Mafia Mask 501

Chapter 501: Unwelcome Visitor

Lila’s POV

Max stayed glued to my side as we exited the law building. True to his word, he hadn’t left me alone for a moment since Connor’s unsettling visit. Outside, Daniel was already waiting, leaning against his unmarked police cruiser with that smile that always made my heart flutter despite the dangerous world we inhabited.

"Hey, little one! I missed you," he said, wrapping his arms around me in a warm embrace before acknowledging my friend. "Good evening, Max."

"Good evening, Inspector," Max replied, shifting his weight awkwardly.

"Man, just call me Daniel," he said with a casual wave. "Sorry about that day, but I think you understand why." The fact that Daniel was apologizing to Max for his initial jealous reaction when they first met touched me deeply, especially knowing how territorial men in our world could be.

"No worries, Daniel. I get it," Max said with an understanding nod. "And your protectiveness is justified—Lila is truly beautiful and incredibly special." He turned to me with a friendly smile. "Lila, I’ll wait for you here at the entrance tomorrow." After saying our goodbyes, Daniel and I got into his car.

"Tiny one, what happened?" Daniel asked the moment he started the engine, his detective instincts immediately picking up on my tension.

"Connor showed up at the law school today," I said, still trying to process the unexpected visit from the casino magnate.

"Who?" His brow furrowed in confusion, though his hand instinctively moved toward his concealed weapon.

"Connor, the head of the gambling syndicate my mother wants me to marry into," I explained, watching his expression darken. "He came to the university today to talk to me personally."

"What did that bastard want?" Daniel's grip tightened on the steering wheel, his voice taking on the dangerous edge I'd learned to recognize when someone threatened his territory.

"I'm not sure exactly. He mentioned making some arrangement with my mother about consolidating our families' assets..." I recounted everything Connor had said and how his predatory gaze had made my skin crawl. "It was really strange, Daniel. Something about him felt absolutely menacing, like he was already planning something."

"Lila, don't worry," he assured me, taking my hand in his calloused one. "That piece of shit won't get near you, I promise. I'll talk to Beckett—maybe Thorne's intelligence network can dig up some dirt on Connor's recent moves." His touch remained steady and comforting throughout the drive, gradually easing my anxiety about the casino boss's intentions.

"Tiny one, I should apologize for bringing my sister without warning you," Daniel said as we rode the elevator up to his secure apartment. "She's also running from an arranged marriage the family set up to strengthen political connections."

"You don't need to apologize for that," I replied sincerely. "I think she and I will get along wonderfully." I smiled at him. "At least your mother doesn't resort to physical violence like mine does when she doesn't get her way." I couldn't help the bitter edge in my voice, remembering how Claire seemed to enjoy hitting me when I defied her plans.

"Oh, love, don't think about that witch now." He pulled me into his arms and placed a gentle kiss at the corner of my mouth. "You know what I just remembered?"

"What?" I asked, noticing a playful smile forming on his lips.

"That you owe me some action in the elevator," he whispered, his breath hot against my ear, making my body instantly respond despite our dangerous circumstances.

"You're such a pervert!" I laughed, but couldn't deny the heat building inside me.

"Only for you, little one, only for you." He kissed behind my ear and then gently sucked on its tip, sending delicious shivers down my spine.

When we entered the apartment, a mouthwatering aroma greeted us from the kitchen. Sybilla looked up with a bright smile, clearly having made herself comfortable in her brother's safehouse.

"Ah, you're here!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "Lila, I made dinner, and not to brag, but I'm quite the chef when I'm not dodging family politics."

"If you keep this up, I'll get too spoiled and won't let you leave," I joked, making her smile even wider.

Dinner was genuinely delicious. Afterward, Sybilla and I cleaned the kitchen together, chatting easily about everything except our families' criminal enterprises. She told me about convincing Sasha to cut her hair—a story that had me doubled over with laughter, especially knowing how image-obsessed that woman was. She also opened up about her parents and the political marriage her mother had arranged to strengthen the Martinez family's influence. I realized we shared similar experiences—both fleeing our homes to escape arranged marriages designed to consolidate power rather than create happiness.

Later that night, with Daniel busy on his laptop reviewing case files and family intelligence reports, Sybilla and I settled in to watch TV. She enthusiastically recommended a SWAT series that turned out to be surprisingly good, though I couldn't help thinking the real thing was far more complex than television portrayed.

"So, Lila, what did you think?" Sybilla asked when the episode ended.

"I loved it! All the tactical operations, strategic planning, and coordinated strikes were amazing," I admitted with a smile. "I've always been fascinated by law enforcement procedures, even though our families operate on the other side of that equation."

"Me too! Isn't that team leader incredibly attractive? Girl, I even dream about him," Sybilla gushed.

"He is gorgeous! Actually, he reminds me a lot of Xavier Black..." I immediately regretted my words as her expression dimmed. "Oh, sorry! You're not a fan of Xavier, I take it? That's surprising—he's usually pretty charming when he's not intimidating people."

"No need to apologize," she sighed. "Xavier is just irritating, at least to me. He always treated me like a child because he's older, never letting me prove myself in any family business. I haven't seen him in years, but he constantly dismissed me, never let me participate in anything important or go anywhere significant with them. Always making comments like, 'oh, Daniel's little sister,' 'oh, you're just a kid,' 'oh, you should stay out of family affairs...'" Her impression of Xavier made me laugh despite the tension.

"Well, if it's been years, maybe he'll stop treating you that way. He really is a brilliant strategist," I offered.

"I highly doubt it. He might even try to prevent Caleb from giving me the position at Thorne," she said bitterly. "I'd prefer to avoid running into him altogether if I'm going to work there."

"But if you work at Thorne Corporation, that might be difficult," I pointed out.

"Not really—that place is massive, and most of the legitimate operations are kept separate from the strategic planning divisions. He won't even know I'm there," she countered confidently.

"Have you sent your credentials to Jude yet?"

"Yes! It would be incredible to work there. Thorne Corporation offers amazing opportunities, and the legal department especially would give me real experience in corporate law." Her excitement was palpable.

As we continued talking, Sybilla shared more about herself—her educational background, her father's refusal to let her participate in family operations, and how frustrating it was being excluded from important decisions. I opened up about moving to the city to pursue my law degree and building my own life independent of Sullivan family expectations, and we bonded over our mutual frustration with mothers who tried to force us into strategic marriages for family benefit rather than personal happiness.

"Girls, it’s getting late," Daniel interrupted, joining us in the living room after finishing his work. "Shall we go to bed, little one?"

"Hey, are you already trying to steal my friend?" Sybilla protested playfully.

"My girlfriend," Daniel declared possessively, then turned to me with a seductive smile. "I need her for something other than sleep."

After saying goodnight to Sybilla, we retreated to the bedroom. Sleep, however, wasn’t what Daniel had in mind. He slowly undressed me and guided me to bed, his lips exploring every inch of my body while his hands played across my skin, making love to me with an intensity that made me forget about casino bosses, family politics, and everything else beyond these walls.

Chapter 502: Hair Evidence Theft

Beckett’s POV

The idea of confirming my suspicions about Lila’s true parentage had been gnawing at me since my last conversation with Daniel about the family bloodlines. As the acting head of the Sullivan syndicate’s legitimate operations, I had access to resources most people could only dream of, but sometimes the most effective approach was the simplest one. Daniel had explained that we needed either a strand of Claire’s hair or something she’d drunk from for the DNA comparison. After weighing my options, I decided to handle this delicate family matter personally.

I rose before dawn and timed my arrival at Claire’s estate to coincide with her Sunday morning routine at the cathedral. The irony wasn’t lost on me that someone who’d built her position through deception and manipulation would spend hours kneeling in prayer. Perhaps playing the devoted parishioner was just another layer of the elaborate facade she’d constructed to maintain her standing in our circle.

"Beckett? This is unexpected," Tessa, the longtime housekeeper, greeted me at the ornate front door with visible nervousness. I rarely visited this place anymore, not since I’d taken control of the family’s operations and moved Lila to safer accommodations.

"Good morning, Tessa. Is Claire receiving visitors? I have some business to discuss with her."

"She’s at morning service at St. Catherine’s. Master Justin is still in his room, though."

"Of course he is," I muttered, stepping past her into the marble foyer. The house still reeked of Claire’s desperate attempts at old-world sophistication. "I’ll wait for her return."

Tessa wrung her hands anxiously. "She could be gone for quite some time, sir."

"That’s perfectly fine. I’m in no particular hurry." I made myself comfortable in the sitting room, noting how the imported furniture seemed to mock the family’s actual origins.

"Forgive me, Mr. Beckett, but Mrs. Claire gave specific instructions that you weren’t to be admitted to the house without her present."

"Did she now? Well, I’m already here, so that particular rule seems rather pointless. How about some coffee while I wait?"

Tessa’s face tightened with disapproval, but her position in this household didn’t allow for direct confrontation with family members. The moment she disappeared toward the kitchen, I moved with the calculated precision that had served me well in both legitimate business and family enforcement matters. Claire’s private suite was on the second floor, and I knew exactly where she kept her personal items. Her sterling silver hairbrush sat on the antique vanity, and I carefully collected several strands, securing them in a small evidence bag I’d brought. The whole operation took barely any time at all, and I was back downstairs before Tessa returned with the coffee service.

"Where did you go?" Her suspicious gaze darted between me and the staircase.

"The powder room. You seem unusually on edge about my presence here, Tessa," I observed, watching her mouth compress into a thin line of disapproval.

"You really should leave, Mr. Beckett. The mistress specifically said she didn’t want—"

"Yes, you've mentioned her preferences." I lifted the delicate china cup, took a deliberate sip, and made an exaggerated face of disgust. "This coffee is absolutely terrible. You know what? I've changed my mind about waiting. Tell Claire I stopped by."

As I headed toward the door, Tessa's voice followed me with obvious relief. "Don't come back here causing trouble!"

I smiled to myself. There wouldn't be any need to return once I had the answers I was seeking.

Before reporting to the Thorne Group offices, I made a stop at our family's private medical facility. Daniel had already arranged for a discreet DNA analysis through Dr. Reed, who'd been handling delicate matters for associated families for many years. The test kit containing Lila's sample from her recent medical checkup was waiting, and all I needed to add were Claire's hair follicles and a comparison sample from myself.

"Beckett, what brings you here this morning?" Dr. Reed looked up from his paperwork as I entered his consultation room.

"I need a few minutes of your time, Doctor."

In the privacy of his office, after renewed assurances about confidentiality and discretion, I handed him the sealed envelope containing all the necessary samples. He nodded gravely, understanding the implications without requiring detailed explanations. These weren't the kind of results that could be trusted to standard laboratories or computer systems that might be monitored.

By the time I arrived at our downtown headquarters, I was running behind schedule, but punctuality seemed trivial compared to what I was trying to accomplish. Right on cue, as the lunch hour approached, Claire burst into my office like an avenging fury, her face contorted with the kind of rage that only came from wounded pride.

"What were you doing sneaking around my house like some common thief?" she demanded, her voice pitched high enough to carry through the reinforced walls.

"Just paying a social call, stepmother dear," I replied calmly, putting particular emphasis on the word 'step' as I always did when addressing her.

"What did you really want there?"

I leaned back in my leather chair, projecting the kind of casual authority that came from actually running the family's operations. "Nothing in particular. I simply felt like disrupting your morning routine. Judging by your current state, I'd say mission accomplished."

Her face darkened to a dangerous shade of crimson. "You insolent little bastard! You'll regret crossing me. When I'm finished with you, you'll be begging on street corners."

"No, Claire," I stood slowly, placing both palms flat on my mahogany desk in a gesture that had intimidated far more dangerous people than her. "You're the one who's going to have regrets—especially about how you've treated Lila all these years. Let me be crystal clear: you will never lay another finger on her. You won't even be in the same room as her if I have anything to say about it."

She laughed, the sound dripping with venom and false confidence. "And exactly how do you plan to stop me? She's MY daughter, you pathetic fool."

"Is she? Are you absolutely certain about that?" For just a moment, genuine fear flickered across her carefully maintained facade before she managed to regain her composure.

"Stay away from my house, Beckett. There's nothing there for you anymore—not even your father lives there now, though he'll be back soon enough, mark my words. But you—you're never setting foot on my property again."

Something dangerous snapped inside me. I walked around the desk, took hold of her arm with just enough pressure to make my point clear, and began escorting her toward the exit. She fought and screeched like a cornered animal, but I maintained my grip as we crossed the building's marble lobby with every employee watching the spectacle unfold. At the main entrance, I signaled for security to open the doors and firmly guided her outside onto the sidewalk.

"Don't you dare come back to my building!" I called after her.

"This company belongs to MY children more than it does to you!" she shrieked back from the street.

"No, it doesn't." I stepped closer to the threshold, lowering my voice to the tone I reserved for serious threats. "Justin has no legitimate claim here, and Lila will stand with me when the time comes. Crawl back to whatever hole spawned you, and don't show your face here again."

"We'll see who wins this war, Beckett," she hissed as the security doors closed between us.

I immediately instructed building security that Claire was permanently banned from the premises, and later informed our father that Justin wasn't welcome in any of our facilities either. Dad simply nodded his understanding—he knew I was protecting the family's true interests.

Chapter 503: Double the Stakes

Claire's POV

The summer heat was suffocating as I dragged myself home from the family's private chapel service, my silk blouse clinging uncomfortably to my skin. All I craved was a cold shower and an iced martini to wash away the day's exhaustion. Playing the part of the grieving mafia widow whose husband had vanished into witness protection was a performance that drained every ounce of my energy. Listening to endless condolences from the other family wives about my "coward" husband Nathaniel who had fled rather than face the Commission's judgment was tedious beyond measure. Truth be told, his disappearance had been a blessing. I had grown sick of his weak leadership long ago, but maintaining the facade of a devastated Don's wife was essential for preserving my position in the Sullivan organization.

"Tessa! Where the hell are you, Tessa?" I barked for my housekeeper, annoyed by her typical sluggishness.

She eventually emerged from the kitchen, drying her hands nervously on her apron. The woman had served our famiglia for decades but still moved like she was walking through a minefield. "Yes, Mrs. Sullivan?"

"Where's Justin?"

"He’s sleeping, ma’am. Had his afternoon rest after the tutoring session."

"Get me something cold before I collapse from this heat." The housekeeper hurried away, returning shortly with a crystal tumbler filled with ice and premium vodka. I noticed her anxious expression as she placed the drink in my hands. "Speak up, Tessa. What’s eating at you now?"

"Ma’am, your stepson Beckett came by earlier today."

My blood turned to ice in an instant. "What was that ungrateful bastard doing in my home? Did you actually allow him inside?" I had explicitly forbidden that dangerous man from entering my territory. Even after Lila’s escape to the city, he hadn’t dared show his face here - until today.

"Ma’am, I couldn’t refuse him entry. He walked right in saying he needed to wait for you, then ordered espresso like he owned the place..."

"You left that snake alone in my house? Are you completely out of your mind?"

"Ma’am, he demanded coffee, so I went to prepare it. When I returned, that arrogant man spat it out and complained it wasn’t up to famiglia standards." Tessa’s weathered face twisted with wounded pride.

"Well, your espresso is garbage compared to what they serve at the social clubs," I had to admit. "Did he go anywhere else in the house?"

"He used the private study’s washroom, ma’am."

"And you permitted that too? Worthless woman!"

"When I brought the coffee service, he was already coming down from upstairs. Said he’d used the facilities. I never even saw him go up there, ma’am."

"Madonna mia, you’re useless! Get out of my sight before I throw this glass at your empty head."

She scurried away like a frightened mouse, leaving me to contemplate Beckett’s unexpected reconnaissance mission. What intelligence was he gathering in my private quarters?

The front gate’s security buzzer interrupted my brooding. Tessa rushed past me toward the reinforced entrance. So much for my plans of relaxation and strategizing - disrupted once again by unwanted intrusions.

"Good afternoon, Claire!" Connor’s gravelly voice boomed through the marble foyer. His presence at my family compound was highly irregular - he and Nathaniel had maintained an uneasy business relationship at best, never social calls.

"Connor? What brings the casino king to my humble residence?" I asked, genuinely puzzled by this parade of unexpected male visitors to my domain.

"Just dropping by for a friendly chat about our mutual business venture." Perfect - this ruthless old bastard was probably here to renegotiate our agreement regarding his worthless son’s engagement to Lila.

"I already assured you I’ll retrieve the girl from her little rebellion. Don’t concern yourself with the details."

"Oh, I’m not worried one bit. I know your reputation well enough to trust you’ll deliver results. But we need to discuss modifying the terms of our arrangement." My jaw clenched involuntarily - he’d better not be contemplating reducing my agreed-upon compensation.

"Don’t even consider offering me less than what we handshook on, Connor."

"You know, Claire, I had the pleasure of meeting Lila personally. Quite an enlightening conversation."

"What exactly are you talking about?"

"I took a business trip to the city to assess our investment opportunities firsthand. That girl is absolutely breathtaking - a genuine beauty worthy of renaissance paintings. You know who she reminds me of, Claire?" I knew precisely where this dangerous conversation was heading, but I refused to give him the satisfaction of acknowledgment.

"I haven't the slightest clue what you mean." I maintained my poker face while my mind raced. That cunning Lila had indeed transformed since establishing herself in the urban famiglia networks, and her resemblance to... the previous donna... was becoming undeniable.

"Oh, I believe you understand perfectly. What's fascinating is how your late husband and stepson failed to notice the obvious similarities. I suspect we won't even require those DNA tests to confirm our suspicions."

"What exactly are you insinuating, Connor?"

"You grasp the implications completely. Remember, I provided crucial assistance during that delicate situation long ago."

"Yes, and I've repaid that favor with substantial interest over the decades."

"Perhaps not quite substantial enough. Had I understood then what I comprehend now, my price would have been considerably steeper."

"State your demands plainly, Connor. My son is resting, and I prefer he doesn't discover you here."

"Your little prince is every bit as pathetic as my own offspring."

Connor chuckled darkly, knowing his words would provoke my maternal fury.

"Of course he appears weak - he's been corrupted by your son's influence, hasn't he? But my Justin has a mother who fights ruthlessly for his inheritance and protects his famiglia interests." I wouldn't tolerate him disparaging my bloodline.

"Such a devoted mother!" Connor's laughter carried a sinister undertone. "Here's my revised proposal, Claire. You have a short time to bring the girl back to our territory. But she won't be marrying my disappointment of a son - she'll become my wife."

"Your wife?" Despite knowing Lila would suffer under an elderly husband's control, Connor would provide her with luxury and security, unlike his sadistic son who was notorious for brutalizing women. "Our original contract specified marriage to your heir."

"Come now, Claire! Whether she marries me or my boy is irrelevant to your bottom line. What matters is your payment, which I'll double if she becomes my bride instead." The calculating old wolf's offer was genuinely tempting.

"Double the agreed amount? Was she truly that impressive during your evaluation?"

I found it intriguing that Connor, who had remained a widower for years and spurned all marriage proposals from ambitious famiglia daughters, would suddenly make this unprecedented offer.

"Double and not a single dollar more. Don't attempt to extort additional concessions from me." His warning carried the weight of decades in the underworld, and knowing his reputation for extreme measures, accepting gracefully seemed the wisest course.

"Agreed. Within a short time, that ungrateful brat belongs to you. Do whatever pleases you with her." The revised deal strongly favored my interests.

"You truly despise her, don't you?" Connor studied me with the fascination of a predator examining wounded prey.

"She humiliated me by abandoning her famiglia obligations, Connor. She requires proper discipline and punishment." That was all the explanation this dangerous man would extract from me. "Now leave my home. I'll contact you when developments warrant communication."

Connor departed, his laughter echoing with an almost disturbing satisfaction. I grabbed my designer purse - time to pay that scheming pest Beckett an unexpected visit at the family's legitimate business headquarters.

Chapter 504: Reluctant New Beginning

Sybilla's POV

A few days had passed since submitting my credentials to Jude at Thorne Group, and my secure phone remained disappointingly silent. Perhaps it was time to explore alternative arrangements within the family networks. Thankfully, Lila had generously allowed me access to her vehicle—Daniel was providing her with personal security escorts due to the escalating situation with her mother—which made navigating the city's legitimate business district considerably more manageable.

Armed with carefully curated resumes that strategically omitted my Martinez family connections and a list of reputable employment firms I'd researched through secure channels, I dressed in conservative professional attire and ventured into the world of legitimate commerce. My strategy appeared straightforward: secure legitimate employment, establish financial independence, and finally escape my family's expectations of a strategic political marriage. Freedom seemed within my grasp—or so I naively believed.

The first personnel consultancy shattered my optimism immediately. After enduring an exhaustive background verification process disguised as personality assessment, followed by a grueling interview with someone who clearly had connections to various family networks, they delivered the rehearsed response about "maintaining contact should appropriate opportunities emerge," while subtly implying that placing someone with my background would prove challenging. I've never comprehended how human resource professionals reduce complex individuals to simplistic risk profiles based on family affiliations.

At the second consultancy, I discovered a position in international trade compliance that genuinely intrigued me, only to be informed I was "overqualified and potentially problematic." The consultant insisted that someone from my background wouldn't remain in such a position long enough to justify the placement risk. Do they honestly believe legitimate career opportunities are abundant enough that I'd abandon stable employment on impulse? If this represented my only chance at independence for months or even years, I would certainly demonstrate unwavering commitment.

The third consultancy didn't bother conducting a formal interview. Once again, my educational credentials and family connections exceeded their comfort level for available positions. My international business education and linguistic capabilities—achievements I'd once considered assets—now seemed like insurmountable obstacles. Perhaps I should begin sanitizing my background completely, omitting details like my fluency in eight languages and my connections to international financial networks.

By mid-afternoon, I found myself slumped in an upscale coffee establishment, nursing an espresso and my wounded pride. Six consultancies had politely shown me the exit, declaring I didn't "match the profile" for anything within their legitimate client base. If I'd understood that preparing for executive-level positions within family enterprises would render finding entry-level legitimate work impossible, perhaps I should have abandoned my academic pursuits and embraced the future my mother envisioned—becoming a strategic alliance through marriage to consolidate family power. Who was I deceiving? I could never accept that predetermined path.

"Perhaps I should consider retail establishments next," I muttered to myself. "I've managed legitimate businesses before during my university years. I can certainly handle commercial operations again." I settled my account, but just as I prepared to continue my search, my encrypted phone rang with an unfamiliar number.

"Hello?" I answered, attempting to mask my desperate hope.

"Sybilla, this is Jude from Thorne Group." His voice immediately lifted me from my pessimistic spiral, though I prepared myself for another polite rejection.

"Hello, Jude. How are things progressing?"

"Excellent. I'd like to arrange a formal interview regarding the position that Caleb has designated for you. When would you be available for discussion?"

My expression transformed into a genuine smile for the first time that day. "I can arrive immediately. I'm currently in the vicinity," I replied, barely containing my excitement.

"Perfect! I'll be expecting you."

Shortly after, I was striding through Thorne Group's impressive headquarters with my visitor credentials, repeating my personal affirmation: I possess the capability. I will achieve independence. I will control my own destiny.

"Sybilla!" Lila greeted me enthusiastically as the private elevator doors opened. "I'm pleased you arrived so quickly. Listen, I cannot provide advance details, but maintain an open perspective, consider the complete offer carefully, and remember this is simply professional employment."

Her cryptic warning puzzled me, but before I could request clarification, Jude materialized.

"Excellent, you've arrived! Please, let's proceed to my office for our discussion."

Jude's office was spacious and tastefully appointed with understated luxury that spoke of serious business operations. Our conversation flowed naturally as he posed standard professional inquiries, and I began relaxing, sensing this opportunity might actually materialize successfully.

"Sybilla, the position is yours, and you'll begin tomorrow morning," Jude announced with a welcoming smile. I beamed back at him, despite still lacking specific details about the role itself. "Oh, I neglected to specify the exact position. You'll serve as Xavier's executive assistant. I'm receiving permanent assignment as Caleb's personal aide since Ivy decided to step away from company operations to focus on her family responsibilities..."

My smile evaporated instantly.

"Sybilla?" Jude noticed my expression collapse completely.

"Who exactly is Ivy?" I managed to inquire, grasping for any distraction from the bombshell he'd just delivered.

"Ah, Ivy served as Caleb's executive assistant, but they married and now have five young children, and she wants to dedicate more attention to family life. She was barely maintaining office presence, working remotely, but it was becoming logistically complicated, so she decided she wants to witness her children's development personally. You'll certainly meet her—we're all closely connected."

"I understand." My responses became mechanical. Working directly for Xavier? The man who barely tolerated my existence? The individual who'd openly referred to me as his friend's troublesome little sister at Daniel's wedding? This was potentially catastrophic. But I desperately required legitimate employment.

"Will I maintain significant contact with Xavier?" I asked, hoping there might be some physical separation between our working arrangements.

"You'll be practically inseparable! His office connects directly here, come see." Jude demonstrated the adjoining office through a door at his room's rear. "Since you're already acquainted, you'll collaborate excellently."

Jude's optimism seemed misplaced. "Sybilla, is there some concern?"

"No, Jude, absolutely none. However, before finalizing my employment, you should probably consult Xavier directly. He doesn't particularly appreciate my presence," I explained diplomatically.

"Xavier? But Xavier respects everyone! He's actually sometimes overwhelming because he's so professionally accommodating," Jude laughed.

"Well, then I must represent the sole exception to 'everyone' because he genuinely dislikes me. He only tolerates my existence because I'm Daniel's sister. And I'm absolutely certain about that assessment."

"Don't you want this opportunity?" Jude appeared concerned.

"I require this employment." The truth was undeniably simple.

"Then accept it. If complications arise, I'll always be available in the adjacent office for support, and Lila will be stationed between our locations." His reassuring hand settled on my shoulder.

"You believe this arrangement will succeed?" My uncertainty was transparent.

"Accept the position, maintain professional standards, and everything will function smoothly, I guarantee you."

His confidence proved contagious. "Very well, I accept." I smiled, clinging to hope that professionalism would triumph over personal antagonism.

Chapter 505: Sasha's Desperate Threat

Daniel's POV

My phone buzzed with Sybilla's name lighting up the screen. My sister called with exciting news - she'd successfully secured the assistant position with Xavier Black, Thorne's chief consigliere. I felt genuinely relieved knowing Xavier would look after her properly within the organization. She mentioned she'd be escorting Lila to law school since she was already at the Thorne offices. Watching those two develop a real friendship brought me considerable peace.

It was exactly what both women needed in this dangerous world. Sybilla had been searching for genuine connections since fleeing our father's arranged political marriage, and Lila's trusted circle had been steadily shrinking lately.

Our usual crew dynamics had shifted dramatically. Ivy barely surfaced for air between managing her multiple children and helping with Thorne's legitimate front operations. Gemma remained completely absorbed in caring for her newborn while her husband handled their family's shipping interests. Nora had relocated to oversee West Coast operations, and Ruby's schedule stayed permanently packed with her role in the financial laundering networks, making it rare for the women to gather anymore. Zoe still visited Lila regularly at my fortified penthouse, but she was currently enjoying her honeymoon with Finn somewhere in the Caribbean.

During this transitional period, Jude had formed an unlikely friendship with Lila. His wife had vanished during a territorial dispute in the past, leaving a permanent void in his life. Nobody really understood their arrangement, though I suspected Lila knew more than she revealed.

My phone interrupted my thoughts about our changing alliances. Beckett's name appeared - Lila's brother was supposed to update me about obtaining the samples we needed for the DNA test to prove Lila's true parentage.

"Beckett," I answered.

"Daniel, how are things holding up?" His voice carried the controlled tension typical of family heads.

"Solid on all fronts. Actually, I should have contacted you sooner, but operations have been intense, and it slipped through the cracks." I suddenly remembered I hadn't briefed him about Connor's bold move at the university.

"What happened? Security breach?" His tone immediately sharpened with professional concern.

"Unclear exactly. Connor himself showed up at Lila's law school. She couldn't read his full angle, but she felt threatened. He made some comment about her mother wanting to reclaim her." I explained the encounter as thoroughly as possible, though Connor's motives remained murky to me.

"What business does that casino boss have approaching Lila directly?"

"Unknown. He mentioned something about 'evaluating whether the arrangement justified the complications' and discussed renegotiating terms with Claire." I relayed his cryptic message.

"What arrangement could he possibly mean?" Beckett paused, processing. "Daniel, I don't like this development at all. Keep that man away from Lila - he represents serious danger to our interests."

"Already handled," I assured him. "She has a trusted ally monitoring her at school, and my sister has moved into the penthouse. They're bonding perfectly and will be working closely together, so Lila has protection on all fronts."

"That's reassuring to hear!" He exhaled audibly. "But I called to report I secured the genetic material. It's already been processed by our lab, and we should have definitive results soon."

"Impressive speed! Well executed."

"Yes, I'm anxious to know the truth! I'll travel there when the results arrive."

"Absolutely. I want to be present with you for this revelation."

Our conversation continued for several more minutes. Beckett proved excellent company - charismatic and intelligent, sharing Lila's sharp wit. His efficiency in obtaining the sample we required demonstrated why he'd risen to lead the Sullivan organization so young. Soon, our questions would finally be answered. Meanwhile, I continued investigating the suspicious circumstances surrounding his mother's death. Something felt deeply wrong about that entire situation. A detective colleague working in a small city near Lila's hometown was assisting me in tracking down leads. He'd located the sister of the household staff member who had died under questionable circumstances and planned to interview her soon.

"I can see you're preparing to start complaining, Daniel." The voice sliced through my concentration. I'd been so focused on my computer screen analyzing financial records that I hadn't detected someone entering my office.

"Perfect, did the underworld freeze over? Is that why you're gracing me with your presence?" I stared coldly at Sasha as she confidently settled herself across from my desk.

"This situation exists because you refuse to abandon that investigation," she said with calculated composure.

"Not this conversation again. Can't you allow me to work in peace?"

"Sasha, I have zero authority over this process. I submitted the report, and it's completely beyond my jurisdiction now. I warned you my father would sacrifice you to save himself when the heat intensified, but you chose not to listen." I fought to maintain professional detachment, wishing she would disappear from my sight permanently.

"Yes, you did warn me, Daniel, but you never provided any viable alternatives."

"Don't restart this argument! If you came hoping I'd somehow make the investigation into your document forgery vanish, you've wasted your time completely. Now leave, find something constructive to occupy yourself, and let me handle my duties." My patience, never my strongest attribute, was rapidly evaporating.

"Daniel, I need assistance," she admitted desperately. "My father's legitimate businesses are collapsing. Your father promised financial backing if I convinced you to resign from law enforcement and return to

the family operations. I couldn’t deliver on that promise, and now your father has completely abandoned us."

"And precisely how does that concern me?" I responded, completely unmoved by her sob story.

"You possess more than sufficient resources to help. Become my father’s business partner, save his companies from bankruptcy. That was your father’s original intention. In exchange, I’ll reveal everything your father is orchestrating against you and the damage he’s already inflicted." Her proposal didn’t surprise me - my father constantly schemed to drag me back into the family’s criminal enterprises - but I would never align myself with Sasha’s interests.

"I have absolutely zero interest in partnering with your father. What I genuinely want is to forget you both exist entirely. And I don’t need your intelligence. Your father will discover his own solutions." I kept my response definitively final.

"Daniel, please, everyone is abandoning us when we need support most." Her concern for her father appeared genuine enough.

"I cannot and will not assist you. When we were married, I would have done anything to protect you, but you chose divorce, remember? You departed with half of everything I owned - not an insignificant fortune by any standard. You’ve lived luxuriously for years without financial concerns, and could have maintained that lifestyle indefinitely if you’d invested intelligently or contributed productively. Instead, you only understand consumption. I’m not apologetic, Sasha, and I won’t sacrifice anything more for you. Now leave and don’t contact me again."

"Do you really possess the ruthlessness to treat me this way?"

"I do. Furthermore, even if your father’s empire crumbles and you lose your privileged lifestyle, you won’t face destitution. You can work like ordinary people. Now go before I summon an officer to escort you out."

"Don’t turn your back on me, Daniel. I can become your most dangerous enemy!" There it was - when she didn’t achieve her objectives, threats inevitably followed.

"You lack the power to touch me. Now exit immediately." When she remained seated defiantly, I stood and approached the door. "Bella! Assistance needed." I called for my colleague, who promptly appeared. "Escort this woman from the station, and if she creates a disturbance, find her appropriate accommodations in our holding cells."

"Unnecessary! I'm departing." Sasha rose, her face flushed with barely controlled rage. At the threshold, she turned with a venomous stare. "You'll regret this decision, Daniel. I'll strike where it damages you most severely."

"Attempt it, and I'll ensure your father's complete destruction. You'll be visiting him in federal prison from your new existence of absolute poverty."

Chapter 506: Unwelcome Return

Lila's POV

Sybilla emerged from Xavier Black's office with a smile that couldn't mask the tension in her eyes. Her history with Thorne Corporation's consigliere was clearly weighing on her mind, especially now that she'd be working directly under his supervision in the legal department.

"Let's grab some espresso with Sybilla," Jude suggested, following her out of the mahogany-paneled office. "I thought she'd be thrilled about securing this position within the organization..."

"I am pleased, Jude," Sybilla insisted as we made our way through the marble corridors toward the executive break room. "Just concerned about certain... professional complications." Her body language betrayed her anxiety despite her attempt to appear composed.

"Don't stress about it," Jude assured her while arranging imported coffee and Italian pastries on the conference table. "Xavier's matured considerably since your last encounter. If he creates any difficulties, inform me immediately and I'll address the situation personally."

I seized the opportunity to redirect our conversation. "How did the meeting with Nora go?" Jude had traveled to her family's estate, hoping to salvage their marriage after she'd discovered certain aspects of his work with our organization. Judging by his expression, the outcome hadn't been favorable.

"She refused to see me," Jude sighed heavily, adjusting his expensive suit jacket. "Her father's attorney delivered the message that I should accept the relationship's termination, sign the divorce settlement, and proceed with my life. She claims she's moved beyond our marriage."

"Without even speaking with you directly?" I was incredulous. Ending years of marriage without a proper discussion seemed unconscionable, even considering our world's unique complications.

"Precisely." Jude's voice carried resignation rather than bitterness. "I'm accepting the conclusion of our relationship, but the method stings more than the actual outcome."

I reached across the polished table and squeezed his hand. "I'm sorry, Jude. You deserved more respectful treatment."

"Thank you for your understanding." Jude turned to Sybilla. "Please keep this confidential. Lila's the only one aware of my marital difficulties, and now you."

"Your secret remains safe with me," Sybilla promised. "And I'll hold you to that assurance about Xavier if he becomes insufferable—which past experience suggests is inevitable."

"You're genuinely concerned!" Jude laughed. "What's the history between you two?"

"Nothing particularly dramatic. I'm Daniel's little sister, and Xavier always treated me like an irritating child he had to tolerate for my brother's sake. He'd invent unflattering nicknames, pull my hair during family gatherings, criticize everything I attempted, and constantly remind me I was too young to participate in their business discussions." Sybilla's expression darkened at the memories.

Jude shook his head. "That doesn't reflect the Xavier I know currently. He's genuinely professional these days."

"Where is he today, anyway?" Sybilla inquired.

"Called after our afternoon briefing saying he'd handle his responsibilities remotely. He's been making that arrangement frequently lately," Jude explained.

"If only he'd make that arrangement permanent," Sybilla sighed dramatically, making us laugh despite the tension.

Sybilla remained until the organization's offices closed, familiarizing herself with her new responsibilities and meeting other members of the Thorne Corporation's legal team. Afterward, she drove me to my evening law classes at the university.

"Mind if I accompany you inside?" she asked hesitantly as we parked. "My new apartment feels like solitary confinement since I don't know anyone in the city yet."

"Of course! You'll enjoy the environment," I replied enthusiastically, spotting Max Philip across the campus courtyard. "Look, there's Max now."

Max waved and approached us with his characteristic confidence. With his athletic build, light brown hair, and striking green eyes, he certainly attracted attention. He was constantly inviting me to exclusive clubs and private parties, but I preferred quiet evenings with Daniel over noisy social scenes.

"Ladies!" Max greeted us warmly, his expensive watch catching the light.

"Max, this is Sybilla, Daniel's sister. She's joining us tonight."

His eyes widened appreciatively. "Stunning! Please tell me there are more gorgeous siblings in your family?"

Sybilla laughed. "Another brother, but he's committed as well."

"What a tragedy! Your parents should have produced a dozen more with such excellent genetics," Max joked, earning another laugh from Sybilla.

As we walked through the university's halls, Max detailed a new upscale establishment he was eager to visit. Though I'd repeatedly declined his invitations, understanding the complications of my relationship with Daniel, he persisted.

"Lila’s a terrible companion, Sybilla. She never joins my adventures," he explained dramatically. "Though I understand—if I were involved with someone of Inspector Martinez’s caliber, I’d remain home too. But what about you? Care to accompany me?"

"You know what? I think I will," Sybilla replied enthusiastically.

Within moments, they were conversing like longtime friends, with Sybilla laughing at his endless stream of witty observations. When class began, they slipped away promising to return with refreshments during our break.

Before they returned, Sasha sauntered into the classroom and made a direct path toward me.

"Hello, pocket-size," she smirked, dropping into the chair beside me with deliberate provocation.

"Some individuals never learn appropriate boundaries," I muttered.

"Including you. Still haven’t realized Daniel’s temporary fascination with you will eventually fade?" she challenged, her designer jewelry glinting under the fluorescent lights.

"And you believe he’ll return to you? Oh wait, he divorced you, didn’t he?" My sarcasm wiped the smugness from her perfectly made-up face.

"Did you actually believe I’d accept defeat so easily? Darling, how naive. Daniel belongs with me. He’ll return eventually."

"And you traveled all this way just to share that delusion?"

"Listen carefully, Mini-Me. I’m systematically removing you from Daniel’s existence." Her confidence was genuinely unnerving. "I’d wager he hasn’t mentioned seeing me earlier today."

"Finished with your fantasy? Then leave," I demanded, fighting the urge to physically escort her from the premises.

"Sasha? What brings you here?" Sybilla appeared suddenly at the classroom entrance.

"Of course you'd align yourself with this nobody," Sasha sneered. "I still have unresolved matters with you, Sybilla. You destroyed my hair!"

"How is it my responsibility that you maintain poor hygiene?" Sybilla countered smoothly.

"You pest! I discovered your little scheme that forced me to cut my hair so drastically," Sasha complained.

"Stop being overly dramatic. Hair regenerates—yours already has," Sybilla dismissed her casually.

"I despise you, Sybilla!" Sasha stood confrontationally.

"That's lovely, but express your hostility elsewhere. Let's go," Max intervened, firmly gripping Sasha's arm.

"Release me! Who do you think you are? Another protector of the vertically challenged?" she protested.

"Honestly, Sasha, you're exhausting. Just leave," Sybilla sighed, settling beside me.

"I'm departing, but remember my words, Fun-Size. Daniel will return to me." Sasha turned dramatically and strutted away, her heels clicking against the classroom floor.

"I can't believe she came here solely for that performance," Sybilla marveled.

"That and to demonstrate every possible height-based insult in her vocabulary," I added, wondering if Sasha would perpetually lurk in our lives, ready to disrupt whatever peace we managed to find.

Chapter 507: X Cracks in Paradise

Daniel’s POV

The secure line on my desk buzzed with an encrypted call. Xavier’s name appeared on the display, but his voice carried none of its usual calculated confidence when he asked if I could meet him at our private club after my shift ended. Something in his tone immediately put me on alert. Xavier Black, Thorne’s chief strategist and one of the most composed men in our circle, never sounded this rattled.

"Of course," I agreed without hesitation. "The sanctuary this evening?"

Hours later, I walked through the mahogany doors of our exclusive establishment, a place where men like us could speak freely without worrying about surveillance or unwanted ears. I found Xavier hunched over the marble bar, his usually immaculate appearance slightly disheveled as he traced patterns around a crystal tumbler of aged whiskey.

"Inspector," he greeted me, but the familiar title lacked its usual warmth. The weight of whatever was troubling him hung heavy in the air between us.

"You look like you’ve been through hell," I said bluntly, claiming the leather stool beside him. "What’s eating at you?"

The bartender, a discrete man who’d served our families for decades, approached silently. I ordered my usual while Xavier gathered his thoughts.

"It’s Ruby," he finally admitted, staring into the amber liquid as if searching for answers. "Everything’s falling apart between us."

I nodded slowly. I’d noticed the signs over recent weeks. Ruby had been conspicuously absent from family gatherings, always armed with elaborate excuses to avoid our circle.

"She’s been keeping her distance from all of us lately," I observed. "But I didn’t realize the problems ran deeper between you two personally."

Xavier’s laugh held no humor. "Deeper doesn’t begin to describe it. We’re like strangers living in the same house, finding reasons to tear each other apart over nothing." He took a long pull from his drink. "Today was particularly brutal."

"What happened this time?"

"She summoned me home during lunch, claimed she needed to discuss something important. Then she exploded because I hadn’t mentioned Jude’s visit to see Nora over the weekend." Xavier ran his fingers through his dark hair. "How was I supposed to know about Jude’s movements? And since when does she care about his personal affairs?"

I frowned at the strangeness of it. "That doesn’t make sense."

"It gets worse. When I told her I had no knowledge of Jude’s whereabouts, she launched into this tirade about how I don’t trust her with family business." Xavier’s confusion was evident in every line of his face. "The whole conversation felt like a trap, like she was deliberately trying to provoke a confrontation."

The bartender placed my drink before me with practiced silence. I took a measured sip before responding.

"Speaking of Jude and Nora, don’t you find their entire situation peculiar? She’s been away for months now." This had been nagging at me for some time, though I’d avoided prying into Jude’s private matters.

Xavier nodded grimly. "Jude keeps insisting she’s caring for her ailing father, but my instincts tell me there’s more beneath the surface. If anyone knows the truth, it’s Lila. Those two share everything."

"Lila hasn’t mentioned anything unusual to me," I said. "But you’re absolutely right about their bond. If Jude’s confided his secrets to anyone, it would be her."

"She’s fiercely loyal, that one," Xavier said, a genuine smile flickering across his features for the first time tonight.

"Let’s get back to your situation with Ruby," I redirected. "When did you first notice this change in her behavior?"

Xavier’s expression darkened considerably. "It started before Nora disappeared, but it became significantly worse after Gemma announced her pregnancy." He traced the crystal rim of his glass absently. "One evening, I brought up the possibility of marriage and starting a family. After all this time together, I thought we were naturally moving toward that future."

"She wasn’t receptive to the idea?"

"She completely shut down on me. Said I was pressuring her, moving too aggressively." The pain in Xavier’s voice cut deep. "A long courtship in our world isn’t exactly rushing into anything."

"No, it’s not," I agreed quietly.

Xavier looked directly into my eyes, his vulnerability stark and unguarded. "I think she’s planning to end things between us, Daniel."

The raw honesty in his voice reminded me why this man had become one of my closest allies. This wasn’t just Thorne’s brilliant strategist sitting beside me; this was one of my most trusted friends.

"If that’s where this is heading," I said carefully, "perhaps it’s better to face it now rather than later down the road."

"Like what happened with Nancy." Xavier’s mouth twisted into a bitter expression.

Nancy—Xavier’s college sweetheart who’d abandoned him just days before their elaborate wedding ceremony. She’d accepted his proposal with apparent joy, helped plan an extravagant celebration with hundreds of distinguished guests, then vanished without explanation. His devastated mother had been left to cancel everything and personally notify seven hundred invitees of the broken engagement. That betrayal had been Xavier’s motivation for relocating to our territory and joining Thorne’s inner circle.

"At least Nancy didn’t wait until after the vows were exchanged," I offered.

To my complete surprise, Xavier burst into genuine laughter. "Christ, we’ve both made some absolutely catastrophic choices when it comes to women, haven’t we?"

His laughter proved contagious, and soon we were both chuckling like fools, finding unexpected humor in our romantic disasters.

"Speaking of catastrophic choices," I said once our amusement had subsided, "guess who paid me an unexpected visit at headquarters today?"

Xavier’s eyebrows shot up knowingly. "Sasha? This soon?" He didn’t appear particularly surprised. "You didn’t seriously believe she’d retreat that easily, did you?"

"I was hoping for some peace," I admitted.

"That woman is like a dangerous infection—she always resurfaces when you least expect it and when it can cause maximum damage." Xavier shook his head with practiced cynicism. "What did she want this time?"

I detailed Sasha’s calculated appearance at the station, watching Xavier’s expression grow increasingly concerned as I spoke.

"You’re telling Lila about this immediately, correct?" Xavier’s tone made it clear this wasn’t actually a question. "We all remember the consequences of your last attempt to handle Sasha’s machinations in secret."

"The moment I walk through my door tonight," I promised without hesitation. "I’ve learned that lesson the hard way. Secrets and relationships are a toxic combination in our world."

Xavier raised his glass toward me. "To learning from our catastrophic mistakes."

I clinked my crystal against his. "And to hoping we don’t create too many new disasters."

As our conversation continued deep into the evening, I found myself wondering what awaited me in my penthouse—and what future remained for Xavier’s increasingly fragile relationship. Our territory might appear pristine and controlled from the outside, but beneath the polished surface, even our carefully constructed paradise harbored its share of complications.

Chapter 508: Trust Conquers All

Lila’s POV

Sasha’s unexpected appearance at the law building had left my nerves completely frayed. The thought that Daniel’s former wife might be seeking him out behind my back gnawed at me relentlessly. What if she had actually gone to the police station to see him? A simple encounter with his manipulative ex-wife had transformed into a consuming dread that threatened to overwhelm my rational mind.

The afternoon dragged on with excruciating slowness as these dark thoughts consumed me. Every minute felt like an hour, each tick of the classroom clock a cruel reminder of my spiraling anxiety about what schemes Sasha might be orchestrating.

When the Professor finally dismissed our constitutional law seminar, I practically fled from my seat. I rushed into the corridor where I spotted MP and Sybilla walking together, deep in animated conversation.

"You could have waited for us inside, Lila," MP said with mild irritation evident in her voice.

"Sorry, I just need to get back to the penthouse. I’m completely drained," I replied, desperately trying to conceal the anxious tremor in my voice.

"Drained? No surprise there! You and my brother have been keeping me awake all night with your bedroom activities. Those luxury apartment walls might be expensive, but they’re certainly not soundproof!" Sybilla teased with that mischievous Martinez family grin that reminded me so much of Daniel.

"Lila! That innocent law student facade of yours is quite the perfect disguise," MP chimed in, making heat flood my cheeks.

"Please! What did you honestly expect? Have you actually looked at my boyfriend? He's like some kind of ancient Roman god brought to life!" Despite my embarrassment, I couldn't suppress the surge of pride that filled me whenever I thought about having Daniel as mine. "Are you ready to leave, Sybilla?"

"Absolutely, let's get out of here. MP, we'll catch up soon. I'll try to convince this boring couple to join us for drinks on Friday." Sybilla said her goodbyes to her new friend before we made our way toward the parking garage.

Once we were alone in the elevator descending to Daniel's armored car, Sybilla's playful demeanor immediately shifted to concern. "You can't fool me, Lila. You've been on edge ever since that manipulative witch Sasha showed up. What's really going on?"

"Sybilla..." I sighed heavily, then explained everything Sasha had said before they had arrived and the terrible worries that had been plaguing me ever since.

"Listen carefully, my brother made serious mistakes in the past, but he never repeats his errors. You need to trust him, Lila. If they did meet today, he'll tell you about it."

Her words struck a chord deep within me. I had asked Daniel to trust me completely, so I needed to extend that same level of faith to him.

When we arrived at the penthouse, Daniel wasn't home. My mind immediately jumped to the worst possible scenarios. Was he returning to his old patterns of mysterious phone calls and midnight disappearances that had characterized his marriage to Sasha? I wished Sybilla goodnight and retreated to our master bedroom, took a long shower, and tried unsuccessfully to distract myself with a legal brief when sleep refused to come. A while later, I heard the front door's electronic lock disengage.

"Beautiful little one, still awake waiting for me?" Daniel entered with that devastating smile that never failed to make my heart race uncontrollably.

"Can’t seem to fall asleep," I admitted as he gently took the legal documents from my hands, lifted me effortlessly from the bed, and carried me to the leather armchair positioned in the corner of our bedroom.

"Perfect timing then. We need to talk," he said, settling me comfortably onto his powerful lap.

"About what?" My heart began pounding violently against my ribs, palms suddenly becoming clammy with nervous perspiration.

"How was your day at Thorne Group?" he asked between tender kisses placed along my neck.

"Productive. Your sister starts tomorrow as Xavier’s new legal assistant." He chuckled deeply and looked up at me with those intense dark eyes.

"Xavier never mentioned that development." He kissed the corner of my mouth softly.

"You saw Xavier today?" Relief began flooding through my entire system.

"Yes, we grabbed drinks at the private club after work," he replied with casual ease.

"Just the two of you?" I pressed, still deeply concerned about Sasha’s potential interference.

"Just us," he confirmed without any hesitation whatsoever.

"No one else joined your meeting?" I persisted, unable to let go of my anxiety.

"Xavier wanted to discuss some private matters. Things with Ruby haven’t been going well lately, but he prefers to keep family business confidential." Ruby had been maintaining her distance from everyone recently, and Xavier had definitely been behaving strangely too.

"Nobody ever wants others to know when their world is falling apart," I said, thinking about Jude's deteriorating situation since Nora had abandoned him.

"Not even Jude, correct?" His detective instincts were absolutely spot on as usual.

"What exactly have you heard through your police contacts?" I asked as he trailed burning kisses down my throat to my chest, sending delicious electric shivers throughout my entire body.

"Nothing concrete yet. Care to provide some details?" He was clearly suspicious but hadn't confirmed anything definitively.

"It's really his story to tell, but I believe he'll open up to someone soon," I explained, not wanting to betray Jude's confidence and trust.

"Did he and Nora actually break up?" Daniel asked before pulling down my silk nightgown and taking my breast into his hot mouth, sending intense electric pulses straight to my core.

"More accurately, she broke up with him... damn it! I shouldn't have revealed that." He laughed richly, his sweet seductive tactics having successfully worked to extract confidential information.

"Your secret is completely safe with me. I suspected as much anyway from his recent behavior." He kissed me passionately again. "But little one, I need to tell you something important."

"I'm listening intently." I already desperately missed his intoxicating kisses.

"Sasha came to see me at the police station today."

As Daniel carefully explained every detail of Sasha's calculated visit, my smile grew progressively wider with each word he spoke. He trusted me enough to tell me absolutely everything, which meant that regardless of what manipulative schemes Sasha attempted, she would never succeed in driving a wedge between us. When he finished his complete account, he looked at me with obvious curiosity.

"I assumed you would be furious, but you're actually smiling?"

"Here's the thing, big guy..." I shifted position to straddle him properly, placing one leg on each side of his powerful muscular body. "Your calculating ex-wife found me at the law building today." I told him about Sasha's visit and her transparent intention to separate us permanently. His protective arms immediately tightened around my waist.

"She'll only succeed in separating us if you allow it," he said with absolute unwavering conviction. "Now that we've discussed everything openly, come here. I desperately need to feel you against me."

Daniel pulled me close and carefully removed my nightgown, once again exploring my body thoroughly with his hot demanding mouth, my skin burning intensely under his expert touch. Poor Sybilla would undoubtedly lose another night of peaceful sleep, but I couldn't bring myself to care about anything except this moment with Daniel.

Chapter 509: Forgotten Face

Sybilla's POV

Anxiety twisted through my stomach as I prepared for my first day working as Xavier Black's personal assistant at Thorne Group headquarters. The irony cut deep—I'd be working for the consigliere of one of New York's most powerful families, a man who would dismiss me without hesitation if not for my brother's standing in the underworld hierarchy. Yet beneath my apprehension, anticipation fluttered at the prospect of seeing Xavier again after all these years. The last time our paths crossed, I was merely an awkward teenager harboring an impossible crush on my brother's sophisticated friend. I'd spent the entire night restless, imagining countless scenarios of how this reunion might unfold.

"Sybilla! Earth to Sybilla!" Daniel's commanding voice sliced through my wandering thoughts.

I blinked rapidly, realizing I'd completely lost focus during breakfast. "Sorry, what were you saying?"

My brother exhaled slowly, his expression mixing exasperation with the protective concern that defined his relationship with me. As a senior inspector who straddled both legitimate law enforcement and family obligations, Daniel understood the delicate balance of our world better than anyone.

"I said I’m personally driving you and Lila to Thorne Group today, and I’ll handle pickup afterward. No arguments."

"Whatever you command, big brother," I muttered, my thoughts already drifting back to Xavier as we made our way toward the towering glass monument that housed Thorne Group’s legitimate operations.

At the executive elevator, Lila gently touched my shoulder with her characteristic warmth. "You seem unusually distracted today. Everything alright?"

I couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease her about her relationship with my notoriously intense brother. "Well, it’s challenging to sleep when you and Daniel are making our reinforced apartment walls vibrate all night long."

Her cheeks instantly blazed crimson, and I had to bite my lip to suppress my laughter at her mortification.

"Daniel isn’t exactly a young man anymore, Lila. Perhaps consider not giving him cardiac complications with your nocturnal athletic performances."

"Sybilla!" Lila looked absolutely horrified, her face now matching the deep red of expensive wine. "Your brother maintains excellent physical condition, thank you very much."

"Morning, ladies!" Jude approached with his usual coffee, his easy smile masking the sharp intelligence that made him invaluable to Thorne’s information networks. "What’s today’s entertainment?"

I grinned with wicked satisfaction. "Just discussing how Lila might accidentally eliminate my brother through excessive bedroom activities."

Jude’s eyebrows shot upward with genuine amusement. "And here we worried about our detective potentially overwhelming Tiny Cipher. Turns out she’s the dangerous one in that relationship."

Lila attempted to hide behind her leather portfolio while Jude and I continued our merciless teasing campaign against her dignity.

"It’s absolutely true," I added with theatrical drama. "Every single night, for hours on end. The reinforced walls in that high-security apartment might as well be constructed from paper."

"My guest quarters remain available if you require refuge," Jude offered with his characteristic smirk. "Only the city’s newest monk currently occupies that space."

I snorted with disbelief. "Monk? Please. With your devastating looks and legendary charm, that townhouse will be swarming with beautiful women before long. You’ll need to install a reservation system for bedroom access."

Jude erupted into genuine laughter while Lila appeared to wish the marble floor would open and swallow her completely.

Once seated at my designated workstation, I attempted to settle into my new role within Thorne’s complex hierarchy. Jude kept me occupied with various assignments designed to familiarize me with the organization’s intricate operations, but my attention remained fractured, anticipating Xavier’s inevitable arrival. When he finally materialized, striding through the executive floor with his characteristic confidence and authority, he walked directly past my position without acknowledging my greeting, vanishing into his private office without offering so much as a casual glance in my direction.

The morning crawled past with agonizing slowness, Xavier remaining sequestered behind his closed door while my stomach twisted into increasingly complex knots knowing he occupied space mere feet away from my position.

During our lunch break in Thorne’s private dining facility, conversation naturally gravitated toward Jude’s notably absent social life.

"You cannot continue this hermit existence indefinitely," Lila insisted with gentle but firm conviction. "You need meaningful social interaction beyond our professional circle."

I nodded with enthusiastic agreement. "She speaks absolute truth! Listen, MP and I have plans to hit that exclusive bar downtown one evening this week—premium drinks, stimulating conversation, attractive people everywhere. You absolutely should join our expedition."

"MP?" Jude appeared genuinely confused by my reference.

"Close friend from Lila's graduate program. Incredibly fun personality, always prepared for memorable adventures."

Jude considered the invitation briefly before shrugging with resigned acceptance. "Why not embrace social interaction? Count me in for that evening."

I clapped with excited satisfaction just as Xavier and Caleb stepped off the executive elevator together. The sight of them moving in synchronized confidence was breathtaking—two impossibly handsome men radiating power and absolute authority that commanded respect throughout the criminal underworld.

"So Xavier, what's your assessment of the personal assistant I selected for your operation?" Caleb inquired as they approached our small group.

Xavier looked genuinely puzzled by the question. "Which assistant?"

"Your new personal assistant." Caleb gestured directly toward me, and I felt my blood transform into ice water.

Xavier turned toward me with that devastatingly charming smile that had haunted my teenage fantasies, the expression that made my heart skip erratic beats. "I don't believe we've been formally introduced yet."

"Are you seriously playing this game right now?" Jude asked, his frown deepening with obvious confusion.

"Playing what game?" Xavier appeared authentically bewildered by Jude's reaction.

Jude pressed forward with his interrogation. "Are you absolutely certain you two require formal introductions?"

Xavier studied my face with concentrated attention, his brow furrowing with obvious mental effort. "Well, I'll handle introductions myself then. I'm Xavier Black, your direct supervisor in this organization. My apologies for rushing past earlier—I was managing a critical situation with our West Coast operations." He extended his hand with professional courtesy, maintaining that killer smile.

"No apology necessary, Mr. Black. I'm Sybilla." I kept my expression carefully neutral as we completed the handshake, refusing to return his devastating smile.

"Please, just call me Xavier," he insisted, his intense gaze lingering on my features. "Strange, but something about you seems remarkably familiar somehow."

"I apparently possess one of those common faces," I replied with deliberate flatness, withdrawing my hand from his warm grasp.

"Caleb, let's discuss that conference call with Dominic's organization in my private office." Xavier beckoned his friend, who followed after casting me one final curious glance.

Once they disappeared behind closed doors, my legs nearly betrayed me completely, and I collapsed into the nearest chair with shaking limbs.

"He genuinely didn't recognize you?" Jude asked with obvious bewilderment.

"He's pretending ignorance," I replied, though seeds of doubt began sprouting in my mind.

"Xavier wouldn't engage in that type of deception," Jude said, settling beside me with concerned attention. "I believe he honestly failed to recognize you."

Hope flickered within my chest like a fragile flame. "Could we maintain this situation? Not reveal my true identity?"

"Caleb is probably explaining everything right now," Jude said, effectively extinguishing my brief optimism.

When Caleb emerged from Xavier's office some time later, he stopped at my workstation with an expression of pure mischievous delight.

"How much time has elapsed since you two last encountered each other?"

"Many years," I answered quietly, dreading his next words.

Caleb laughed with genuine amusement. "He has absolutely no idea who you are. How long will it take this brilliant idiot to solve this puzzle?" His eyes sparkled with anticipatory entertainment. "This situation promises exceptional amusement."

"You didn't tell him?" I couldn't believe my incredible fortune.

"Of course not. I intend to let him play the fool for as long as humanly possible," Caleb declared with wicked satisfaction. "I want him to reach the conclusion independently."

My spirits soared immediately. If Xavier never discovered my true identity, I could remain simply his competent assistant. I might actually retain this position after all. I just needed to convince Daniel to maintain silence and avoid Xavier outside our professional environment.

"If you don't tell, I won't tell," I whispered conspiratorially.

"Deal!" Caleb chuckled with obvious pleasure. "I'll ensure Lila and Jude maintain silence too. His expression will be absolutely priceless when realization finally dawns."

For the remainder of the day, I felt oddly conflicted about this unexpected development. Part of me experienced profound relief—without knowing my true identity, Xavier would evaluate me solely on professional merit rather than dismissing me for being his friend's annoying younger sister. But another part stung with genuine hurt. Was I truly so forgettable that he couldn't recognize me at all?

As Xavier remained behind his closed door, I wondered when—or if—he would ever remember the girl I once was.

Chapter 510: Revenge from Within

Daniel’s POV

Staring at the calendar on my desk at the precinct, I counted the days until Lila’s DNA test results would arrive. Only a short time remained. The anticipation gnawed at me like a persistent ache. I hoped Beckett’s suspicions would prove correct—Lila deserved better than having that manipulative woman as her mother. In the mafia world, bloodlines determined everything, and the truth about Lila’s parentage could reshape the entire Sullivan family hierarchy.

"Inspector, got a minute?" I looked up to see Gideon standing in my doorway. He was the detective I’d enlisted to investigate the circumstances surrounding Beckett’s mother’s death—a case that could unravel decades of family secrets within the Sullivan crime syndicate.

"Gideon! This is unexpected." I rose to greet him, gesturing toward the chair across from my desk. We’d worked together when he first joined the force, long before either of us understood how deeply the mafia families had penetrated law enforcement. "Didn’t think you’d be stopping by today."

"There’s a reason I came in person instead of calling. What I’ve uncovered needs to be discussed face-to-face." Gideon’s expression was grave as he settled into the chair. The weight of his words told me this wasn’t routine.

"Must be significant if it brought you all the way down here," I observed, noting the tension in his shoulders.

"It is. What started as a favor for you might become something much bigger—possibly involving other families in our network." That caught my attention immediately. When investigations crossed family boundaries in our world, things got complicated fast.

"How so?" I leaned forward, recognizing that whatever he’d discovered could have far-reaching implications beyond the Sullivan family.

"Let me walk you through what I’ve found. Tiffany, the maid in question, had been working in the Sullivan household for some time before the incident. But here’s where it gets interesting—before that,

she was employed in Nathaniel's legitimate business operations. Nathaniel being the husband of the woman who died in childbirth, of course. What's fascinating is that Nathaniel's father terminated her employment some months before she mysteriously appeared as household staff." This detail was new, and I wondered if Beckett knew about this connection to the family's front businesses.

"What was her role in the organization, and why was she let go?" I asked, understanding that in mafia-controlled businesses, employment decisions were never arbitrary.

"Her sister couldn't provide specifics about her exact position. She knew Tiffany handled administrative work—probably managing some of the cleaner financial records that families use for legitimacy. But the sister never learned why Tiffany was dismissed. However, she did mention that Tiffany was furious about it and constantly talked about getting revenge against the family. Even more intriguing, Tiffany apparently had a close ally within the organization—someone she confided everything to. The sister couldn't remember this person's name, just that Tiffany shared all her plans with this contact." Gideon had uncovered a potential network of betrayal within the Sullivan family's operations.

"Interesting. But if she harbored such resentment about being fired from the business side, why would she seek employment in their personal household? That's moving from the periphery straight into the heart of family life."

"I asked the sister the same question, and she found it equally puzzling. According to her, Tiffany said she needed to be close to the family to execute her revenge properly." As Gideon spoke, my mind raced through various scenarios. In the mafia world, household staff often had access to the most sensitive family secrets—financial records, meeting schedules, personal vulnerabilities.

"This just makes the whole situation more mysterious," I remarked, thinking about how such access could be weaponized.

"Exactly. The sister is convinced Tiffany despised the Sullivan family by the end. During their last conversation, Tiffany mentioned she'd be moving closer to her sister soon because her revenge was almost complete and she planned to disappear afterward. This conversation happened just days before Tiffany was found dead. The sister also found the drowning highly suspicious—Tiffany couldn't swim and always avoided bodies of water." Gideon's investment in the case was evident in his voice.

"Compelling. Did the sister have any insight into what form this revenge was supposed to take?" I asked, knowing that in our world, revenge could range from financial sabotage to exposing family secrets to rival organizations.

"Only that Tiffany claimed it would target what the family valued most." Gideon studied my face carefully. "I believe there's something substantial beneath this whole story. I'd like to interview the deceased woman's family directly—get their perspective on these events."

"That's not possible right now, Gideon. My girlfriend is the daughter from the widower's second marriage, and she remains unaware of this investigation." I couldn't risk exposing Lila to the darker aspects of her family's history—not yet, not until I had concrete proof. In the mafia world, knowledge could be as dangerous as bullets.

"I'm convinced there's more to uncover here. Perhaps we could locate this confidant—the person Tiffany shared her plans with? They might provide the missing pieces?" Gideon's detective instincts were fully engaged, a common trait among officers who stumbled upon cases involving family secrets and organized crime.

"How do we identify this person without a name to work with?" I asked, though I was genuinely intrigued by the possibility.

"We could request employment records from that period and see if any names trigger the sister's memory when she sees them."

It wasn't a terrible approach, especially considering the meticulous record-keeping that mafia families maintained for their legitimate operations.

"Here's what we'll do: interviewing the deceased woman's family isn't feasible, but I can contact my brother-in-law—Beckett, the son of the woman who died—and request the employment records you need. That should be sufficient for now," I suggested, knowing Beckett would understand the delicate nature of this investigation.

"Perfect. Can you arrange this quickly?"

"I believe so." With Gideon watching, I called Beckett and briefed him on our progress and what we needed. He assured me he could obtain the employment records, though it might take several days to retrieve them without raising suspicions within the family's business operations. After thanking him, I explained the delay to Gideon.

"One more development—when Tiffany died, her sister traveled to handle the body, burial arrangements, and clearing out the house. She collected all of Tiffany's personal belongings and transported them home. According to her, those boxes should still be stored somewhere in her basement. She promised to contact me once she locates them." Gideon's visit to Tiffany's sister had been remarkably productive.

"That's excellent news—those boxes might contain the evidence we need to understand her true motives." My interest was thoroughly piqued; I'd apparently given my friend quite the engaging case to sink his teeth into.

"That's exactly what I'm hoping for." Gideon smiled with satisfaction.

"What about the midwife situation?" I inquired, remembering another loose thread in our investigation.

"Another interesting development there—I canvassed the area, speaking with longtime residents. Nobody recalled a midwife specifically, but one elderly gentleman remembered a nurse who provided private services to wealthy households. He couldn't recall her name, but he mentioned that only two nurses worked at the local hospital during that time period, and one of them is still employed there. I haven't interviewed her yet, but I plan to in the coming days." Gideon's thoroughness impressed me.

"When this case concludes, I might try recruiting you for more sensitive assignments. You've extracted remarkable information from practically nothing." My compliment clearly pleased him.

"If you can make that happen, I'd accept without hesitation. But first, I want to solve this mystery. This case has become personal."

We continued discussing the details and potential next steps before Gideon eventually departed. I remained seated, contemplating our conversation, increasingly fascinated by whatever dark secrets lay buried in Lila's family history. In the mafia world, the past never truly stayed buried—it had a way of surfacing at the worst possible moments.

My thoughts were interrupted by my phone ringing, pulling me back to the present.