle but built with increasing urgency. Her warmth enveloped me perfectly as I moved within her, our bodies finding that perfect synchronization that spoke of deeper connection than mere physical pleasure.

I felt her tension building again beneath me, her breathing becoming irregular as I increased my pace. When she contracted around me, reaching her peak for the second time, the sensation triggered my own release. With one final thrust, I poured myself into her completely, feeling that moment of absolute unity that transcended everything else in our complicated world.

My heart hammered against my chest as I drew ragged breaths, my mind empty of everything except the perfection of this moment. Moving to her side, I pulled her against my chest, knowing this connection represented far more than physical satisfaction. This was our promise to each other, our commitment to face whatever darkness our families and enemies might bring.

"I love you, little one. No matter what schemes my father hatches or what legal battles we face, I will never fail to protect what we have," I murmured while stroking her hair and pressing a kiss to her head.

"I love you, Daniel. Whatever the Martinez family or the Sullivan legacy demands of us, I choose you. Always," she responded, her words filling me with a peace I had never believed possible in my world of badges and blood money.

Chapter 485: Territorial Claim

Daniel’s POV

Life had grown considerably smoother lately. Several days had passed since Sasha’s theatrical display at my penthouse, and mercifully, she had ceased her relentless phone campaigns entirely. My relationship with Lila flourished, and even my father had stopped demanding my weekly appearances at the Martinez family estate meetings.

"The big day has finally arrived!" Lila watched as I adjusted my Italian silk tie in the mirror of our bedroom.

"Indeed. You seem unusually enthusiastic about this obligation," I observed, catching her reflection as she positioned herself between me and the marble bathroom counter.

"Of course I'm excited to watch my distinguished boyfriend address future legal eagles about crime investigation for a while, followed by more time answering questions from eager law students." She smoothed her hands across my chest and pressed a gentle kiss to my chin.

"I assumed you were anticipating being thoroughly satisfied by your distinguished, well-endowed boyfriend afterward," I murmured, encircling her waist and teasing her with kisses behind her ear.

"My boyfriend certainly has an inflated opinion of himself," she responded with closed eyes, melting into my embrace. "But yes, I'm perpetually eager for that."

I chuckled. "Your constant praise feeds my ego." I kissed her neck once more before exhaling. "As tempting as it is to remain here worshipping you, we must depart. I'll escort you to Thorne Group and collect you this afternoon for this academic torture."

Lila laughed. She had spent recent days taunting me about this tedious guest lecture that Adler Thorne had strong-armed me into accepting for the university's criminal justice program, but there was no escape now.

When we reached the university campus that afternoon, I bid Lila farewell in the parking structure. She headed toward the law library while I reported to the academic coordination office before my presentation.

The program coordinator greeted me with surprising reverence, evidently grateful that someone of my stature in law enforcement had accommodated this engagement. After introductions to various faculty members and obligatory small talk, it was time to confront the sea of college students.

As I surveyed the lecture hall before taking the podium, I located Lila seated at the end of the center row. Beside her sat a young man roughly her age, perhaps slightly older. He whispered something intimately in her ear that provoked her laughter, then casually positioned his arm around her shoulders. I instantly despised everything about this individual.

Following my introduction, I commenced speaking about organized crime investigations and inter-agency cooperation. The time stretched like an eternity. The students gazed at me with manufactured interest, their minds obviously wandering. However, what increasingly aggravated me was Lila's little companion.

This kid persisted in passing notes to her and whispering closely in her ear, repeatedly draping his arm around her shoulder. I yearned to vault from the platform, hoist Lila over my shoulder, and permanently ban her from this institution. Yet I restrained myself—I was not some primitive caveman, despite my instincts.

When I finally concluded my remarks, I received polite applause before the coordinator announced I would field questions for a while longer. I wanted to groan audibly and storm out. Nothing had ever been more mind-numbing. Watching some college boy coveting my woman made it infinitely more unbearable.

As the question period commenced, I attempted focusing on each inquiry while providing comprehensive responses, but my tolerance for Lila's admirer was rapidly evaporating. Partway through this torment, I began pacing between the rows while answering questions. I deliberately positioned myself adjacent to Lila, who smiled up at me knowingly.

While addressing a student's question about federal versus local jurisdiction in organized crime cases, I observed this punk placing yet another note atop Lila's notebook. My expression hardened immediately. Without hesitation, I confiscated the note and slipped it into my suit jacket. The kid stared at me as if I had sprouted horns, while I smiled meaningfully at Lila, who clearly understood my irritation. For the session's remainder, I remained firmly planted beside her.

When the ordeal finally concluded, I returned to the podium to accept the coordinator's gratitude. Several students approached me afterward—more than anticipated and more than I cared to entertain—but I spoke cordially to each one. Soon, I noticed Lila approaching with her puppy dog admirer trailing behind.

"Lila, let's hit the bar. The whole study group is going. We can grab drinks, hang out, and I'll drive you home later," he said, touching her arm.

"No thanks, MP. I'm exhausted. I already declined," Lila replied diplomatically.

"Then what about dinner? Somewhere quiet where we can talk privately. It’s still early. Come on, Lila." This desperate kid was blatantly pursuing my girlfriend, and my patience had been exhausted long ago.

The auditorium was nearly deserted, and my obligation was fulfilled. So propriety could go to hell. I maneuvered past the remaining students, seized Lila by the waist, and delivered a kiss that was decidedly inappropriate for an academic environment.

"Your friend shows remarkable persistence, little one," I said, and she laughed while the guy stood frozen beside us, wide-eyed.

"He does indeed," she replied, amused. "And you have something that belongs to me."

"You mean the note your admirer passed instead of absorbing the lecture?"

"Precisely."

I snorted. "That insignificant scrap of paper has been confiscated as evidence."

"That constitutes invasion of privacy, Inspector."

"I’m a law enforcement officer. I can seize it as potential evidence."

Tightening my possessive grip on her waist, I turned to the young man staring nervously at me. "Aren’t you going to properly introduce me to your friend?"

"This is Max Philip, a classmate from third year. MP, this is Daniel, my boyfriend," Lila said casually.

"Inspector Martinez," I corrected, extending my hand which he reluctantly shook with obvious nervousness. "MP, I appreciate your invitation to my girlfriend, but as you can observe, we have prior commitments." I guided Lila away while she simply waved goodbye.

"Daniel, was that a jealousy exhibition?" Lila asked with amusement once we reached my car.

"What if it was? That clown was pursuing you directly in front of me. Don’t I have the right to territorial behavior?"

"You do, but remember recently I caught a half-naked woman attempting to seduce you. Where’s the mutual trust?" she countered bluntly, disarming me with her directness.

"And you nearly assaulted her. I trust you completely—it’s him I don’t trust." I began laughing. "Incidentally, where did you acquire those combat skills?"

"I have two brothers. Beckett taught me self-defense since I never got along with the younger one. But don’t deflect."

"Didn’t you inform that guy you had a boyfriend?" I asked, wondering if she was concealing me from her university associates.

"Everyone knows I have a boyfriend, but they didn’t know it was you. By Monday, everyone will know, since the gossip network witnessed your little performance in there."

"Does that concern you?" She laughed.

"Start the engine, Inspector Martinez. Let’s go!" I obeyed her command, and once we escaped the university traffic, she eyed me mischievously. "You look incredibly attractive when you’re jealous. It aroused me. Perhaps I should provoke your jealousy more frequently."

"Damn, Lila!" I nearly slammed the brakes, almost rear-ending the vehicle ahead after her brazen declaration.

Chapter 486: Meeting the Family

Daniel’s POV

The morning light filtered through the bulletproof windows of my penthouse as I entered the kitchen to find Lila already moving about with infectious energy. The secure high-rise apartment had become our sanctuary, a place where the weight of Martinez family politics and Thorne business couldn't reach her. This carefree version of my girl was precious beyond measure.

"What's on today's agenda, little one?" I asked, mentally planning a peaceful day with my beautiful girlfriend, away from the underground power struggles that defined our world.

Lila spread preserves across her toast with deliberate care before responding, "First, I'd like to read that note my friend gave me yesterday—the one you confiscated, detective."

I maintained an innocent expression. "Note? What note are you referring to?"

Her knowing gaze met mine with that familiar intensity. "Daniel, do we need to revisit our discussion about trust again?" The gravity in her voice made it clear she wasn't playing games.

With a resigned exhale, I stood and walked to the living room. The note remained tucked in my suit jacket from the previous evening, forgotten after I'd swept her into my arms. Last night had been extraordinary. Returning to the kitchen table, I reluctantly handed over the folded paper.

"There! Was that really so challenging?" Lila asked with teasing undertones.

"Actually, yes," I admitted with complete honesty. "It's agonizing watching some college student flirting with my girlfriend. Knowing you encounter him daily while I must maintain professional boundaries is driving me insane."

She smirked knowingly. "But you did take action, detective. That outrageously passionate kiss you gave me in front of everyone yesterday was quite the possessive statement. I doubt any man will dare approach me now—romantically or otherwise."

The memory of how I'd boldly pulled her against me and kissed her thoroughly brought satisfaction to my face. "That kiss was indeed memorable."

"It’s the only reason I’m not arguing with you right now," she countered. "Besides, I enjoyed observing the reaction from that chattering group of students behind me. They spent the entire lecture discussing how attractive the detective was."

My smile broadened. "So you experienced jealousy too? At least those girls weren’t embracing me, unlike your friend..."

"Daniel, please," she sighed heavily. "Do you genuinely believe any man could compete with you? Look at yourself—you’re practically carved from marble. How could I possibly consider anyone else?"

"So I have your complete attention?" When she nodded, I continued. "Then explain why that student had his arm around your shoulder."

With an exasperated sound, Lila pushed the note toward me. "Read it."

"I trust you completely," I said, giving her a gentle kiss.

"No, I insist you read it," she persisted, extending the note further.

Taking the paper reluctantly, I unfolded it, completely unprepared for the words scrawled inside. I glanced at Lila, who was struggling to suppress her laughter, then back at the message: "Who is this gorgeous man, girl? Any chance he might be interested in men and willing to give me his number after class?"

Lila burst into laughter at my stunned reaction.

"Your friend is gay?" I asked, disbelief evident in my voice.

"Yes, MP is. He’s simply a friend, nothing more. He could never see me the way you do. But he’s quite interested in your contact information, detective." She was thoroughly enjoying my embarrassment.

Playing along with her amusement, I responded, "Tell your friend I’m unfortunately committed to a little devil who made me suffer jealousy all night."

I pulled her from her chair onto my lap. She looked radiant laughing at my expense, so carefree and joyful that I couldn’t help joining her laughter.

"I thoroughly enjoyed your suffering," she teased with mischievous delight, clearly recalling how I’d passionately demonstrated she belonged to me alone.

"You’re wicked," I complained without real annoyance. "But I enjoyed it as well."

Our kiss was interrupted by her phone ringing. Without breaking contact with me, she reached for the device, answered on speaker, then returned her hands to my chest.

"Good morning, sweetheart!" A deep masculine voice resonated through the speaker.

Her face illuminated with joy. "Dad! Good morning! How are you doing?"

"I’m well, sweetheart. I was hoping to visit briefly this afternoon. I’m in the city with Beckett and Katarina."

Seeing her excitement grow, I decided to join the conversation. After all, meeting her father was something I eagerly anticipated.

"Nathaniel, good morning! Why not join us for lunch? We’d be delighted to have all of you," I offered, watching Lila’s smile widen further.

"Hello, Daniel. Thank you, son, but I have business matters requiring attention that will consume considerable time. We’ll reserve lunch for another occasion, but I’ll gladly accept coffee."

"That’s disappointing, but we’ll be thrilled to have you here regardless," I replied, gently moving Lila off my lap and gesturing for her to continue the conversation while I cleared our breakfast dishes.

After the call concluded, Lila and I spent the morning walking through the secured neighborhood surrounding my building and enjoying lunch at a restaurant under Thorne protection. We purchased some delicacies for her family's visit, and when we returned home, she was practically vibrating with anticipation. When building security announced their arrival, she waited at the open door like an eager child.

Their reunion was heartwarming—genuine affection evident in every embrace and smile exchanged. During introductions, I felt the weight of evaluation from both her father and brother. Nathaniel seemed genuinely kind-hearted, but Beckett's protective stance was unmistakable. Katarina, meanwhile, possessed an easy manner and treated Lila like a beloved sister. The emotional bond between Lila and the men of her family was evident in their eyes.

"Dad, where's your luggage? Aren't you staying with us?" Lila asked, disappointment clear in her voice.

"No, Lila, we're returning tonight. Your mother doesn't know I'm here—I came to meet with a divorce attorney," her father explained. Surprisingly, Lila seemed to accept this news without shock.

"You could still stay..." she persisted childishly. It warmed my heart seeing her with family members who clearly adored her, so different from her difficult mother.

"Next time," her father promised before turning to me. "Daniel, I can see you're taking excellent care of my little girl."

"I try my best, Nathaniel, though I believe she's actually the one caring for me." I smiled at Lila, noting how she shared her brother's distinctive caramel eyes but bore little resemblance to her father. Despite their different heights, Lila and Beckett shared similar features. Curiously, they didn't resemble Nathaniel, yet they weren't children of the same mother either.

For several hours, conversation flowed naturally as they shared stories about Lila, particularly her complicated relationship with her younger half-brother and mother. These two seemed to be the source of considerable family tension. Eventually, Lila pulled Katarina to her bedroom for what appeared to be a private woman-to-woman discussion.

"Thank you for taking care of her, Daniel," Nathaniel said, his tone now melancholic. "Her relationship with her mother is extremely volatile."

"Sometimes I wonder if that woman is even her mother," Beckett muttered, earning a sharp look from their father.

Silently, I agreed with Beckett's assessment—I too found it difficult to believe that cold woman could be my sweet Lila's mother.

Chapter 487: Uncanny Resemblance

Daniel's POV

Something about Lila's brother's reaction to his stepmother caught my attention. It wasn't just casual disdain—there was deep-seated conviction behind his words, the kind that comes from knowing family secrets in our world. What really piqued my curiosity was their father's reaction. Nathaniel seemed unnaturally disturbed by his son's comment and quickly silenced him with the authority of a former don.

"Enough, Beckett! You've been obsessed with this ever since Lila visited your estate," Nathaniel reprimanded sharply, but his words only fueled my investigative instincts.

"Impressed by what?" I asked, sensing there was more to this family mystery than they were letting on.

"Beckett hadn't seen his sister for some time after she moved to the city," Nathaniel explained carefully. "When she finally visited his compound to tell him she was relocating permanently, he's been fixated on how drastically she's changed."

I shook my head. "When I first met Lila at Thorne's operation, she was already like this. Whatever transformation you're talking about had already happened."

"Dad, you can't keep denying what we both see," Beckett insisted, his voice carrying the weight of someone accustomed to commanding respect in the Sullivan organization. "The resemblance is undeniable."

Nathaniel’s weathered face tightened with the look of a man who’d buried too many secrets. "Lower your voice! I don’t want Lila hearing this madness! I’ve told you repeatedly—you’re projecting old grief onto her."

"What about you?" Beckett challenged, his tone shifting to that of a underboss confronting his former boss. "Are you going to pretend you weren’t shaken to your core when you first saw her after the change?" His father fell silent, unable to respond.

My detective instincts were fully activated now, the same ones that had helped me navigate both legitimate law enforcement and the shadowy world of organized crime. "I’m curious—who does she resemble? I assumed she took after her mother since she doesn’t look much like you, sir. Though she does share certain features with her brother."

"Yes, but you’re aware that Beckett and Lila have different mothers, right?" Nathaniel asked, and I nodded in confirmation.

Beckett pulled out his phone with the deliberate motion of someone about to reveal a family secret that could shake foundations. "I’ll show you and you can judge for yourself." He displayed a photo of a strikingly beautiful woman who bore an uncanny resemblance to Lila—the kind of resemblance that makes your blood run cold in families like ours.

"Who is she?" I asked, though my gut already knew this woman was significant to the Sullivan family history.

"Just answer—does she look like Lila or not?" Beckett pressed, his eyes holding the intensity of someone seeking validation for a truth he’d carried alone.

I studied the image carefully, my trained eye picking up every detail. "It’s as if I’m looking at Lila in another decade. The resemblance is extraordinary—almost supernatural."

"See, Dad? Are you going to claim Inspector Martinez is projecting too?" Beckett said with the satisfaction of someone finally being vindicated.

Nathaniel shook his head, but I could see the cracks in his denial. "Beckett, it's impossible! Just a coincidence. You've been watching too many crime documentaries and inventing conspiracy theories."

"The woman in the photo is my mother," Beckett explained, his voice softening with old pain. "She died when I was young. She was carrying a baby girl and died during a difficult labor."

Something clicked in my mind as Nathaniel added, "My daughter also died during delivery." Pain shadowed his eyes—the kind of grief that never fully heals, even in men who've seen violence and loss in our world. "I wasn't there when it happened. I had traveled to oversee operations in a neighboring territory, taking Beckett with me to fulfill a promise I'd made him."

"My mother was left with just our most trusted household staff at the family compound," Beckett continued, his voice trembling with suppressed emotion. "When we returned, the head of security told us mother went into premature labor. She called our family's private physician since there wasn't time to reach our usual medical facility. Both my mother and the baby supposedly died from complications." His voice grew stronger, more determined. "But look at Lila—she's the living image of my mother!"

"Beckett, that's impossible!" Nathaniel's voice cracked with the desperation of a man whose carefully constructed world was crumbling. "I held my wife's funeral. I carried my daughter's small coffin myself."

"Dad, we never saw what really happened in that room. The physician had already departed when we returned, and the staff gave us only their account," Beckett challenged before showing me another photo. "Want to see something else that'll interest you, Inspector?"

"Who's this?" I asked, though the woman looked vaguely familiar.

"That's Claire, Lila's supposed mother. Tell me what you think."

I examined the photo with the same attention I'd give evidence in a major case. "There's absolutely no resemblance whatsoever. None."

"Exactly!" Beckett exclaimed with the fervor of someone whose theory was gaining credibility. "Daniel, you're a detective—doesn't this seem highly suspicious? Claire has always treated Lila with cruelty, always!"

"Nathaniel, this is deeply troubling," I admitted, my professional instincts now fully engaged. "Lila truly looks identical to your late wife. But why did you only notice this recently?"

Beckett showed me yet another photo, this one clearly taken some time ago. "Because this was Lila before her so-called 'transformation.'"

The image showed a younger Lila with tightly braided light brown hair and heavy bangs nearly obscuring her eyes. Thick glasses and dental braces dominated her face, which was rounder and less defined than now. Her posture was hunched, almost deliberately trying to make herself invisible. Despite the dramatic differences, looking closely with my trained eye, I could still see the underlying bone structure. It was the picture of a girl who had blossomed into a stunning woman—or been allowed to blossom.

"I see the connection now. Nathaniel, how exactly did you meet your second wife?" I inquired, my investigative mind already forming theories.

"Claire worked in our legitimate restaurant operations. My marriage was struggling—there were tensions over family business decisions. I even left the compound briefly and foolishly became involved with Claire. When my wife discovered her pregnancy, we reconciled completely. I was weak and made terrible choices. Then Claire announced she was pregnant too. That's when our family crisis deepened. But Lila knows nothing of this history," Nathaniel confessed with the weight of a man carrying decades of guilt.

Just then, Lila and Katarina returned to the living room, their conversation ending our discussion abruptly. But my investigative mind was already racing with possibilities, connections, and the kind of questions that kept detectives awake at night. Something wasn't adding up in the Sullivan family history.

"Sorry to interrupt, gentlemen, but we should head back before the evening gets too late," Katarina announced diplomatically.

"It's still early," I protested, genuinely enjoying the company of people who had brought such happiness to my daughter.

"No, Daniel, Katarina's right. It's time for us to return to our territory," Nathaniel stood with finality. "Next visit, I'll arrange to stay for several days."

We escorted them to the building's secure entrance, where Lila bid her family farewell with eyes bright with unshed tears. She clearly missed them deeply—they were warm, protective people who treasured her as much as I did.

Yet my mind kept working this puzzle with its many missing pieces, the way it had trained me to approach complex cases. Before they departed, I exchanged secure contact information with them and discreetly arranged to call Beckett later. I needed to learn more about this story, needed to dig deeper into the Sullivan family secrets.

People often talked about doppelgängers—how everyone supposedly had a double somewhere in the world—but this similarity seemed far beyond mere coincidence. As both a detective and someone who'd grown up in a world where family secrets could mean life or death, I couldn't let this mystery go uninvestigated.

Chapter 488: Abandoned by All

Sasha's POV

The family tribunal hearing loomed ahead like a death sentence, and that bastard Elias still hadn't given me clear orders on whether to show up or disappear. His only instruction was to "stay ready" for either scenario—what kind of underboss leaves someone hanging like this in Martinez family business?

I should never have mentioned my visit to the federal task force office to him. That ice-cold detective's interrogation changed everything between us. Elias's treatment of me shifted completely after I told him about the meeting. But what choice did I have? Ignoring a federal summons wasn't an option when they're investigating money laundering through political marriages, and this disaster wasn't entirely my fault.

My nerves were shot as I paced the penthouse lobby of the hotel, checking my diamond watch repeatedly. Patience had never been one of my virtues, especially when family honor was at stake. Unable to bear the uncertainty any longer, I pulled out my encrypted phone and called him.

"What do you want, Sasha? I'm handling family business," Elias answered, his voice dripping with the kind of disdain usually reserved for street-level runners.

"You’re always handling business, Elias!" I snapped. It wasn’t an exaggeration—since I’d known him, which felt like a lifetime in this world, "family business" had been his constant excuse.

"That’s because I work for the family’s interests, unlike you who lives off daddy’s territory and occasionally cons wealthy marks into marriage contracts." His words hit exactly where he intended them to hurt.

Our arrangement had always been purely transactional within the family structure. He would provide protection and resources as long as I served his purpose—keeping Daniel in line with Martinez family expectations. Everything had been running smoothly; I secured the marriage alliance, Daniel obediently followed his father’s directives, until he developed dangerous independent ideas and joined law enforcement. That’s when my position as the perfect mafia wife crumbled. Elias’s pressure intensified until I transferred it to Daniel, delivering an ultimatum: abandon the badge or lose me. To my shock, he chose his detective career.

Elias then ordered me to file for separation in family court, convinced Daniel would cave under the shame. He didn’t. After those papers were signed, Elias assured me he’d fix everything if I disappeared to one of our East Coast safe houses to make Daniel desperate for my return. I complied, enjoying the protection and luxury in Boston until my allowance dried up and my father’s street operations collapsed under federal scrutiny. That’s when my dependence on Elias deepened. We struck a new deal—I’d return when the family required it. Honestly, I never wanted to come back. Daniel was handsome but painfully righteous and boring, while I craved the excitement of high-stakes family politics. Yet business was business, as Father always preached, so I returned. What a catastrophic miscalculation.

Now I was trapped following Elias’s commands while enduring Daniel’s cold hostility. Not to mention the humiliation from those Thorne family soldiers who threw me onto the street in my undergarments, leaving me with lingering trauma that still haunted my nights.

"Elias, what am I supposed to do? The tribunal is approaching, you promised to handle the family politics, and I don’t even have a family lawyer," I pleaded, genuine panic rising in my chest.

"Christ, you’re worthless!" he growled. "Your father sent a counselor to meet you in the hotel lobby. Follow their guidance exactly. And don’t you dare mention my involvement to anyone in the families."

"Where exactly is this counselor?"

"Figure it out, Sasha! Call your old man," he barked before cutting the connection.

"What an absolute snake! He hung up on me! Elias, you'll pay for treating me like disposable muscle." I gripped my phone until my knuckles went white, nearly hurling it against the marble wall when it buzzed again.

"Dad? Where's this family counselor? That miserable Elias—"

"Enough, Sasha!" Father's voice exploded through the speaker. "The counselor is en route. You'll follow his instructions to the letter, and after this tribunal, you're coming home and forgetting about Daniel and the Martinez alliance! Understood?"

"Dad, I..." The suggestion of returning to our small-time Greenleaf operation was absurd.

"Sasha, it's finished—Daniel, Elias, the high-level family connections—all of it! I'm facing federal racketeering charges, and you've created an impossible situation. You couldn't maintain your marriage alliance, and now you're tangled up with federal investigators. Elias's ready to eliminate what's left of our family if you don't comply with their demands. You're returning to Greenleaf today without causing more scandal for the families. DO YOU UNDERSTAND, SASHA?" Father's voice thundered with the authority he used during territorial disputes.

"No, Dad, I don't understand!" I protested defiantly.

Father only used that tone when family survival was at stake—the last time being after my separation from Daniel threatened our alliance with the Martinez organization.

"Sasha, I'm exhausted by your brilliant schemes. Everything was proceeding according to family protocol until you forced Daniel to choose between you and his federal career. Then you pursued that ridiculous separation despite my warnings about family consequences. Now, daughter, you'll follow my orders, or you'll be cut off from family protection entirely. With no skills beyond seduction and manipulation, your survival prospects outside family territory are nonexistent," he raged.

"Daaaad..." I whined pathetically.

"My decision is final. Now wait for the counselor." He disconnected, becoming the second family member to abandon me within moments.

Shortly after, the family counselor arrived and advised complete discretion. He would make minimal efforts to contest the separation, explaining that pushing too aggressively might escalate the federal investigation into document falsification—potentially landing me in serious federal custody. Naturally, Elias had anticipated this outcome but ensured the consequences would fall entirely on me. While he provided orders and financing, nothing connected him directly to these forgeries. The counselor delivered my father's final message: remain silent because Elias had withdrawn all Martinez family protection and wouldn't provide assistance. I always knew that viper would sacrifice anyone to protect himself, though I hadn't expected such immediate betrayal.

Perhaps silence truly was the wisest strategy. I'd follow Father's instructions, heed the counselor's advice, and quietly retreat to Greenleaf. There, Father and I could plan our next move from our small territory. But one thing remained absolutely certain—Elias would pay dearly for his betrayal. That was a blood oath I fully intended to honor.

Chapter 489: Freedom at Last

Daniel's POV

The day of reckoning had finally arrived. After what felt like an endless battle against my father's judicial puppets, the divorce hearing was scheduled for today.

As I paced the marble corridors of the federal courthouse, tension coursed through my veins like molten steel. The hearing was minutes away, and Sasha was nowhere to be found. The last thing I needed was for her to pull another theatrical disappearing act on the day that would determine my freedom from the Martinez family's political web.

"Inspector Martinez," I turned to my legal counsel, Dr. Citadel, unable to mask my concern. "If Sasha doesn't appear, will the judge postpone the hearing?"

"It depends on the circumstances," Dr. Citadel replied with the unshakable confidence that had made him the most feared attorney in our circles. "But don't worry. I've prepared compelling arguments for the judge to rule today. I even had a private consultation with him yesterday."

His calm demeanor was reassuring. Dr. Citadel was a master of the political chess game that ruled our world - steady voice, unshakable presence, and connections that reached into every corner of the justice system. Unlike my father's crude attempts at judicial bribery, Dr. Citadel operated through legitimate channels and superior legal strategy.

When we were called into the courtroom, Sasha still hadn't made an appearance. My lawyer was about to begin his opening argument when the mahogany doors burst open. Sasha strode in with her attorney, making an entrance as dramatic as the spoiled princess of a fallen political dynasty.

"This is such a waste of time, Daniel," she complained immediately, her voice echoing in the formal chamber.

The federal judge's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Counsel, please remind your client this isn't her family's private drawing room."

"We're cutting it close, Your Honor," her lawyer responded nervously, clearly intimidated by the judicial authority that even mafia money couldn't fully control.

"Actually, you're late," the judge corrected tersely. "Let's proceed with this matter."

After completing the necessary formalities and explaining the purpose of the hearing, the judge recognized Sasha's legal counsel.

"Your Honor, my client, despite her deep affection for her husband and their shared history within respected family circles, is willing to grant the divorce since that appears to be his desire. However, he filed incorrectly under federal jurisdiction, therefore I request dismissal of his petition," he stated with manufactured confidence.

I clenched my fists under the polished table, watching Sasha perform her role as the wounded wife of a powerful law enforcement official. Her charade made my blood burn with rage that threatened to explode past my professional restraint.

Dr. Citadel responded with surgical precision. "Your Honor, we're here to correct a serious error resulting from systematic judicial corruption. The documents used to annul the previous divorce

contained forged signatures and were processed through compromised channels. We shouldn't be discussing a new divorce when the previous one was properly executed through legitimate federal courts, and its annulment was nothing but the product of criminal interference with the justice system."

The judge studied his computer screen intently, reviewing the extensive evidence Dr. Citadel had presented - forensic reports, financial records, and testimony from witnesses who had finally found the courage to speak against my father's network.

"Mrs. Martinez," the judge finally spoke, his tone carrying the weight of federal authority that even mafia families respected. "When the divorce decree was annulled, there wasn't a proper hearing, just submitted documents processed through questionable channels. Did you personally witness your husband signing these annulment documents?"

"Me? Of course I did," Sasha lied with the boldness of someone who had grown up believing family connections made her untouchable. "We were together. We were emotional when we discovered the pregnancy."

Dr. Citadel subtly gestured for me to remain patient, his years of experience dealing with politically connected families evident in his measured approach.

"And where have you maintained residence these past years?" the judge continued his methodical questioning.

Sasha glanced nervously at her attorney, clearly unprepared for this line of inquiry. "In Greenleaf."

"Are you absolutely certain about that location?" the judge pressed, his voice carrying the authority of someone who had already verified the facts.

"Yes, absolutely," she answered, but her voice had lost its earlier conviction.

"That's sufficient testimony," the judge declared, typing something into his computer with decisive keystrokes. When he finished, he addressed the entire courtroom. "I've reached my decision based on the evidence presented. I'm reinstating the original divorce decree from years ago. Mrs. Martinez has clearly provided false testimony today - federal records confirm she's maintained residence in Boston

these past years, not Greenleaf. Furthermore, she claims to have witnessed Inspector Martinez signing documents, but independent forensic analysis proves beyond doubt that those signatures were expertly forged."

Relief washed over me like a cleansing tide, the tension draining from my body as I exhaled the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. My legal counsel had masterfully gathered irrefutable evidence proving Sasha had lived outside our jurisdiction all this time, that we never met during the alleged reconciliation period, and included scientific reports confirming the signatures weren't mine.

"I assume your client won't pursue an appeal of my decision, since she stated her willingness to grant the divorce," the judge addressed Sasha's lawyer with pointed directness.

"Your Honor, there remains the matter of asset division and spousal support..." the lawyer began desperately.

"Assets were already properly divided through the original proceedings, and your client received a substantial settlement at that time," the judge interrupted firmly. "As I'm reinstating the previous federal divorce decree, there are no additional assets requiring division. And with no children produced during this union, there's no basis for discussing ongoing support obligations."

"Will you really destroy me like this, Daniel? After everything our families shared together?" Sasha's voice trembled with carefully manufactured emotion.

"Enough, Sasha!" I snapped, my patience finally exhausted. "We've been legally divorced for years while you lived in Boston without a single thought about me or our supposed marriage. You've only returned because you want access to something, and it isn't a genuine relationship with me."

"Daniel, please..." she started, but Dr. Citadel wisely interrupted as the judge watched with growing impatience.

"Counselor," my attorney addressed hers with professional courtesy masking steel, "it would be wise for both parties to waive appeals, or your client might find herself facing federal charges. She just committed perjury before a federal judge, and we possess comprehensive proof of signature forgery and document fraud. If you persist with this charade, we'll be compelled to demonstrate your client's pattern of criminal deception."

Sasha's lawyer sighed heavily and whispered urgently in her ear. Her face registered genuine alarm for the first time as the reality of federal prosecution dawned on her, finally understanding that her family's local political connections meant nothing in this jurisdiction.

"We waive our right to appeal, Your Honor, just like opposing counsel," her lawyer conceded with obvious relief.

With all documents signed and the hearing officially concluded, I was finally free from the legal web that had trapped me. All I wanted now was to rush home and find my little one, to share this victory and begin planning our real future together.

"Daniel!" Sasha called after me as I headed toward the exit. "We need to discuss this situation immediately."

"I have absolutely nothing to discuss with you - not now, not ever again," I replied, unable to suppress the smile spreading across my face.

"I gave you the divorce you wanted. Now stop the federal investigation about the forged documents," she demanded with desperate authority.

"I can't halt that investigation, Sasha. It's already been transferred to federal prosecutors, and I have no authority to interfere with their process." I turned to face her one final time, catching a flash of genuine fear in her expression - confirmation that my father had abandoned her completely once her usefulness expired.

"End this investigation and I'll tell you everything about your father's operations," she offered desperately.

"Tell everything to the federal investigators," I replied, turning to leave without looking back.

"Things don't work that way in our world, Daniel," she complained, her voice rising with panic.

"Do us both a favor - return to Boston, live whatever life you can manage there, and forget I exist," I suggested, my patience completely evaporated.

"You might think you've gotten rid of me, but you haven't freed yourself from your father's influence," she shouted as I walked away, her final desperate attempt to maintain some hold over my future.

I ignored her theatrical exit and approached Dr. Citadel near the courthouse steps. "What happens with the federal investigation now?"

"I'll monitor Inspector Adrienne's progress closely. She's methodically tracking down every lawyer and official involved in this corruption network. I'll keep you updated on any significant developments that might affect your position."

I thanked him for his exceptional work before hurrying toward my car. I couldn't wait to return home and share this incredible news with my little one when she arrived tonight.

Chapter 490: The Patriarch Arrives

Lila's POV

Life had finally found its rhythm in the carefully orchestrated chaos of our intertwined worlds. Yesterday, Daniel had returned from the precinct with the finalized divorce papers—the legal chains binding him to his politically arranged marriage were finally severed. Sasha had been reduced to nothing more than an unpleasant shadow from his past, her schemes crumbling under the weight of exposed corruption.

Today found Daniel pulling weekend duty, leaving me alone in the fortified sanctuary of our penthouse. I had planned to use the solitude productively, diving into case studies for my upcoming law exams. The afternoon quiet was broken when the building's head of security called up—someone had arrived requesting access, someone I hadn't expected but couldn't quite bring myself to refuse entry. After granting permission and sending Daniel a brief message about our unexpected visitor, I quickly changed into something more appropriate for receiving the patriarch of one of New York's most influential crime families.

The man who stood at our threshold commanded the same imposing presence as his son. Despite his distinguished silver hair, the resemblance between father and son was unmistakable—the same piercing

eyes, the same aura of absolute authority that came from decades of wielding power in the shadows. Elias Martinez carried himself with the refined menace of old-world aristocracy, his polite smile masking layers of calculation as he stepped into our apartment, his practiced gaze cataloging every detail of our living space.

"Lila, I presume?" He extended a manicured hand in formal greeting, his voice carrying the smooth cadence of a man accustomed to boardroom negotiations and backroom deals.

"Yes, sir. The pleasure is mine," I replied, fighting to keep my voice steady as I accepted his handshake. His smile deepened slightly, those calculating eyes assessing me with the thoroughness of a man evaluating a potential business partner or threat.

"Please, make yourself at home. May I offer you something to drink?" I gestured toward our living room, acutely aware that I was being scrutinized by someone who had built an empire on reading people's weaknesses.

"Espresso, if you have it," he answered with casual authority, settling into our leather armchair as if he owned it.

"Of course. I'll just be a moment," I excused myself to the kitchen, grateful for the brief respite.

While preparing the coffee, my thoughts churned around the formidable figure occupying our living room. He possessed an undeniable charm beneath that veneer of polished menace—nothing like the tyrannical puppet master Daniel had described. Based on my boyfriend's recent accounts of his controlling, manipulative father, I had expected someone far more overtly threatening. I returned with the service, acutely conscious of his unwavering attention as I poured, receiving a gracious nod of acknowledgment.

"Lila, I assume Daniel is working today?" he inquired, though something in his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"Yes, sir. But I've informed him you're here. I'm certain he'll come home as soon as possible," I replied, assuming his visit was intended for his son.

"Thank you, my dear. But you misunderstand—I didn't come to see Daniel. I came specifically to speak with you." His directness left me momentarily speechless. "I believe we need to have a conversation. Tell me, Lila, how do you feel about my son's career choice? Doesn't the constant danger, the weekend shifts, the unpredictable hours concern you?"

"Sir, I'd be lying if I claimed I don't worry about the risks he faces daily. But regarding his schedule—that's his profession, and I respect his commitment to it. As long as Daniel finds meaning in what he does, I support him completely."

I knew this wasn't the response he was hoping for, but I refused to compromise my principles to appease him.

"I assume you understand the nature of our family enterprises," he continued, studying me with the intensity of a chess master planning his next move.

"Only in general terms. Honestly, it's not my business, and I have no particular interest in those matters."

"And you're unconcerned that I intend to disinherit Daniel for his refusal to return to the family operations?" His bluntness was chilling—he posed these loaded questions with a calm that sent ice through my veins.

He finished his espresso and carefully placed the cup back on its saucer.

"Young lady, you're quite young. Perhaps you don't fully comprehend the significance of legacy, the importance of children honoring their family's traditions and maintaining what generations have built..."

"Perhaps I understand better that good parents prioritize their children's happiness over legacy preservation."

"Are you suggesting I'm failing as a father?"

"Not at all. From what I can see, you care deeply for your son, but perhaps your priorities need recalibration. Look, sir, I understand what it means when parents try to force predetermined paths on their children without considering their personal interests and aspirations. But I believe parents should trust that they've raised their children with enough wisdom to make their own best decisions."

"Hmm. I respect your viewpoint, even if it reflects a somewhat naive understanding of family responsibility. I'm curious, though—you're studying law, correct? Does your family have different expectations for your future?"

"No, my family supports my choices completely. They trust my judgment and decisions. At least, most of them do. My mother had... other ideas."

"Ah, yes. Mothers can indeed be more demanding than fathers when it comes to family obligations," he smiled knowingly. "And after graduation? Do you plan to join law enforcement like Daniel?"

"That's still several years away, but no. I'm drawn to corporate law, and that's where I intend to focus my practice."

"If only Daniel shared that practical mindset," he sighed heavily. "Lila—may I call you that?"

"Certainly."

"Well, Lila, I believe we could work together very effectively. You're obviously an intelligent young woman, and I respect intelligence. It's no secret that I want Daniel to return to our family enterprises. From what I observe, he's completely devoted to you, so I thought perhaps you might help persuade him. You understand, it would be far more beneficial for my son to leave police work and rejoin the family business—and such cooperation would prove highly advantageous for you as well."

"I'm sorry, but I don't see how that benefits me, and even if it did, I respect Daniel's choices. He's chosen to be a detective, and he has my complete support. If he ever decides to return to your business, I'll support that too, but I absolutely will not attempt to influence his decision."

"Are you certain about that position? I can be remarkably generous to those who assist me." His demeanor revealed a man who had spent decades getting exactly what he wanted, having people bend to his will through either persuasion or pressure.

"I have no interest in that kind of arrangement, sir. I won't insert myself into this situation or this conflict between you and your son. I refuse to try convincing Daniel to return to something that doesn't fulfill him. I'm sorry, but that's absolutely final."

He reached into his tailored jacket and produced an elegant business card. "My card, Lila, should you reconsider or wish to better understand how you might be of assistance to me."

"That won't happen," I stated firmly.

He placed the card on our coffee table, smiled that same calculating smile, and rose, adjusting his jacket with practiced precision.

"We shall see. I must take my leave now. Thank you for the excellent coffee." He moved toward the door.

"You won't wait for Daniel?" I asked, maintaining politeness despite my discomfort with his presence.

"As I mentioned, I didn't come to see him." Before departing, he turned back one final time. "It was genuinely a pleasure meeting you, Lila." And with that same friendly yet threatening smile he'd arrived with, the Martinez family patriarch disappeared into the hallway, leaving only his business card and an unmistakable sense that this conversation was far from over.