Mafia Mask 491

Chapter 491: Hunted by Blood

Lila’s POV

I had barely secured the reinforced door behind Daniel’s father when the sophisticated security system chimed again. My stomach dropped—what more could the Martinez patriarch possibly demand from me?

Drawing a shaky breath, I disengaged the locks. The moment the door swung open, I felt every drop of blood flee my face. Standing in the hallway with a smile that could freeze hell itself was my mother Claire, with my brother Justin’s imposing frame casting a shadow behind her.

"Mom?!" My knees threatened to buckle beneath the weight of her unexpected presence.

"Did you think I would simply vanish into the night, Lila? Did you believe a matriarch of the Sullivan family would forget her most valuable asset?" Her laughter held no warmth, only the calculating coldness of a seasoned crime boss. "A mother never abandons her investment, especially one as rebellious as you."

"Mom, of course I’ve thought about you constantly!" I attempted to embrace her, but she stepped away with practiced precision, leaving my heart aching from the deliberate rejection.

"Aren’t you going to invite your family into this fortress you call home, ungrateful daughter?" Her voice carried the authority of someone accustomed to absolute obedience. I stepped aside wordlessly, and she strode past me with the confidence of a woman who had orchestrated countless hostile takeovers. Justin followed, pausing only to roughly mess my carefully styled hair and twist my ear—a painful dominance display he’d perfected since outgrowing me in our teenage years.

"Living like a princess, aren’t you, little sister?" Justin’s mocking tone surveyed the luxury apartment. "So this is where you’re playing house with that Martinez cop?"

My mother settled into the exact leather chair where Daniel’s father had delivered his own threats moments earlier—a coincidence that felt more like an omen. "Tracking you down required considerable

resources, Lila. You disappeared like a frightened mouse scurrying through the shadows. But the Sullivan family has both patience and connections, something you should have learned during your upbringing."

"Mom..." I began, wondering how she'd bypassed the building's elite security when I knew my father would never betray my location.

"Silence, Lila! When the head of this family speaks, you listen," she snapped with the tone she'd once used to command fear from rival crime syndicates. "You will absorb every word and execute my orders precisely, just like before your father foolishly granted you independence." Her harsh authority made me tremble as familiar terror began creeping through my veins.

"Take a seat, princess." Justin seized a handful of my hair without warning and shoved me into the armchair beside my mother. "Listen to Mom. She knows what's best for the family business."

"Let's dispense with pleasantries, Lila," my mother continued with icy calculation. "I know your police inspector isn't home—he's handling whatever corruption case keeps him busy. No one can defend you now. So without any theatrical displays—you know I have no tolerance for dramatics—you're going to gather your belongings and accompany us immediately."

"I'm not going anywhere with you!" I protested with what little courage remained in my voice.

"Oh, but you will. You're going because I am the matriarch of this family and your compliance is not optional. You're going to marry Connor's heir. The arrangements are finalized—we're simply collecting the bride. I've come to rescue you from this foolish fantasy of independence." Her eyes gleamed with the satisfaction of a predator who had cornered her prey.

"We've argued about this endlessly! Why are you determined to force this marriage? Why do you want me trapped in misery?" I couldn't restrain my tears any longer.

"We've discussed this matter repeatedly, and repeatedly I warned you to return voluntarily without creating complications. I told you I would retrieve what belongs to me. You know I always opposed this ridiculous notion of you studying law and living independently. But what did you do? You manipulated your soft-hearted father into indulging your whims, as always. You conspired with him and fled at the first opportunity." Her eyes blazed with the fury of a woman whose authority had been challenged. "Did you believe I would simply accept this betrayal? That you and your father could outsmart me? You

clearly underestimate me, Lila! You've forgotten that everything happens according to my design, when and how I decree it! You've forgotten who truly controls the Sullivan legacy!"

I'd never comprehended her treatment of me. Justin was irresponsible, refused formal education, and wasted his days causing trouble throughout the city, yet she showered him with affection and protection. Whenever I questioned the disparity, she'd simply declare that Justin was the male heir who could indulge himself, while I was merely a daughter who required guidance. As her child, my obligation was to obey her commands because she supposedly understood what was best for the family—though her "best" inevitably left me devastated.

"Mom, please, let's end this warfare. Allow me to live my own life. I won't marry Connor's son. I have my legal studies, my position with Thorne..." I attempted reasoning with her, though desperation told me nothing would alter her determination.

"SHUT UP, LILA!" she screamed with the voice that had once terrified rival crime families. "I don't care about your pathetic ambitions. I'm taking you away, and you're completing this marriage. That's final! That's what the family requires, and that's what will happen."

"I WON'T GO!" I attempted to stand, desperate to escape and find sanctuary.

My mother's hand cracked across my face with practiced violence, sending me tumbling back into the chair. She leaned over me, her manicured finger inches from my face. "I said you're leaving, and you're leaving! Now move—let's collect your things. Or if you prefer, I can transport you wearing exactly what you have on." She gripped my chin tightly, her sharp nails drawing blood as they dug into my skin.

"Why are you doing this? Why won't you allow me happiness?" Tears streamed down my cheeks, mixing with the metallic taste of fear.

"Happy, Lila?" She cackled, transforming before my terrified eyes into something monstrous. "You will never know happiness!"

Her words cut through me like a blade—never had she spoken so plainly about her intentions. I tried to escape, but Justin grabbed my hair and hurled me to the floor. Everything ached; terror paralyzed me completely. I knew the moment I left this apartment, my life would end, transformed into the wife of someone everyone knew was as violent and worthless as my brother.

"She’s not escaping this time, Mom," he grinned, clearly savoring my suffering. "How do we transport her without drawing attention?"

"Restrain her, silence her. She has a vehicle—we’ll exit through the private garage," she responded casually, as if discussing the movement of contraband. "Handle that while I gather her valuables."

Justin seized my hair again, yanking me upright with brutal force. Then, from the corner of my vision, I saw the door exploding open and Justin being ripped away from me.

"What the hell do you think you’re doing in my home?" Daniel tore Justin off me and delivered a devastating punch that sent him crashing to the marble floor.

"You animal! Release my son!" My mother rushed forward, helping Justin struggle to his feet.

"Both of you—out of my residence immediately!" Daniel positioned me safely behind his protective frame.

"You don’t speak to me with such disrespect! I’m her mother!" she challenged with the authority she’d wielded over criminal enterprises for decades.

"And I’m her partner! Now get out—both of you!" When neither moved, Daniel added with deadly calm, "Fine, I’ll remove you myself. Lila, secure the door behind us."

He grabbed Justin by his expensive collar and my mother by her designer sleeve, dragging them toward the exit with the efficiency of someone accustomed to handling dangerous criminals.

I engaged every lock the moment they disappeared and pressed my back against the reinforced door. My legs finally surrendered, and I slid to the floor, tears flowing freely as pain coursed through my body and soul. I would never understand why the woman who claimed to be my mother treated me as nothing more than a commodity to be traded.

Chapter 492: Unlikely Alliance Found

Elias's POV

My expedition to Boston to confront Sasha had proven utterly futile. The woman had failed catastrophically at the one straightforward assignment I had given her: retrieving Daniel and restoring him to his rightful place within the Martinez syndicate. I was beginning to suspect that her marriage to my son had succeeded only because of the considerable influence his mother and I still commanded over him during that period. Now it was glaringly apparent that he could barely stand her presence.

The disaster compounded when she botched the judicial document manipulation I had orchestrated through our contacts in the courthouse. Daniel spotted the fabricated signatures immediately. If she possessed even a fragment of cunning, she could have compromised him with liquor before securing his signature on the papers—an elementary strategy that apparently exceeded her meager capabilities.

To make matters worse, my son had retained Dr. Citadel as his legal counsel. That sanctimonious attorney had been a perpetual thorn in my syndicate operations—the one lawyer in the city immune to financial persuasion or political pressure. Daniel knew precisely what he was accomplishing by engaging him.

Just when I believed the situation could not deteriorate further, Sasha contacted me in complete hysteria. The federal authorities wanted explanations regarding the falsified court documents. I had never anticipated Daniel would escalate to involving law enforcement agencies. I dispatched one of my most reliable lieutenants to evaluate the circumstances, and he confirmed the document fraud charges carried serious federal implications. The dissolution of their marriage was now unavoidable. It was time to severe ties with Sasha—her utility to the family had expired completely.

With Daniel officially divorced and cohabiting with his new paramour, I required a strategic recalibration. Perhaps an encounter with this young woman would illuminate how I might exploit her to my benefit in bringing my son back into the fold.

Acquiring Daniel's patrol schedules proved remarkably simple given my connections throughout the police hierarchy. I needed to intercept the girl when she was isolated, though my primary concern was whether she would grant me audience. To my astonishment, she proved quite gracious—perhaps excessively accommodating. Naturally, she immediately alerted Daniel to my presence, compelling me to conclude my visit expeditiously. I had no intention of engaging in another explosive confrontation with my obstinate son. Eventually, he would comprehend that every action I took served his ultimate interests and the family legacy.

My expectations of encountering an easily manipulated young woman were swiftly demolished. Despite her youth, she demonstrated remarkable shrewdness and made it crystal clear that her loyalties lay entirely with Daniel. Foolish child! The opportunities I could provide if she aligned herself with the Martinez organization were substantial. Perhaps with persistent effort, I could discover her weakness.

Fortune smiled upon me as I departed the residential complex. I collided with a middle-aged woman accompanied by a young man—obviously her son based on their resemblance. After offering my apologies, I overheard her imploring the security guard, claiming to be Lila's mother and demanding unannounced access to the building. Based on the limited information the girl had shared during our brief conversation, her relationship with her maternal figure was severely strained. This could present the opening I desperately needed.

"Please, I am her mother, and this is her brother," the woman purred to the doorman with practiced charm. "We wish to surprise her. Allow us entry."

Her excessive sweetness toward the security personnel and insistence on an unannounced visit struck me as highly suspicious. I positioned myself strategically to observe the interaction.

"Ma'am, I simply cannot authorize that. It would create serious liability issues for the building," the doorman responded, clearly uncomfortable with her pressure tactics.

"Liability issues? For what reason? Would you not welcome a surprise visit from your own mother?" The woman persisted, her determination increasingly evident as her facade began cracking.

After a moment of internal debate, the doorman capitulated. "Very well. Present identification documents, and if you are indeed her mother, I will grant access."

Following verification of their credentials, he permitted them inside without announcing their arrival—a breach of standard protocol that suggested either incompetence or bribery.

I retreated to my rental vehicle positioned across the street, deciding to monitor the building until the woman emerged. Perhaps she would prove receptive to a mutually advantageous arrangement against our children's relationship. While maintaining surveillance on the entrance, I observed Daniel's unmarked police cruiser entering the underground garage. He failed to notice me in the unfamiliar vehicle.

A short while later, Daniel stormed from the building entrance, visibly enraged, physically dragging the woman by her arm while gripping the young man by his shirt collar. Their surprise visit had obviously gone disastrously wrong.

"Never return to this building and do not dare lay another finger on Lila!" Daniel's furious shout carried clearly across the street. What precisely had transpired during their encounter upstairs?

Recognizing that approaching now would only provoke a violent confrontation with my already incensed son, I opted to trail the woman and engage her at a more suitable location. I followed their sedan to a mid-range hotel several blocks away, where they proceeded directly to the registration desk.

"Mom, why must we remain here? I want to return home," the young man complained as his mother displayed visible agitation and embarrassment.

"By now, Justin, Lila has undoubtedly informed your father about our visit, and I am not prepared for that particular confrontation at present. We are staying—I have unfinished business in this city. Now retrieve the room keys," she commanded, dismissing him with an imperious gesture.

"Excuse me, madam," I approached with calculated caution. She examined me carefully, clearly recognizing me from our earlier collision.

"Who are you exactly?" Her tone lacked any warmth or courtesy.

"Elias Martinez. I am the father of your daughter's boyfriend." She stepped backward defensively, her expression hardening.

"The father of that girl's lover? You clearly failed in raising your son properly—he is rude and completely without manners. I have absolutely nothing to discuss with you. Your son has corrupted Lila into a complete disgrace." She began turning away dismissively.

This unpleasant woman had obviously employed selective charm to gain building access through manipulation. I suppressed my instinct to respond with equal hostility.

Instead, I employed her own tactical approach—superficial civility in service of calculated manipulation.

"Consider hearing my proposal. It appears neither of us approves of this romantic entanglement. Perhaps we could provide mutual assistance in resolving it." She turned back, genuine interest flickering in her calculating eyes. I may have discovered my perfect accomplice in this campaign.

"Who is this man, Mom?" Justin emerged from the hotel elevator, room keys dangling from his fingers, eyeing me with obvious suspicion.

"No one of importance, Justin. Go upstairs and remain there until I summon you," his mother snapped, her irritation at the interruption evident.

"But Mom—"

"I said upstairs, Justin! Do not make me repeat myself again."

The young man retreated into the elevator, casting worried glances over his shoulder as the doors closed.

She turned back to me with renewed focus, her previous dismissive attitude replaced by calculating attention.

"Very well, you have my attention."

Chapter 493: Sanctuary Violated

Daniel’s POV

The stack of evidence files from a recent money laundering bust occupied my attention at the precinct when my phone vibrated. A text from Lila sent ice through my veins—my father was at our penthouse. Alone with her. My father could be merciless when it served the family’s interests, and the thought of him pressuring Lila about my loyalties made my jaw clench. I needed to finish processing this financial

crimes case before I could leave, each passing minute feeling like an eternity. Once the paperwork was filed, I approached my partner.

"Family situation. Need to head out but I'll be back before shift ends. Can you handle things here?"

With his understanding nod, I raced to my unmarked sedan. The drive through downtown took an excruciating stretch of time through midday traffic, my mind conjuring increasingly troubling scenarios about what my father might be demanding of Lila.

When I burst through our penthouse door, the scene before me ignited a murderous rage. A young man had Lila pinned against the marble foyer wall, his fist tangled in her golden hair as she struggled beneath his grip. White-hot fury exploded through my system. Who dared lay hands on my woman in our own sanctuary?

A woman lunged forward, attempting to shield the attacker with her body. One glance at her face and recognition struck—Claire Sullivan, Lila's adoptive mother and a key figure in the Sullivan family's art laundering operations. I'd studied her photograph in family intelligence files recently. The realization hit like a sledgehammer. This was exactly why Lila had refused to give her mother our address, fearing being dragged back into the Sullivan family's web of control.

Lethal fury consumed me as I stormed across the marble floor, seizing both intruders with enough force to cut off their air supply. The woman's protests meant nothing as I physically hauled them from our home and deposited them in the private elevator, sending them down to the lobby with a promise that they'd never set foot in this building again.

Before returning upstairs, I found the building's head of security shifting nervously at his station. His anxious mumbling caught my attention.

"What did you just say?" I demanded, advancing toward his desk with the predatory stride that made hardened criminals confess.

"Mr. Martinez, I verified their credentials thoroughly, I swear," he stammered, sweat beading on his forehead. "I didn't think there would be any harm in allowing the young lady's family members to visit."

I leaned across his desk, my voice dropping to the lethal whisper that had ended more than one interrogation. "Did you not follow protocol and announce their arrival?"

"The woman insisted it was meant as a surprise for her daughter. I confirmed her surname matched Ms. Sullivan's identification documents in our system..."

"You allowed strangers into our private residence without notification?" I slammed my fist down on his desk hard enough to crack the glass surface. "Listen very carefully—from this moment forward, absolutely no one enters without direct authorization from Lila or myself. I don't care if they claim to be family, business associates, or the governor himself. No exceptions. Are we clear?"

The security chief's face drained of all color. "And specifically, that woman and her accomplice are permanently banned from this property and all Martinez-controlled buildings."

"Y-yes, sir. I'll update the security database immediately and inform all shifts."

I strode toward the elevator, already composing a message to our family's security coordinator about tightening protocols across all properties. Reaching our penthouse level, I found the door secured with all deadbolts—she'd remembered my teachings about defensive measures. I pressed the intercom button.

"Lila, it's me. They're gone. Open up, little one."

A soft sob preceded the electronic click of the locks disengaging. When the reinforced door swung open, my heart contracted with rage and pain. Her beautiful face bore an angry red handprint across her cheek, her lower lip split and bleeding from where that animal had struck her. Tears streaked down her porcelain skin. Without a word, I lifted her into my arms and carried her to our bedroom, placing her gently on the silk comforter.

I gathered medical supplies from our bathroom—ice wrapped in Egyptian cotton for her cheek, antiseptic for her lip, prescription painkillers from our family physician, and bottled water. Settling beside her on the bed, I pressed the cold compress to her reddened skin with infinite gentleness.

"Hold this here, sweetheart. Let me clean this cut properly. Are there other injuries I can't see?" My voice cracked despite my efforts to maintain control. She shook her head silently, her golden eyes still bright with unshed tears.

After tending to her wounds with the precision I'd learned from battlefield medics in the Martinez family's employ, I lay beside her, drawing her trembling form against my chest. I couldn't comprehend how anyone—especially someone claiming to be a mother—could harm someone as pure as Lila. The thought of how many times that worthless brother might have brutalized her throughout their childhood made my blood boil with the need for retribution. I understood now why her other brother had insisted on teaching her self-defense techniques.

I thought about calling Zoe, but I knew she was traveling with her boyfriend. The isolation felt more acute since Nora left, leaving Lila with even fewer trusted allies in her corner.

"You need to return to headquarters," she whispered eventually against my shirt.

"I'm not leaving you alone," I insisted, pressing my lips to her crown.

"You have cases to close. Your reputation matters."

"Lila, nothing in this world matters more than you." I hesitated before asking, "Was my father still here when your family arrived?"

"He had just left," she sniffled softly.

"I came as quickly as traffic allowed. Was he threatening toward you?"

"Surprisingly no. He was quite civil, though he asked me to convince you to leave police work and return to oversee the family's legitimate businesses. When I refused to manipulate you, he left his card and departed peacefully."

My father showing restraint shocked me, though his attempt to recruit Lila as his agent didn't surprise me in the least.

My phone’s sharp ring interrupted our conversation—the precinct calling about developments in the financial crimes case. Before I could decide whether to answer, the penthouse intercom buzzed. Security announced Jude’s arrival.

When I opened the reinforced door, Jude greeted me with obvious confusion etched across his features. "Aren’t you supposed to be working the evening shift?"

I explained the invasion in hushed tones, watching his expression transform from surprise to barely contained violence.

"That’s not family—that’s an enemy organization," he growled, fists clenching at his sides.

"I need to get back to close this case, but I can’t leave her vulnerable."

Jude’s response was immediate and fierce. "Go handle your business. I’ll stay with Lila until you return. I was planning to spend the evening here anyway since you’d be working. Now I have real purpose."

Relief flooded through me. Jude had proven his loyalty to our family countless times, and his protective instincts toward Lila had only grown stronger since becoming part of our inner circle.

"You won’t leave this penthouse for any reason until I return?" I pressed.

"I’ll be her shadow until you walk back through that door, and that’s a blood oath," he assured me with the gravity our world demanded.

"My shift ends late tonight. If anything happens—anything at all—you call me immediately."

I returned to the bedroom to bid Lila farewell, kissing her injured lips with careful tenderness and promising swift justice for today’s violation.

Back at the station, I immersed myself in closing cases while my mind worked on a different problem entirely. Between reports, I discreetly made a phone call to someone within the Sullivan family's organization who might shed light on Claire's desperation. Some family secrets demanded immediate illumination.

Chapter 494: Racing to Lila

Beckett's POV

"Beckett! Beckett!" Katarina's frantic voice echoed through the corridors of our Brooklyn Heights mansion before she'd even cleared the marble foyer.

"In the study!" I called back, focused on reviewing the monthly reports from our legitimate art gallery operations. No family emergency was worth abandoning business, especially when those numbers directly affected our money laundering pipeline.

Katarina burst through the mahogany doors, her face flushed with urgency. "We've got a problem. A serious one."

"Whatever Claire's scheming now can wait a bit." I didn't look up from the financial ledgers spread across my desk. "Besides, these gallery receipts need my attention."

"Your stepmother took a little road trip with Justin," she announced, watching me closely for a reaction.

I laughed and continued scanning the numbers. "Excellent. The farther that manipulative woman stays from our operations, the better." The quarterly profits from our high-end art auctions looked promising. "These auction house figures are impressive."

"They went to Port Harbor, Beckett." Katarina's tone turned deadly serious. "Where Lila is hiding."

My blood turned to ice. Suddenly, the financial reports meant nothing. "Fuck."

I reached for my encrypted phone just as it started buzzing. Daniel's name flashed across the secured screen.

"Martinez? I was just about to call Lila." From the corner of my eye, I caught Katarina snatching the expensive brandy from my desk.

"Sullivan, we need to meet immediately." Daniel's voice carried the kind of strain I'd only heard during the most dangerous family operations. "This can't wait."

"Is Lila safe? My wife just informed me Claire traveled to Port Harbor with that bastard Justin." My heart rate spiked as I waited for his response.

"That woman showed up at the safe house." Daniel's voice hardened with barely controlled rage. "She tried to drag Lila back to Brooklyn. If I hadn't returned from the precinct when I did..." He trailed off ominously.

Cold fury swept through me like a tidal wave. "How did she locate the address? What's Lila's condition?"

"That's exactly what I intend to discover," Daniel said grimly. "I'm transmitting a photograph of Lila's current state."

When the encrypted image appeared on my screen, murderous rage consumed me. My baby sister's delicate face was marked with an angry bruise, her eyes swollen and red from crying.

"I'm coming to Port Harbor. Tonight." My voice carried the lethal edge that had earned me respect throughout the five families.

After ending the call, I turned to Katarina, who was now nursing my brandy. "Pack our things. We're going to collect Lila."

Her playful expression vanished when I showed her the photograph. "Madonna mia. That innocent girl doesn't deserve this brutality. I'll prepare immediately." Tears welled in her eyes. "Should we inform your father?"

"Yeah, the old man needs to see this face-to-face."

Soon, we were driving to my father's private office in his legitimate construction company. He looked pleased when we walked into his soundproofed conference room.

"I was just considering a visit to you two," he said with a smile that quickly died when he read our expressions.

"Pop, Claire has completely lost her mind." I showed him the photograph of Lila. "She tracked down Lila's safe house location and physically assaulted her. Martinez intercepted her before she could successfully kidnap Lila back to Brooklyn."

"That woman has crossed every line!" Dad slammed his fist on the solid oak table, his face turning purple with rage. "I never should have brought her into this family."

"We're heading to Port Harbor tonight," I interrupted. "Are you coming with us?"

Dad hesitated, then shook his head slowly. "No. You go secure your sister. I'm calling my attorney and moving my assets before Claire returns. Then that woman and I are going to have a very final conversation."

"Stay at my compound," I offered. Even as the current family head, I feared what Claire might attempt in desperation. She'd brought nothing but poison since manipulating her way into our organization.

"I'll retreat to the old estate," Dad said, referring to our ancestral family compound upstate where we'd lived before Claire's arrival.

"Absolutely not, Pop. That's the first place she'll search for you. Stay at my place until I return." I knew Claire would be absolutely furious after failing to recapture Lila. A cornered snake was the most dangerous kind.

Dad finally relented. "You're right. That woman is capable of anything."

I handed him my spare security codes and headed out with Katarina. On the highway, my knuckles turned white from gripping the steering wheel.

"That psychopath can't possibly be Lila's biological mother," I muttered through gritted teeth. "No real mother would brutalize her own child like that."

Katarina placed her manicured hand over mine. "Claire is simply a sadistic creature, Beckett. Some people have poison in their souls."

"Kat, you knew my real mother. You remember her before she died."

Katarina nodded solemnly. We'd grown up together in the neighborhood, playing in the same parks until my mother's mysterious death when we were children.

"Your mother was gentle and gracious," she said softly. "Exactly like Lila has always been."

The suspicion that had been eating at me for months grew stronger. When Lila had returned to visit us after escaping Claire's control, I'd been struck by how much she resembled my deceased mother. Not just the newly lightened hair, but everything—her mannerisms, her infectious laugh, her compassionate nature. The resemblance was uncanny, as if they were truly mother and daughter.

"It's deeper than physical appearance," I said. "Lila possesses such a pure heart despite being raised by that monster. She shares nothing with that woman."

Katarina squeezed my hand gently. "Your mother was an angel. Lila inherited that spirit."

I thought about all the times I'd discovered Lila with mysterious bruises, courtesy of Justin's cowardly attacks. Her supposed half-brother was barely younger but significantly larger, always striking when she was defenseless. I'd taught her basic self-defense techniques, but Justin was a gutless predator who specialized in ambush attacks.

When Lila finally escaped that toxic household, I felt profound relief. Distance from Claire had allowed her true personality to flourish brilliantly. But Claire refused to release her grip, continuously finding new methods to inflict pain.

The miles disappeared as fury fueled my driving. By the time we reached Port Harbor, darkness had settled over the coastal town. I drove straight to Lila's address without bothering to secure accommodations first.

Daniel opened the door immediately, looking relieved to see us arrive. In the modest living room, Lila sat on the couch in quiet conversation with him. When she spotted me, her bruised face lit up despite the angry mark on her cheek.

"My little princess!" I enveloped her in a protective embrace. "Didn't I teach you the proper technique for kicking Justin in his weak spots?"

She managed a fragile smile. "He caught me completely off guard."

I examined her face carefully, recognizing the distinctive mark that could only come from Claire's signature ring—the one she deliberately turned inward when striking Lila, designed to inflict maximum damage. My heart clenched at the familiar, sickening sight.

"Pop didn't come because he's securing his assets while that woman is away," I explained, not wanting Lila to think our father didn't care about her welfare.

"It's long overdue," she said, her smile becoming more genuine despite her injuries.

I exchanged meaningful glances with Daniel, recognizing the protective fury burning in his dark eyes. My sister had found a man who would shield her from harm. But we had serious discussions ahead of us—conversations I hoped would finally illuminate the questions that had been haunting me about Lila's true parentage and rightful place in our family.

Chapter 495: Stolen Baby Secret

Daniel's POV

The moment Lila drifted into sleep, I slipped back into the living room. An important discussion with her brother couldn't wait any longer.

"I've witnessed plenty of brutal things in my years working between the police and our families, but what this woman does to Lila crosses every line," I stated firmly, settling into the leather couch in Beckett's penthouse office.

"It was even more savage before," Beckett replied, his voice heavy with old pain. "Lila would receive vicious beatings for the smallest infractions against Claire's twisted rules. When she was young, Claire thrashed her with a leather belt for accidentally knocking over some antique piece during a family gathering. Her body was covered in buckle marks for an extended period. Claire always threatened worse punishment if she told our father about the family discipline. I'd already moved out to handle our overseas operations by then, only discovered it when I noticed Lila wearing long sleeves during summer heat at the compound. I nearly went after Claire myself when I found out, but my father returned from his business trip, and we had a massive confrontation. Lila begged me not to tell him anything."

"That incident wasn't isolated," Katarina added softly from her position near the window. "It wasn't the first time, the last time, or even the worst. I'm constantly amazed that Lila grew into such a compassionate person despite everything she endured in that house."

"Shortly before she finally escaped that compound, Claire had beaten her with a wooden cane from grandfather's study. When she left for college, her back was still marked from the assault," Beckett continued, lost in painful recollections of his family's internal warfare.

Bile rose in my throat as disgust washed over me. "Your father never discovered these beatings?" I asked incredulously.

"Never. His marriage to Claire is miserable, so he buries himself in managing our legitimate businesses across the city. Lila refused to tell him and wouldn't let me say anything either. I was terrified of what Claire might do to her if I spoke up and she remained under that roof."

"Why not report it to authorities?" I demanded, though I already suspected the answer in our world.

"Because the police captain's wife is Claire's closest friend from their charity circle. That captain would do anything his wife asked, including covering up any Sullivan family business or Justin's messes with other families." Beckett's expression revealed his helplessness within the web of corruption.

"Tell me about your biological mother," I pressed. "She died during childbirth, but was there an autopsy by the family doctor?"

"No autopsy. My father couldn't bear it. We had left the estate that morning for a meeting, with my mother staying home with the trusted housekeeper. The baby wasn't expected for some time. When we returned from the negotiations, the housekeeper said mother went into labor suddenly. There wasn't time to fetch our family physician from his practice downtown."

Beckett paused, collecting himself. "She called a midwife instead, someone Claire supposedly knew from her previous work in our money management operations. The baby was stillborn, and my mother died shortly after. My father contacted his doctor friend who determined she died from hemorrhaging. The baby apparently suffocated with the umbilical cord around its neck."

"Nathaniel still blames himself for not being there during the family crisis," Katarina murmured, squeezing her husband's hand supportively.

"How did Claire enter the picture in your family's organization?" I asked.

"She worked in our art acquisition division. My grandfather was still running everything then, managing all our legitimate fronts and underground operations. My parents had separated briefly because my mother suspected infidelity with someone from a rival family. During that time apart, Claire grew close to my father and they were together several times during business trips."

Beckett's gaze turned distant. "Father eventually regretted it, ended things with Claire, and reconciled with my mother. He confessed everything, and mother forgave him. Soon after, mother discovered she was pregnant. Then Claire announced she was pregnant too."

"My mother-in-law knew about Claire's pregnancy," Katarina interjected. "Claire left the city, and periodically, Nathaniel's father would visit her with money and check on her condition while maintaining family secrecy."

"Soon after my mother died, father went to see Claire and discovered she'd given birth recently. When he returned home, he was already married to her. That's when our nightmare began under her reign," Beckett finished grimly.

"Did your father search for the midwife after the tragedy?" I asked, remembering they'd mentioned her absence when they arrived home.

"He tried. But she'd vanished from the city completely. Disappeared without a trace, which is suspicious in our circles."

"And the housekeeper? What else did she say about that day?"

"Nothing more. After the funeral, she told father she couldn't continue working for our family—too traumatized by what happened—and she quit her position."

"Do you know where she is now?"

"In the cemetery. Shortly after leaving the estate, she was found in the city river. Police ruled it an accidental drowning, but we know better."

"How long had she worked for your family's household?" The circumstances were becoming increasingly suspicious in typical family fashion.

"Not long, that's all. Just long enough to gain trust."

"What a twisted situation," Jude commented, eyes wide. "Nobody saw this midwife except the housekeeper who conveniently died afterward."

"Want to hear something even more disturbing?" Katarina looked between us. "Claire registered Lila with the exact same name as my mother-in-law's deceased daughter."

"Wait—the baby who died was going to be named Lila?" Jude looked horrified.

"Exactly. Nothing could persuade her to choose a different name. She insisted, and Lila received the name of her half-sister who died at birth," Katarina confirmed.

"That woman has serious psychological issues," Jude muttered, matching my own thoughts about Claire's obsession.

"Indeed," Beckett nodded. "Lila grew up with this woman as her tormentor rather than her mother. I defended her whenever possible, but eventually, I couldn't stand living in that compound anymore. Claire's cruelty combined with Justin turning my father against me constantly drove me to move in with my grandparents' estate upstate. I told them everything about the family situation."

"That's why when my grandfather died, he left nothing to Justin in his will. He believed bad people with money and power only become more dangerous people. He left substantial funds for Lila, plus shares in all our legitimate companies. The same for me, but nothing for Justin or my father. Claire was furious when she discovered this and intensified her mistreatment of Lila, constantly claiming that Lila's inheritance rightfully belonged to Justin."

"Their grandfather owned nearly all the family assets," Katarina elaborated. "The estate, companies, urban properties, art collection, and most of their wealth from both legitimate and underground sources. My father-in-law only has their city house, a portion of the art business, and whatever he earned working under his father. Everything else belongs to Beckett and Lila."

"Are you saying that sweet, humble Lila is actually wealthy beyond measure?" Jude asked incredulously, mirroring my own surprise.

"She has enough money and assets to live luxuriously without ever working. You didn't know?" Katarina responded.

"No. Lila lives simply. She doesn't spend extravagantly and isn't impressed by material wealth or family power," I confirmed. "This could explain why Claire wants to drag her back to the compound."

"Without question," Beckett agreed. "The beating she gave Lila before she came here was to force her to sign power of attorney for her assets. I'd warned Lila, so she endured the beating but refused to sign. My grandfather named me guardian of Lila's assets until she reached adulthood. Even after that, she

asked me to continue managing her inheritance. I have her power of attorney and deposit business profits into her account regularly. It will stay this way as long as she wants."

"That’s fortunate for her security," I nodded. "Beckett, show Jude those photographs."

Beckett showed Jude the pictures of his mother and Claire, and Jude’s reaction matched my earlier astonishment.

"This woman definitely stole your mother’s baby. I don’t know how, but Lila isn’t Claire’s biological daughter," Jude declared, voicing our shared suspicion.

"Daniel, how can we confirm this?" Beckett asked anxiously. "Lila suffers tremendously because her supposed mother despises her."

"DNA testing seems the obvious solution. But we’d need samples from both of them. I’m not sure how we’ll manage that without Lila discovering everything. Since your father doesn’t want her knowing this family history, legal channels are closed to us," I explained.

"Exactly. Lila doesn’t know about father’s affair with Claire or that she shares a name with the baby who died. But the real challenge will be getting Claire to provide a DNA sample," Beckett said grimly.

"We’ll find a way to obtain those samples," I replied thoughtfully. "I’m already formulating a plan that should work."

Chapter 496: Unholy Alliance Forms

Claire’s POV

The moment the hotel elevator closed behind Justin, I turned my attention to the distinguished gentleman who had requested this private meeting. His presence commanded the room—impeccably tailored in what was clearly a bespoke Italian suit, with the unmistakable bearing of a man who controlled territories rather than merely owned businesses. This was no ordinary police supervisor as Lila’s boyfriend had claimed to be. Intrigued by the discrepancy, I followed him to an isolated corner table in the hotel’s exclusive lounge.

"I appreciate you making time for this conversation, Mr. Martinez," I said, settling into the leather chair with practiced elegance. "What exactly can I assist you with?" My tone carried the subtle challenge of someone who had navigated dangerous family politics for decades.

He studied me with calculating eyes before responding, "I don't believe we've been properly introduced."

"Claire," I offered simply, recognizing a fellow strategist when I saw one.

"Claire," he began, his voice carrying the smooth authority of someone accustomed to having his words treated as law, "I have specific plans for my son's future that are incompatible with his current entanglement. I suspect you harbor similar concerns regarding your daughter's choices. My son refuses to return to the family compound while he remains involved with her. I believe our interests align perfectly."

I nodded slowly, immediately grasping the implications. In our world, family loyalty and strategic marriages were everything. "This relationship has indeed become a significant complication for my family's interests. Do you truly believe we can sever their connection?"

"I'm absolutely certain of it," he replied with the confidence of a man who had orchestrated far more complex schemes. "My son may possess a stubborn streak, but perhaps your daughter can be more easily persuaded."

I couldn't suppress a bitter laugh. "Persuaded? You clearly haven't dealt with Lila extensively. That girl has inherited the most obstinate traits of our bloodline. The only method that will keep her away from your son is complete physical removal from the equation."

"Do you have a specific strategy in mind?" His interest sharpened like a blade.

"I intend to transport her back to our territory where she'll be wed to Connor's heir," I explained, laying out the arrangement that would consolidate power between our families. "Connor's son will ensure she remains properly controlled and confined. Connor and I have negotiated terms—I'll secure access to all her trust assets before the ceremony, and then we'll arrange for her permanent disappearance. The

inheritance from her grandfather should have passed through Justin to strengthen our position, but the old man's misguided sentimentality left my son with nothing substantial."

Martinez leaned forward, clearly pleased with this information. "If she marries into Connor's organization, Daniel would be completely devastated. That emotional devastation would make convincing him to return to our operations significantly simpler."

"And what drives your determination to bring him back into the fold?" I asked. In our world, information was currency, and fair exchange was essential.

His expression hardened into something truly formidable. "To claim his rightful position in our organization alongside his brother. I've never comprehended why he would abandon everything to play at being a legitimate police inspector for such pathetic government wages." The disgust in his voice was unmistakable.

"I had planned to retrieve Lila today, but your son's interference disrupted those arrangements," I complained.

Martinez chuckled darkly. "That's Daniel's particular talent—dismantling carefully constructed plans."

"Your son is proving to be quite the obstacle," I agreed. "But what specific assistance are you proposing?"

"I can ensure my son remains thoroughly occupied while you handle your daughter's situation," he offered.

I frowned, considering the logistics. "That inspector has likely issued orders banning me from their building entirely."

"You won't need to enter the building—simply intercept her when she ventures out."

"The execution isn't that straightforward," I corrected him. "If I transport her back to our territory, your son will pursue immediately. And her father would undoubtedly complicate the entire operation."

Martinez's eyes gleamed with predatory interest. "Take her to a secure location until the wedding arrangements are finalized. I'll provide the necessary financing. Locate a suitable safe house, and I'll cover all expenses—consider it an investment in a valuable asset."

I smiled, recognizing the perfect alliance had presented itself. Keeping Lila secured until she signed over her inheritance was precisely what my plans required.

"An excellent proposition. I'll need several days to establish the proper arrangements."

"Perfect." He produced an elegant business card from his jacket. "Contact me when you've finalized the operational details and cost projections."

"I certainly will." I accepted the card and departed, my curiosity about this man's true capabilities growing exponentially.

Back in my suite, after dispatching Justin with sufficient funds to occupy himself elsewhere, I began conducting thorough research on Martinez's background through my family's intelligence networks. What I discovered left me genuinely stunned.

"Well, well! Look what fortune has delivered!" I exclaimed to the empty room. "A direct pipeline to untold wealth!"

Daniel wasn't merely financially comfortable—he was heir to one of the most powerful criminal empires on the East Coast. The inheritance from my father-in-law—substantial as those assets were—appeared insignificant compared to the Martinez dynasty's resources. With this man, Lila would live like absolute royalty. The way he had defended her made his intentions crystal clear. She would possess everything I had schemed for decades to obtain.

"Oh, Lila," I whispered, a cruel smile spreading across my face. "Mother simply cannot permit such happiness. Lila living in luxury? I think not!" My laughter echoed through the suite, unrestrained and vindictive.

Connor’s son would teach her proper humility. That backward mountain boy would break her spirit completely.

"Your privileged existence is ending, little princess," I muttered, pacing the plush carpet. "I simply need an appropriate location to keep you secured until the wedding—which will occur the moment you transfer everything you possess to me."

A brilliant strategy crystallized in my mind. I would maintain complete innocence by orchestrating her disappearance while remaining visibly present to her father. They would never suspect my involvement while they frantically searched for her.

Tomorrow I would return home to finalize all necessary preparations.

"You’ll be coming home very soon, Lila," I promised the air. "And this time, there will be absolutely no escape."

Chapter 497: Dangerous Loyalty

Lila’s POV

I watched Beckett loading the last suitcase into his armored Mercedes with a heaviness settling in my chest. "Are you certain you must return to the family estates now?" The words slipped from my lips before I could contain them.

"The Sullivan operations require my immediate attention, Lila," he replied, enveloping me in his protective embrace. His voice carried the weight of someone who commanded vast underground networks. "But I give you my word we’ll coordinate visits more frequently."

I melted into his arms, treasuring these moments with the only family member who truly cared for my wellbeing. "Tell our father I’m managing the Thorne transition successfully. No need for him to concern himself with my security here." With those parting words, I waved farewell as his convoy disappeared around the corner, their reinforced vehicles becoming mere specks in the distance.

Daniel’s powerful arm encircled my waist as we approached his police-issued sedan. "Little one, that woman refuses to abandon her schemes," he said, his voice tight with barely controlled fury. "The

Thorne building security can prevent her from accessing your residential floors, but nothing stops her from ambushing you at the law school."

He'd been repeating these warnings recently, and though I recognized the validity of his concerns, I felt cornered without viable alternatives. "I understand Claire's relentless, but what options do I have?" I sighed, settling into the passenger seat of his vehicle. We'd resumed our established pattern—him serving as my personal security detail, navigating the dangerous intersections between legitimate business and family obligations.

"File formal charges against her and Justin with the organized crime unit," Daniel pressed, his knuckles whitening as he gripped the steering wheel. "Make this official through proper law enforcement channels."

My heart contracted painfully. "Daniel, she's my mother. And Justin—regardless of our strained relationship, he's connected to our bloodline. I maintain hope that eventually she'll release whatever vendetta drives her and acknowledge me as legitimate family. Surely she harbors some maternal feelings, doesn't she?" Tears gathered in my eyes. The psychological warfare within mafia families remained incomprehensible to me.

Daniel's voice hardened with bitter experience. "Lila, this pains me to articulate, but that woman embodies nothing resembling maternal protection." His words struck like physical blows. "She gave birth to you, yes, but authentic maternal figures don't orchestrate the psychological torture you've endured."

Alarm coursed through my veins. "Exactly what intelligence did Beckett share with you?"

The systematic abuse throughout my childhood had become such routine background noise I barely registered its severity anymore. The emotional manipulation, the calculated abandonment—merely footnotes in my survival narrative within the Sullivan power structure.

"He revealed sufficient details to make me desire permanent incarceration for both that manipulative woman and her unstable son!" Daniel's rage barely remained contained within acceptable limits.

"Daniel, I've extracted myself from their immediate influence. I'm operating under Thorne protection now. Those incidents belong to the past," I insisted, failing to convince even myself.

His eyes flicked toward my carefully concealed injuries. "It’s not historical when I can detect her handprint beneath your makeup foundation. It’s not resolved when your lip still bears healing cuts from her signet ring and the bruising marks her assault left on your skin. It’s not finished when I was forced to physically restrain that unstable punk from striking you again during their last intimidation attempt."

I swallowed against the rising panic. "Very well. I’ll comply with whatever security protocols you recommend—including withdrawing from law school if absolutely necessary—but I refuse to involve law enforcement against family members." That represented my absolute boundary, and his expression revealed it wasn’t the response he’d hoped to hear.

"Here’s our immediate operational plan," he stated, his tone brooking zero negotiation. "You maintain constant companion security during all campus activities. I’ll personally escort you to classroom entrances and retrieve you from identical locations afterward. The same protocols apply at Thorne headquarters—Jude will maintain surveillance responsibilities during my absences. I’m seriously considering hiring dedicated private security contractors—"

"That seems disproportionate," I interrupted. "What’s the most severe action she could take beyond verbal intimidation or attempting to force my return to Sullivan properties? If she succeeds in abducting me, you’ll mobilize every available resource, eliminate all obstacles in your path, and recover me safely."

He glanced sideways with dangerous intensity. "You’re absolutely correct about my response, even while you persist in defending her supposed maternal status." His voice softened marginally. "If she touches you again, Lila, I’ll personally ensure she spends her remaining years where she cannot inflict further harm."

I ran gentle fingers through his dark hair. "Don’t allow anger to consume you. Let’s hope circumstances don’t escalate to that extreme."

"My fury isn’t directed at you, little one," he said, capturing my hand and pressing tender kisses to my palm. "I’m enraged contemplating recent events and everything your brother revealed about your childhood within that toxic family structure. Nobody inflicts harm on you—not while I draw breath."

His fierce protectiveness touched something profound within my soul. "Thank you for caring so intensely. Sometimes I wonder if she developed severe psychological complications when I was born. Perhaps that explains her inability to develop genuine maternal attachment."

"Lila, her lack of maternal instincts stems from fundamental character defects within her—not shortcomings in you," Daniel stated with absolute conviction, stealing a kiss as we paused at traffic signals. "I must handle urgent business in Greenleaf, but I'll return before your afternoon lectures. If unexpected delays occur, Jude will assume protective responsibilities. Please exercise extreme caution."

I agreed, though I suspected they were overreacting to manageable threats. When we reached the Thorne corporate building, Daniel waited until I'd safely entered the lobby before departing. In the elevator ascending to the legal department, I encountered Jude emerging from the executive floors.

"Hey there, Tiny Cipher," he said, draping his arm across my shoulders in familiar camaraderie. "How are you managing the family pressures?"

I studied his haggard appearance carefully. "I'm stable, but you look absolutely exhausted."

Dark shadows underlined his bloodshot eyes, betraying sleepless nights. "Another restless evening. Nora contacted me—she's demanding divorce proceedings." He'd been patiently waiting for months for his wife to return after she'd requested indefinite separation. The situation struck me as particularly cruel; he was suffering while accommodating her emotional whims.

"What's your intended response?" I asked with genuine concern.

"I'm traveling there soon. Told her we should discuss this matter face-to-face, but she refused the meeting. Claims her legal representation will contact me here instead." Despite his obvious heartbreak, his voice maintained steady professionalism.

"That's unnecessarily cruel, Jude."

"And professionally cowardly," he added bitterly. "At minimum, she owes me the courtesy of direct communication after everything we've shared. Don't I deserve that basic respect?"

I squeezed his arm supportively. "You deserve far more consideration than she's demonstrating. Have you informed the other Thorne partners?"

"Only you currently. I'll brief the others after I return from attempting to see her." He sighed heavily with resignation. "Thank you, Lila. You've provided invaluable emotional support throughout this ordeal."

"That's what genuine friendships provide," I replied with an encouraging smile as the elevator doors opened.

"Look who's arrived—our inseparable partnership!" Xavier's voice greeted us from my desk area. He was occupying my workspace, appearing equally exhausted as Jude. "The dynamic duo makes their entrance."

"What brings you here so early?" Jude asked, surprised to find him preceding our usual arrival.

Xavier shrugged casually. "Couldn't achieve sleep, so I decided productive work might prove more beneficial. Completed everything on my agenda and grew restless, so I've been managing reception duties." His smile failed to reach his tired eyes. Then he noticed my facial injuries. "What happened to you, Lila?"

Despite careful application, the makeup hadn't completely concealed the bruising, exactly as Daniel had observed. I spent the following period recounting the recent violent confrontations to Xavier, who immediately suggested assigning company security personnel to shadow my movements. Like with Daniel, I dismissed the proposal as excessive. These men shared an obsession with protective protocols—or was I stubbornly refusing to acknowledge genuine danger? Either way, I pushed the disturbing possibilities into the recesses of my consciousness, unwilling to consider that my resistance might represent a terrible miscalculation.

Chapter 498: Lines Are Drawn

Daniel's POV

I drove through the steel gates of the Martinez family compound with cold determination coursing through my veins, heading straight for the imposing headquarters that served as the legitimate face of our empire. The marble corridors echoed with my footsteps as I made my way to Gregory's executive office, where my brother waited behind mahogany doors, curiosity etched across his sharp features.

"What brings you to the family seat unannounced, Daniel?" Gregory leaned back in his leather chair, fingers steepled. "Your call was cryptic at best."

"The old man showed up at my penthouse recently," I replied, watching his expression shift from mild interest to genuine shock. "He cornered Lila while I was handling a crime scene downtown."

Gregory's eyebrows shot up in disbelief. "That's impossible. Mother specifically told me he was meeting with an old friend about the waterfront development deal." My brother had always been my intelligence asset within the family hierarchy, monitoring our parents' movements and warning me of incoming political storms.

"Well, she fabricated that story," I said coldly. "He found Lila alone, attempting to convince her to persuade me to return to the family enterprise. According to her, he maintained his gentleman facade throughout."

"That's completely unprecedented," Gregory admitted, genuine confusion flickering across his face. "Is that why you're here? Because he actually showed restraint?"

"I'm here to establish clear territorial boundaries," I stated firmly, beginning to pace his office like a caged predator. "To make it crystal clear that Lila Sullivan is under my protection and off-limits to family politics. And I wanted to check on Sybilla's situation. Is Mother still orchestrating that ridiculous political marriage?"

"Unfortunately, yes. She's more relentless than ever about securing the alliance." Gregory's sigh carried the weight of years of family manipulation.

"What about your own predicament?" I asked pointedly. "Aren't you concerned about Mother's matchmaking schemes targeting you next?"

Gregory feigned a wounded expression. "What happened to brotherly solidarity in our shared suffering?"

"Honestly, I think Mother's political arrangements might not be entirely detrimental for you," I teased with dark humor. "I'd make an exceptional uncle to your future heirs." We both managed brief laughter.

"Besides, you and Sloane are sophisticated enough to navigate family expectations while maintaining your own agenda."

Our conversation was interrupted when our father strode through the doors without ceremony, his thousand-dollar suit perfectly tailored, a practiced political smile masking whatever calculations ran behind his steel-gray eyes. Someone in his security detail must have reported my arrival within minutes.

"Daniel! What an unexpected pleasure!" His voice carried the smooth authority of a man accustomed to commanding both boardrooms and back-room deals. "Finally ready to claim your inheritance and take your rightful place in the family hierarchy?"

I held his gaze without flinching. "Actually, Father, I'm here to deliver a territorial warning about staying away from what belongs to me."

"You're upset because I paid a courtesy call to your young lady?" His smile widened with predatory satisfaction. "She's truly remarkable, I must admit. Beautiful, intelligent, well-educated. I was genuinely impressed by her composure under pressure."

"Yes, Lila possesses all those qualities and infinitely more," I replied evenly. "But we both understand you didn't visit her penthouse out of paternal curiosity or social courtesy."

"Son, I'll always attempt to make you see the strategic error you're making by refusing your birthright," he said with practiced smoothness. "If Lila could facilitate that conversation, excellent. But she made it abundantly clear she supports your decisions unconditionally and won't intercede on my behalf. I merely wanted to evaluate her character personally."

Something felt fundamentally wrong. My father was being too direct, too reasonable for his usual manipulative style. No psychological pressure, no veiled threats, no elaborate mind games. This straightforward approach was completely out of character.

"What's your real objective here, Father?" I pressed, searching his face for the tells that usually betrayed his true intentions.

"Lila explained she'll support whatever path you choose," he continued with casual precision. "So if you decide to return to the family business, she'll stand beside you. That's actually reassuring, knowing she's not the obstacle preventing your homecoming to the organization."

"She was never an obstacle," I declared with absolute certainty. "Lila would follow me into hell itself. But that doesn't mean you've persuaded me of anything. And let me remind you of my previous warning about consequences."

"Which specific warning would that be?" His unnatural calmness was deeply unsettling, completely absent of his usual theatrical anger or political posturing.

"If you harm her in any capacity, if you attempt to separate us through family politics or business pressure, I'll sever all ties with this organization permanently," I declared with lethal quiet. "I'm absolutely serious about this. The disaster with Sasha was more than sufficient demonstration of family interference in my personal life."

"Ah yes, Sasha." He nodded thoughtfully. "I understand she's returned to her parents' estate in Connecticut. The divorce proceedings concluded satisfactorily, I presume?"

My father only maintained this level of composed civility when he'd already achieved his strategic objective through channels I couldn't yet identify. Something was happening behind the scenes, some political maneuvering I hadn't detected.

"Yes, the divorce was finalized through proper legal channels," I confirmed carefully. "But she's still facing federal investigation for those forged documentation charges."

"Absolutely despicable behavior," he shook his head in apparent moral disgust. "Falsifying legal documents for personal gain... I hope justice prevails swiftly. But regarding Lila, I was merely conducting due diligence. Since I can't enlist her assistance, I'll pursue alternative approaches to convince you. I won't involve her in our family disagreements."

"Just like that?" My skepticism was profound and warranted.

"Just like that." He smoothly redirected the conversation. "Will you be joining your mother for lunch today?"

"Yes. Will you be attending?"

"Prior commitment with a longstanding client about the harbor commission appointments. Unless you'd prefer a complete family gathering? I could reschedule."

"Unnecessary," I replied, still deeply suspicious of his unprecedented reasonableness. "I'll arrange another visit for a full family meal."

After delivering my territorial warning, Gregory accompanied me to our parents' estate. We arrived to the sound of raised voices echoing through the marble foyer—my mother and Sybilla locked in heated combat while Grant, that parasitic social climber, lounged smugly on the antique sofa like he owned the place.

"What the hell is happening here?" I demanded, striding into the main salon. "We could hear you screaming from the circular driveway."

"Daniel!" Sybilla rushed into my arms with desperate relief. "Thank God you're finally here. Mother's trying to force me into signing engagement contracts soon!"

"You're still pursuing this political farce, Mother?" I asked with barely contained fury. "Can't you see you're destroying Sybilla's life for your social ambitions?"

"Now, now, future brother-in-law," Grant smirked without bothering to rise from his comfortable position. "Your sister will be perfectly content in our arrangement."

"I'm not your brother-in-law, and I never will be," I growled with dangerous quiet. "Remove yourself from this house before I have you physically ejected."

"Daniel!" My mother gasped with theatrical horror. "This is my residence. You don't issue ultimatums here."

"True," I acknowledged with deadly calm, "but if you want to witness this social parasite leave here in an ambulance rather than his luxury sedan, by all means let him remain."

My mother recognized the lethal promise in my voice from years of experience. "Grant, leave immediately. I'll contact you later about arrangements." When he remained seated with entitled arrogance, she barked, "NOW, GRANT!"

After he scurried out like the coward he was, my mother turned to face me. "What brings you to the family estate unannounced?"

"Aren't you pleased to see your eldest son?" I asked with cold mockery.

"Of course I am, just surprised by the timing," she replied, embracing me with calculated stiffness. "What business did you have with your father earlier?"

"I wanted answers about why he visited my girlfriend without my knowledge," I answered, watching her face carefully for reactions.

"Discuss that with him directly," she deflected with practiced evasion, then instructed the household staff to prepare additional place settings. When my mother adopted this defensive posture, she became completely impenetrable.

"Why the sudden urgency about Sybilla's engagement?" I pressed relentlessly.

"Because the wedding ceremony is scheduled for very soon," she replied with matter-of-fact coldness.

Gregory and I exchanged alarmed glances loaded with shared concern. "And when exactly were we going to be informed of this timeline?" he demanded.

"It's nothing elaborate or public. They'll sign the contracts here in the library, followed by a private luncheon with only immediate family and his parents," she explained with unnerving composure.

"She absolutely will not marry that social-climbing parasite," I declared with absolute finality. "Sybilla, go pack your belongings immediately. You're coming home with me."

My sister's face illuminated with joy as she rushed toward the grand staircase, but my mother's voice stopped her cold.

"Stop right there, young lady! Daniel, do not interfere in my family arrangements. Your sister will fulfill her obligations to this family, and that decision is final!" Her face flushed with aristocratic fury.

I gestured for Sybilla to continue upstairs and turned back to face my mother with cold resolve. "Mother, I love you despite everything, but I cannot and will not support this travesty. You will not trap Sybilla in a loveless political marriage for your social aspirations. She's an adult with the right to make her own choices. Your control over her life ends today."

"If you walk out that door with her, Sybilla," my mother's voice turned arctic with calculated cruelty, "consider yourself motherless from this moment forward!"

Chapter 499: Sister's Sanctuary

Daniel's POV

My mother's steely gaze remained locked on me, deliberately ignoring Sybilla who stood frozen on the marble staircase of our family estate, her face pale with shock at the ultimatum that had just shattered the afternoon silence.

"Sybilla, go pack your belongings," I commanded, keeping my eyes fixed on my mother's imperious stare. "We'll handle our mother when she's thinking more rationally about family loyalty."

A while later, I steered my black sedan away from the Martinez family compound with my siblings beside me. My mother hadn't even acknowledged her daughter's departure—a calculated display of power. She was applying pressure in the way she knew best. No one wielded emotional manipulation quite like my mother, particularly when it came to controlling my sister's future.

"Daniel, she despises me now!" Sybilla wept from the backseat as we headed toward the private airstrip. "How am I supposed to navigate this?"

"Mom doesn't despise you, Sybilla. You act like you've never witnessed her tactics before," I said, attempting to steady her nerves. "She's essentially a calculating matriarch who says whatever necessary to bend people to her vision. Port't you observed how she operates with Dad?"

"I simply cannot comprehend why she's so determined to force this union with that pathetic Barlow heir," Sybilla said, angrily wiping away her tears.

Gregory shifted forward from the passenger seat. "I might have some clarity on that matter. I had a conversation with Dad recently. He's actually apprehensive about this marriage arrangement, but Mom extracted a promise that he'd support her publicly on this decision."

"Why does that not surprise me in the slightest?" I muttered under my breath.

"You understand how they function—absolute solidarity," Gregory continued. "When one makes a family decision, the other backs it completely regardless of their private reservations."

"But what's driving Mom's investment in this particular alliance?" I asked, genuinely seeking to understand her strategic thinking.

"Grant's mother runs in Mom's social circle and believes marriage might stabilize her son's reckless behavior. She assured Mom that after the wedding ceremony, she'd keep him under strict supervision, especially since they'd be residing in the Barlow family mansion. Mom then persuaded Dad that forming ties with the Barlow organization would strengthen our territorial influence." Gregory explained the political machinery behind the arrangement.

Sybilla's grief instantly transformed into blazing fury. "Live under that woman's roof? She's absolutely intolerable!"

"Precisely my point," Gregory agreed with a knowing nod. "So stop those tears and take charge of your destiny, sister. Go with Daniel and seize control of your own path, because if that worthless Grant ever dares lay a hand on you inappropriately, Daniel will need to arrest me for murder."

Sybilla dried her face, drew a deep breath, and met our concerned gazes in the rearview mirror. "Well, I suppose I'm officially a family exile like Daniel now." She managed a laugh, playfully striking my shoulder. "You'll be responsible for supporting me financially."

"What you're going to do is secure legitimate employment," I grumbled, which sent both of them into fits of amused laughter.

From Port Harbor's private terminal, we proceeded directly to collect Lila from her position at Thorne Corporation. During our flight, I had thoroughly explained the family crisis to Sybilla, who was appalled by the arranged marriage situation. Despite all her theatrical tendencies, our mother had never resorted to physical violence against any of us. Even with her stubborn insistence about this union, I couldn't envision her literally dragging Sybilla home against her will.

My encrypted phone buzzed, and I connected it through the vehicle's secure communication system. "Dad."

"Daniel, I understand you're providing sanctuary to a family runaway," my father said, his tone more amused than genuinely angry.

"I warned you that if she refused this marriage, she wouldn't be compelled," I replied with unwavering firmness.

"I have complete confidence you'll provide proper protection for her," he sighed heavily. "When you grow weary of the responsibility, simply arrange her return. Your mother wasn't being entirely serious about permanent estrangement."

"Are you still advancing this marriage alliance?"

"Yes, we are committed to this path. I'll eventually convince your sister this arrangement serves her best interests and the family's strategic position. But I'll allow her time to cool her emotions first. Let's characterize this as an extended visit to you, and she'll return home soon enough." He maintained his diplomatic composure despite my mother's sharp complaints clearly audible in the background.

"Advise Mom to control her temper. This situation escalated beyond reason, and that's entirely her responsibility."

"Daniel, your mother is accustomed to having her directives followed without question. That fundamental aspect won't change. And Sybilla is simply displaying youthful rebellion."

"If she refuses to adapt her methods, we will adapt our responses," I warned with quiet menace. "First me choosing law enforcement, now Sybilla fleeing, and if Mom doesn't reconsider her approach, Gregory will be the next to abandon ship. I suspect you don't want to lose him as well—he's the only son who actually wants to remain with the family business operations. Consider that carefully, Dad."

"I'll manage your mother's expectations. Keep Sybilla under control until I arrive to retrieve her," he said before terminating the connection.

"He's planning to come collect you personally," I teased my sister, who made an expression of pure revulsion.

"I'm not returning anywhere! I'm staying here, finding meaningful work, and achieving complete independence," Sybilla declared with fierce determination.

"I believe you and little one will form an excellent friendship," I smiled, anticipating that my sister would discover a valuable ally in Lila.

"I'm tremendously excited to finally meet her!" Sybilla's eyes sparkled with genuine enthusiasm.

When the elevator doors parted at Thorne Corporation's executive floor, Sybilla was hanging playfully on my shoulder, and I had my protective arm around her waist. I immediately detected the little one's jealous expression burning across her delicate features. She looked absolutely enchanting when displaying territorial anger. I stopped directly in front of her reception desk, and she glared at me like she wanted to commit justifiable homicide.

"I've returned, little one," I smiled warmly, but received no reciprocal warmth in return. "No welcome kiss for me?"

"Is this her?" Sybilla asked with a mischievous grin.

"Yes, this is her," I confirmed, my eyes never departing from Lila's distinctly unfriendly gaze.

"Oh, Lila, I've been desperately wanting to meet you!" Sybilla released me and circled around the polished desk toward Lila. "I'm Sybilla, this fool's sister."

Lila studied her carefully, then examined me, then returned her attention to Sybilla. Finally, she produced a genuine smile, rose from her chair, and warmly embraced my sister.

"Hi, Sybilla! I'm absolutely delighted you're here!" Lila's tone shifted to sudden enthusiasm and welcome.

"Tiny Cipher, has Daniel provided any new intelligence on—" Jude emerged from his private office, stopping abruptly when he spotted me. "Oh, you've returned to us."

"Just landed. Is everything running smoothly?" I asked, noticing something seemed slightly off in his demeanor.

"Yes, all operations are functioning normally. And who might this stunning lady be?" Jude asked, immediately shifting into his characteristic charming mode.

My sister rewarded him with an absolutely dazzling smile that could melt steel.

"My sister, Sybilla. She'll be staying with us for an extended period," I explained the new arrangement.

"Not just temporarily, brother. I'm here to establish permanent residence," Sybilla corrected with authority. "But don't worry, Lila, once I secure proper employment, I'll find my own accommodations."

"Sybilla, you're completely welcome to stay as long as you desire," Lila reassured her with genuine warmth.

"Oh, thank you so much, Lila!" Sybilla turned back to Jude with obvious interest. "It’s truly a pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"The pleasure is entirely mine, Sybilla. I’m Jude."

"Jude is Xavier’s assistant," I explained the organizational structure.

"Oh! Xavier works in this building too?" My sister’s expression suddenly shifted to serious concern, and I confirmed with a solemn nod.

Chapter 500: Predator on Campus

Lila’s POV

Talk about awkward first encounters in the underworld. There stood Daniel with a stunning woman clinging to his arm, wearing that infuriating smirk instead of immediately clarifying who she was. My blood started to simmer until the woman stepped forward, preventing me from making a complete fool of myself in front of what I assumed was another Martinez family associate.

Sybilla possessed the kind of devastating beauty that ran in powerful bloodlines. She shared Daniel’s piercing dark eyes, framed by impossibly long lashes that would make any socialite envious. Her tall, elegant frame moved with the refined grace expected of mafia nobility, and her sleek black hair fell perfectly around her heart-shaped face. Those full lips and porcelain complexion completed the picture of genetic aristocracy. Despite her intimidating beauty, she radiated genuine warmth—until Daniel mentioned Xavier Black, when her smile visibly dimmed. Clearly some complicated history between Thorne’s consigliere and the Martinez princess.

"Where are the power brokers today, Jude?" Daniel asked, obviously referring to the Thorne leadership.

Jude glanced up from monitoring the legitimate business operations. "Xavier arrived before dawn and vanished just as quickly—probably handling some delicate negotiations. But Caleb..." He nodded toward the executive suite where Caleb was emerging.

"Right here! Daniel, good to see you. Ivy's been asking where you two have been keeping yourselves," Caleb greeted my boyfriend with the firm handshake of allied family heads. Guilt twisted in my stomach realizing we hadn't visited the Thorne compound in weeks.

"Tell her we'll make an appearance soon. Caleb, meet my sister, Sybilla," Daniel introduced her casually, as though she wasn't the secret family member I'd just discovered existed.

Caleb studied her carefully after their formal greeting. "But Xavier mentioned she was still practically a child..."

"She is!" Daniel insisted, earning an exasperated sigh from Sybilla.

Jude chuckled from his surveillance station. "In what reality, Daniel? Your sister is clearly a grown woman—a remarkably beautiful one. Accept the truth before you drive yourself insane intimidating every potential suitor who glances her direction."

"Enough, Jude," Daniel growled. "Sybilla came here specifically to escape an overly persistent arrangement. What she requires now is legitimate employment, not additional complications."

I couldn't miss the protective steel in his voice. This was a facet of Daniel's family loyalty I hadn't fully witnessed before.

"I can arrange something for you, Sybilla," Caleb offered smoothly. "Forward your credentials to Jude, and I'll establish an appropriate position within our operations."

Sybilla's face illuminated instantly. "That would be incredible, Caleb! Thank you so much."

After leaving Thorne Group's headquarters, Daniel drove me toward the university district. He kept insisting on providing full escort service directly to my lecture halls, but I gently resisted.

"Listen, my formidable protector, the campus is right there. I already coordinated with MP, and he understands the security protocols. He'll meet me at the main entrance and maintain close proximity

during classes. He promised to stay alert whenever you're handling family business," I explained for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Fine, but remind him not to get too comfortable," he grumbled with territorial jealousy.

I couldn't suppress my laughter at his possessiveness. I kissed him farewell, gave Sybilla a quick embrace, and headed toward the entrance where MP was stationed.

"Lila!" MP's eyes widened as he examined my face. "It looks worse than I imagined from your description. Don't worry, I'll maintain surveillance around here."

My friend draped his arm around my shoulders as we walked toward the law building, and I briefed him about Sybilla's situation with the arranged political marriage.

"Seriously, what era are these family matriarchs living in?" MP shook his head in disbelief. "Someone needs to inform them that forced alliances went out of fashion with medieval dynasties. Anyway, wait until you hear about this guy I encountered last weekend."

"Still navigating those dating platforms, MP?" I teased, knowing his pattern of meeting potential partners only to be disappointed within days.

"We can't all have dangerous Greek gods fall directly into our lives like you did, Lila! Some of us ordinary mortals have to work for romantic opportunities." MP's theatrical delivery never failed to amuse me.

"Lila!" A gravelly male voice called out, cutting through my laughter.

I turned, scanning for the source, and froze. Several yards away stood a imposing man with a thick mustache, wearing expensive cowboy boots and a belt buckle so massive it could serve as body armor. I recognized him immediately but couldn't comprehend why Connor, casino kingpin and smuggling baron, would be here on university grounds.

"Should I contact Detective Martinez?" MP whispered urgently.

"Not yet," I replied, rooted in place as the dangerous man approached.

"So this is your boyfriend?" Connor laughed, eyeing MP with obvious disdain. "Your mother greatly exaggerated—he's just a skinny college boy."

"What brings you here, Connor?" I asked, trying to mask my terror. He was literally the last person I expected to encounter at my law school.

"My, you've matured beautifully. Almost thought you were..." His gaze lingered on me with unsettling familiarity before he caught himself.

"Almost thought I was what?" Despite my anxiety, curiosity overrode caution.

"Never mind." He dismissed it with a wave. "I came for a brief conversation. Hey, law boy, disappear—this concerns family business," he barked at MP with a shooing motion.

I straightened my spine, channeling the Sullivan family steel. "He stays. If you want to negotiate, do it now. I have constitutional law and won't be late." My voice projected more confidence than I felt.

"Easy there, princess. I'm not here to cause immediate harm." His smile held no warmth as he raised a hand toward my face. I stepped back immediately. "That woman still hasn't learned to control her violent impulses, I see." He noted my poorly concealed bruise from Claire's latest outburst.

"What do you want? If you're here to pressure me into accepting your worthless son's marriage proposal, save your energy—it's never happening!" I declared, drawing strength from MP's loyal presence beside me.

"Why do you resist the arrangement so vehemently?" Connor asked with uncharacteristic calm that made him infinitely more dangerous.

"Do I seriously need to explain the obvious?"

"No," he chuckled darkly. "That boy causes me nothing but expensive problems anyway. But Claire and I had a lucrative understanding. She promised to deliver you home this weekend and failed spectacularly. I came to assess if our partnership is still worth the considerable headaches."

"I have nothing to do with your criminal enterprises!"

"Oh, but you absolutely do. After seeing you today, I might just revise several terms of our business arrangement."

"What are you implying?" Ice crawled up my spine at his calculating assessment.

"You'll understand when the time comes. But make no mistake, princess—you will return to fulfill family obligations," he said with the semblance of a smile that felt more like a death sentence. "Until our next meeting, Lila."

Connor turned and walked away with the confident stride of a man who owned half the city's underground. His words about modifying—not canceling—their deal terrified me more than any direct physical threat could have.

"Come on, Lila, let's find somewhere secure to sit. You're trembling," MP guided me into the lecture hall and helped me into a seat. Between my mother's escalating violence and now Connor's cryptic campus visit, I felt trapped in a nightmare with powerful enemies closing in from all sides.