Mafia Mask 511

Chapter 511: The Hotel Trap

Daniel’s POV

The sharp ring of my desk phone cut through the tension in the precinct. My secretary informed me that an unidentified woman was demanding to speak with the lead inspector. When the call transferred through, I immediately recognized the voice that had haunted my past.

"Daniel, I need you..." Sasha’s voice trembled between sobs, her breathing erratic and desperate. Even after all these years, she still knew how to manipulate every inflection.

"Sasha, seriously? We’re not playing these games again. Your theatrics won’t work this time. Don’t call this number again." I moved to disconnect the call when her shriek pierced through the receiver like a blade.

"DON’T HANG UP, DANIEL!" Her voice cracked with manufactured desperation. "If you leave me now, I swear I’ll end everything. I’m going to jump from this window."

"Then jump, Sasha!" I slammed the phone down, refusing to be drawn back into her web of manipulation. The Martinez family had taught me many lessons, but the most valuable was never to show weakness to those who would exploit it.

Shortly after, my cell phone buzzed with an incoming message. A photo appeared on my screen: Sasha with wild, disheveled hair and mascara-streaked cheeks, perched precariously on what appeared to be a high-rise windowsill, her legs dangling over several stories of empty air.

The message beneath read: "If you don’t come, I’ll jump. I’m at the Summit Hotel."

"Damn it!" I pounded my fist against my desk, the sound echoing through my office. Every instinct told me to ignore her theatrical performance, but the memory of her previous suicide attempt before our arranged marriage haunted me. Even if this was just another calculated move in her endless chess game, could I risk calling her bluff?

I reluctantly left the police station, sending a terse message confirming my arrival as I climbed into my unmarked vehicle. The Summit Hotel represented neutral territory in our city's complex power structure – a place where both legitimate business and underground dealings could coexist without question.

At the hotel, the receptionist immediately provided her room number without hesitation. No questions asked, no identification required. The kind of discretion that money and family connections could buy.

"Sasha, open this door," I demanded after sharp knocks, my voice carrying the authority of both my badge and my bloodline.

The door swung open immediately. As I stepped inside and turned toward her, white-hot rage flooded through my system. She had played me yet again with the skill of someone raised in the same world of calculated deception. Before I could react or retreat, she locked the door behind me and sprinted to the closet, securing the room key inside a digital safe with a triumphant smile.

"What the hell is this?" Any compassion I might have felt evaporated instantly. At that moment, I could have happily pushed her from that window myself, consequences be damned.

"I knew you'd come," she laughed, her eyes gleaming with the victory of someone who had successfully executed a complex operation. "It worked before our marriage, and it worked now. And guess what happens next? Just like last time, you'll come back to me."

I couldn't believe I had fallen for her schemes again. During our engagement years, when I had tried to break free from the arranged union and started seeing someone else, Sasha's mother had contacted my father, claiming her daughter had locked herself away threatening suicide over the dishonor to both families. I had broken down her apartment door to find her making shallow cuts on her wrists. Her tearful declaration that she couldn't live without me, combined with family pressure and honor obligations, had led to our reconciliation and eventual marriage.

Now I stood trapped in a luxury hotel room with my manipulative ex-wife, who wore nothing but expensive black lingerie that probably cost more than most people's monthly salary.

"You've completely lost your mind, Sasha!" I reached for my phone but realized with sinking dread that I had left it in my car. The hotel phone was conspicuously absent from its usual location – undoubtedly locked in that safe with the room key.

"Lost my mind over you, Daniel," Sasha purred, moving closer with predatory grace. "Well, not exactly over you, but I want you and you belong to me, so..."

"Open that safe and give me the key, Sasha, or you'll regret this more than you can imagine," I warned, my voice dropping to the dangerous tone that had made hardened criminals confess their sins.

"What will you do, inspector? Hit me? Arrest me?" She unhooked her bra with theatrical slowness, letting the expensive fabric fall to the plush carpet. "Now that could make for an interesting power game."

"Stop this right now, Sasha!" Panic began to rise in my chest like bile. If Lila discovered that I had walked straight into this obvious trap, if she learned that I was here with my nearly naked ex-wife, I would be facing a crisis that could destroy everything we had built together.

"Why should I stop? You're going to enjoy our little reunion." She slipped off her remaining underwear and began advancing toward me with the confidence of someone who had never been denied what she wanted.

I dodged her advances, but she pursued me with determined hunger around the lavishly appointed suite. Though I could easily overpower her physically, I refused to lay a hand on her. She chased me from room to room, her laughter growing increasingly manic with each failed attempt to corner me.

Eventually, she managed to trap me against the far wall of the bedroom. Without any initiation from me, she pressed her naked body against mine, running her manicured hands over my chest and shoulders possessively. The sensation revolted me completely – her touch making my skin crawl like I was being caressed by something venomous.

Assessing my limited options, I noticed a tall decorative lamp on an antique stand to one side and an open wardrobe on the other. Inside the wardrobe, something caught my experienced eye – a silk scarf draped over a hanger. A plan formed in my mind immediately.

"Come on, Daniel, stop fighting this inevitable reunion," she whispered against my ear, grinding her body against mine. "Take me to that bed and claim me the way you used to – rough and commanding. I've missed that dominant side of you so much."

Her sickeningly sweet perfume overwhelmed my senses, and I knew these clothes would need to be burned afterward to erase any trace of this encounter.

"You know what? You're absolutely right," I said, forcing conviction into my voice while suppressing my disgust. "Why should I keep resisting? I'm going to give you something you'll never forget."

I grabbed her waist and lifted her onto the king-sized bed, watching satisfaction and anticipation spread across her face like poison.

"That's more like it, Daniel!" Sasha laughed breathlessly, spreading herself before me like an offering. "I knew you'd remember what we had."

Smiling with false promise, I retrieved the silk scarf and joined her on the bed. I grasped both her wrists, positioned them above her head, and bound them together with tight, professional knots.

"Ooh, kinky! Will there be punishment too?" she teased, still believing she had won this twisted game of manipulation.

"No punishment today, Sasha." I dragged her higher on the bed and secured the scarf to the solid headboard with knots that I knew she would never be able to undo alone. Stepping back beyond her reach, I savored the moment when realization finally dawned on her face.

"Now, tell me the safe code and I'll untie you before I leave. Refuse, and I'll start shouting until someone breaks down this door to find you naked and restrained like this," I threatened calmly, moving beyond the range of her furious kicking.

"You worthless bastard!" she spat, her voice rising to a shriek.

"Your choice entirely, Sasha. I'm not waiting around." I approached the door and began pounding and shouting for help at the top of my lungs.

Response came quickly – two housekeepers and a security guard burst through the door. I offered a hurried explanation about my unstable ex-wife's mental breakdown, earning a sympathetic nod from the guard before fleeing the scene without looking back at the chaos I was leaving behind.

My only concern now was explaining this entire debacle to my little one. I needed to tell Lila everything immediately, before Sasha could spin her own twisted version of events. I headed straight for Lila's workplace, rehearsing my explanation and praying she would understand that I had been trapped by someone who knew exactly how to exploit my protective instincts against me.

Chapter 512: Scent of Betrayal

Daniel's POV

I drove through the city streets toward Thorne Group headquarters, my knuckles white against the steering wheel. Getting there before Lila finished her shift at the legal department was crucial. I had to explain what happened with Sasha before rumors could spread through the underground networks that connected our families.

The moment Lila spotted me in the marble lobby of Thorne Tower, surprise flickered across her face. She approached with her usual grace, wrapping her arms around me in a brief embrace before pulling back sharply, her delicate nose wrinkling in disgust.

"This perfume," she said, her voice tight with controlled anger. "It doesn't belong to you, Daniel, but I know exactly whose it is."

The dread that had been clawing at my chest since leaving that hotel room exploded into full panic as I watched her expression harden. "Yes, you recognize it. That's precisely why I came early. I was with Sasha, but please, Lila, let me explain everything."

"I'm listening," she replied, settling into her chair behind the reception desk of Thorne's legal wing. Her amber eyes never wavered from mine as she added, "But I want every single detail about why that woman's scent is covering you."

"Well, I—" Just as I began, Xavier emerged from his corner office looking distracted, his sharp gaze unfocused in a way that was completely unlike Thorne Group's usually razor-sharp consigliere.

"Don't friends deserve proper greetings anymore, Xavier?" I called out, momentarily grateful for the interruption that might buy me time to organize my thoughts.

He blinked, recognition dawning, then extended his hand in the formal way expected among our circles. "Ah, Daniel. Forgive me. My mind has been occupied with family business lately."

"So I've heard through the grapevine. Anything the Martinez family can assist with?" I knew exactly what was eating at him—trouble with his girlfriend was written all over the face of Thorne's most composed strategist.

"Not at this time. I have matters to attend to, but we should discuss mutual interests soon." With that diplomatic dismissal, he disappeared into the executive elevator that served Thorne's upper floors.

Once the polished steel doors closed, I turned back to Lila. "He still hasn't remembered Sybilla's real identity?"

"Not yet," she replied curtly, her professional mask firmly in place. "Now sit down and start talking. Every detail."

I took a steadying breath, choosing my words carefully. "Sasha called claiming she needed urgent help. I hung up immediately, but then she sent me this." I showed Lila my phone screen—a photo of Sasha perched dangerously on a hotel window ledge, her silk dress billowing in the wind.

"So Inspector Martinez rushed to play the noble savior?" Lila's voice dripped with sarcasm that could cut glass.

"What would you have done in my position?" I countered, hoping she'd understand the impossible situation I'd found myself in.

"Called hotel security, contacted emergency services, dispatched a patrol unit—literally anything except going there personally and walking into her obvious trap."

She held my gaze with defiant fire, and I knew every word she spoke was absolutely correct. All those options would have been infinitely more logical, but my mind had flashed back to the first time Sasha pulled this manipulation when we were still bound by our families' political marriage arrangement.

"Well, the tension in here could be cut with a blade today," Jude announced, appearing in the doorway of his office that overlooked Thorne's financial operations.

"It certainly could," came Sybilla's voice as she approached from the direction of Xavier's office, her heels clicking against the marble floor. "And just look at my brother's guilty expression. What have you done now, little brother?"

I shot back defensively, "If I were in your position, I'd be more concerned about what happens when Xavier discovers you've been hiding your true identity from him, dear sister. A man in his position doesn't appreciate deception, especially from Martinez family members."

"By then I'll probably be reassigned anyway, so I'm enjoying this undercover work while I can," Sybilla retorted, settling gracefully into a nearby leather chair. "Come now, Jude, let's hear what foolish thing my brother has done this time."

"He went to see his ex-wife!" Lila announced flatly, her amber eyes never leaving my face.

Jude leaned against his desk, covering his mouth with his hand to hide a grin, while Sybilla leaned forward to sniff at my jacket with theatrical disgust.

"I knew I recognized that revolting scent," she grimaced with obvious distaste. "What vile perfume that manipulative woman drowns herself in. Why in God's name would you go anywhere near that insufferable creature, Daniel?"

"Could everyone please give us privacy so I can speak with my girlfriend?" I pleaded, feeling cornered by the collective judgment of Thorne Group's inner circle.

"Absolutely not," Sybilla insisted with wicked delight. "Tell us everything. Lila will just relay it all to us later anyway, so save us all some time."

Lila gestured her agreement with my sister, leaving me completely without allies. With a heavy sigh, I recounted the entire ordeal—from Sasha's desperate phone call to my hasty escape from that hotel room.

"You're such an idiot, Daniel!" Sybilla exclaimed when I finished my confession. "Lila, this isn't the first time that manipulative witch has pulled this exact stunt. The first time, my gullible brother fell for it completely. They were separated by family politics, and he went running back because she threatened to slash her wrists."

"She was locked in the bathroom with a straight razor, Sybilla. She'd already made some cuts on her arms," I defended weakly, knowing how pathetic it sounded.

"A few tiny scratches that barely broke the skin," Sybilla scoffed with obvious contempt. "Yet within days, you were pressured into proposing to her by both families."

"I can't believe you fell for such an obvious manipulation," Jude added, shaking his head in disappointment.

"Trust me, I know," I admitted with genuine remorse. "When she called today, I panicked remembering that previous incident. But after I arrived and actually listened to her performance, I realized she'd manipulated me both times with the exact same tactics."

"Let that be a hard-learned lesson, little brother," Sybilla said with stern authority.

Throughout this entire exchange, Lila had remained silent, her intelligent eyes fixed on me with unreadable intensity.

"Lila, please believe me," I begged, my voice raw with desperation. "I didn't do anything inappropriate. I only touched her to restrain her long enough to escape that room. Then I came straight here to tell you everything before rumors could spread."

Jude chuckled with dark amusement. "You left that woman naked and restrained? She truly has no dignity left whatsoever."

"Daniel," Lila finally spoke, her voice measured and controlled in that way that meant serious business. "You're going to leave this building now and go home."

"Lila..." I started, ready to plead my case further.

"Listen carefully!" She raised her hand, stopping me mid-sentence. "I listened to your explanation, now you listen to my instructions. Go home, remove those clothes and dispose of them completely—that perfume won't wash out, it's designed to linger. Take a thorough shower and scrub every trace of that woman from your body. Then wait for me there, quietly. Do you understand?"

"Please don't be angry with me," I said, genuine worry gnawing at my insides like acid.

"Do you understand, Daniel?" she repeated with firm authority that reminded me she was Sullivan family royalty.

"I understand perfectly." I nodded, realizing we'd finish this conversation in private, away from Thorne Group's prying eyes. "But you don't have transportation. I can return to collect—"

"Unnecessary," Jude interrupted smoothly. "I'll ensure both ladies get home safely. Go do exactly what Lila instructed and wait at your apartment."

"Alright, I'll wait for you, little one." I moved toward her instinctively, but she stepped back with deliberate distance.

"Don't touch me while you still smell like her," she said firmly, pointing toward the elevator.

Feeling properly chastened like a scolded child, I followed Lila's instructions to the letter. I left Thorne Tower and drove home to dispose of my contaminated clothes and take the longest, hottest shower of my life, determined to scrub away every last trace of Sasha's poison from my skin.

Chapter 513: Calling Her Auntie

Lila’s POV

I had complete faith in Daniel. While I knew Sasha would continue her scheming to seduce him back into the Martinez family’s political web, I was ready for whatever she threw our way. For each trap she set, I would demonstrate that messing with me or my boyfriend was a mistake she’d regret. The naive, insecure Lila who first arrived at Thorne Group was long gone.

"You really believe him, don’t you?" Sybilla asked, her voice tinged with concern as she adjusted her designer blazer in the backseat of Jude’s armored sedan.

"Without question," I assured her. "I trust your brother completely. The desperation in his eyes when he explained that judicial manipulation told me everything I needed to know."

Jude shook his head, his hands steady on the wheel as we navigated through the city’s financial district. "The poor guy left without knowing that you believed him. He’s probably torturing himself in that penthouse right now."

A sly smile crept across my face. "Well, I’m planning to teach him a valuable lesson tonight about being more careful with that venomous little snake from his past."

"Great," Sybilla groaned dramatically. "Looks like I won’t be getting any sleep in the apartment tonight. The soundproofing isn’t that good."

Jude’s expression brightened as he glanced at her through the rearview mirror. "Come stay at my place. I’ve mentioned before that I have a guest suite in my building. We could have dinner at that private club downtown, talk for hours. Some company would do me good." The loneliness had been eating at him since his business partner Nora relocated to the west coast operations.

"I’ll definitely take you up on that offer," Sybilla replied enthusiastically. "We’ll drop Lila off at the penthouse, I’ll grab my things, and spend the night at your place. Are you sure I won’t be disrupting your evening routine?"

"That depends," Jude teased, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "Do you snore like a chainsaw in that fancy private school accent of yours?" Sybilla playfully punched his shoulder as he laughed. "Of course you won't be disrupting anything. You'd be doing me a favor with your company."

"Perfect," I interjected, my eyes gleaming with determination. "But before heading home, I want to make a quick stop at the Azure Hotel. I need to pay my dear friend Sasha a little visit before she gets any bright ideas about manipulating more corrupt judges or coming after me."

"Let's do it," Jude said eagerly, making a sharp turn toward the upscale hotel district. "This I've got to witness. The Sullivan family heiress taking on a washed-up political socialite."

Minutes later, we stood in the elegant hotel lobby with its marble floors and crystal chandeliers. Jude charmed the receptionist into giving us Sasha's penthouse suite number with remarkable ease, flashing his business credentials and that devastating smile that had served him well in underground negotiations. We made our way upstairs in the private elevator, and I knocked firmly on her door, hearing her irritated voice call out from inside.

"Who is it?" she demanded, her tone sharp with annoyance.

"Delivery for Sasha," Jude answered smoothly, adopting a neutral service worker's accent.

The door swung open, revealing Sasha standing there in an expensive silk robe, arms crossed, a smug smile forming when she recognized us.

"Well, if it isn't the little miss herself," she drawled, her voice dripping with condescension. "I was actually planning to visit you at that college campus. I'm starting to like the academic atmosphere. Maybe I should return to school – we could be classmates, study law together." Her sarcasm was thick, but I was growing immune to her pathetic attempts at intimidation.

"Education is indeed valuable," I replied sweetly, stepping into her suite uninvited. "It broadens horizons and teaches critical thinking. You should definitely consider returning to school. Maybe you could learn something beyond manipulating family connections and chasing married men. It might help expand that pea-sized brain of yours."

"Oh, sweetie," she purred, closing the door behind us. "Men chase me. Look at Daniel – he came running the moment I called with news about those judicial documents."

"Yes, he came because despite you being this vulgar social climber, he pitied you and believed your fabricated legal emergency. That's what honorable men do, even when dealing with parasites from their past. And what did you do with his kindness? You tried to trap my boyfriend using your family's corrupt political connections. You fabricated something horrible just to seduce him again. And failed. Again. Don't you ever tire of rejection and humiliation?"

Sasha's confident smile vanished, replaced by a mask of barely controlled rage.

"So he ran straight to tattle on me, did he? What a loyal little puppy he's become for his teenage girlfriend," she scoffed, crossing her arms defensively.

"Not a puppy – a partner in a relationship built on trust and mutual respect. Let me make something crystal clear – you will never succeed in coming between us. Your pathetic political schemes and judicial corruption won't work."

"Maybe not," she conceded with a malicious smile, moving to pour herself a glass of expensive wine. "But I can certainly make your lives miserable. The Martinez family has connections you can't even imagine, little girl."

"What a waste of your energy and dwindling political capital." I stepped closer, my voice dropping to a cold whisper. "Be careful though – my patience has limits, and the Sullivan family doesn't forget insults."

"And what exactly will you do when it runs out, tiny? Throw a tantrum? Call your big brother to intimidate me?" Sasha laughed mockingly, but I detected a slight tremor in her voice.

"I'm not the tantrum-throwing type. But while you're busy being this minor irritation in my life – like an ant crawling on my leg, that's how insignificant you are to the real power players in this city – your precious time is slipping away. You're aging, Sasha. You're not a young woman anymore. You're well past your prime, and your political usefulness is declining with every failed scheme. Shouldn't you focus on something more meaningful, or at least ensure you won't end up old, broke, and completely irrelevant?"

I'd noticed during our last confrontation that age and fading influence were her deepest vulnerabilities, so I pressed where it hurt most, even though I found her vanity and desperation pitifully shallow.

"You think you can compete with me, little girl?" Sasha's posture changed, becoming aggressive as she set down her wine glass with unnecessary force.

"Compete? Oh, honey, there's no competition here. Daniel is with me and won't return to a washed-up former socialite who peaked years ago. You're just humiliating yourself, sacrificing whatever dignity and political connections you had left. I'm simply pointing out that if you keep wasting time on this ridiculous pursuit, before you know it, you'll be as wrinkled as a dried prune and twice as bitter."

I smiled sweetly, seeing pure rage building in her eyes. Time to make my exit before she did something truly stupid.

"Listen here, you insignificant insect," she snarled, her carefully maintained composure finally cracking. "I'm going to crush you and your precious little romance. You'll be nothing but a forgettable blip in Daniel's life after he comes back to me and the family obligations he can't escape."

"I came here with friendly advice," I said calmly, smoothing down my skirt as I prepared to leave. "Daniel won't return to you, and your family's political influence isn't what it used to be. And if you continue testing my patience, you might leave this situation with or without your designer clothes, but definitely sporting two black eyes courtesy of Sullivan family security." I turned toward the door, but couldn't resist one final jab. Turning back, I waved cheerfully. "Bye, auntie!"

"You miniature brat! I am NOT your auntie! You'll regret messing with me and underestimating my connections!" Sasha screamed from her doorway like a woman completely unhinged.

In the elevator, Sybilla and Jude exploded with laughter.

"Auntie? Really, Lila?" Jude chuckled, wiping tears from his eyes. "That was absolutely brutal."

Sybilla held her sides, struggling to breathe through her laughter. "You hit her biggest insecurity perfectly. She constantly lies about her age and gets furious when anyone calls her out on it."

"I noticed age was a sensitive topic when she was harassing me at the penthouse," I said, joining their laughter as the elevator descended. "How did Daniel ever end up married to someone so shallow and pathetic?"

Jude sighed dramatically as we reached the lobby. "Oh, Tiny Cipher, we men make terrible choices when we're young and pressured by family politics."

"I'm not convinced you improve much with age, Jude," Sybilla quipped, earning herself a mock glare.

I felt remarkably lighter after showing Sasha I wouldn't be intimidated by her desperate schemes or empty threats. When we arrived back at the penthouse building, Daniel wasn't in the living room – presumably waiting in the bedroom, probably driving himself crazy with worry. Sybilla quickly gathered her overnight things and said goodbye, heading off for her pleasant evening with Jude and their underground business discussions. Meanwhile, I prepared to teach my handsome boyfriend a lesson about trust and communication that he wouldn't soon forget.

Chapter 514: Interrogating the Inspector

Lila's POV

I entered our secured bedroom where Daniel sat in his leather armchair, absorbed in intelligence reports from Thorne Corporation, dressed in his off-duty attire of dark slacks and a cashmere sweater. He glanced up as I walked past him without acknowledgment, closing the bathroom door behind me. Tonight, I had something special planned for my mafia inspector.

After my shower, I slipped into rose-colored lingerie crafted from delicate French lace, selected a silk scarf from our walk-in closet, and returned to face him. I placed the scarf on the nightstand beside our bed, feeling his dark eyes tracking my every movement, then turned to confront him directly. His reports now forgotten, he watched me with predatory intensity, offering that dangerous half-smile when our gazes locked. I approached his chair and leaned down until we were face to face.

"Inspector Martinez, explain yourself. You entered that Sullivan family associate's private quarters, and she was barely dressed?" His smile disappeared instantly as he gave a reluctant nod. "What happened next?"

"Lila..." He clearly wanted to avoid revisiting the undercover operation.

"What happened next, detective?" I pressed, refusing to let him escape my interrogation.

He exhaled heavily. "She removed all her clothing."

"Step by step, Martinez. We're reconstructing your compromising position before I decide your punishment." His confusion transformed into understanding. "What did she remove first?"

"She unfastened her brassiere and let it drop to the marble floor."

I stood, took a deliberate step backward, and unhooked my lace bra, allowing it to fall. His eyes darkened with recognition as he realized the game I was orchestrating.

"Continue," I commanded.

"She slid off her undergarments." His voice deepened with desire. I slowly removed my panties and kicked them aside with deliberate provocation.

"What did you do then, Inspector? Did you stare at her the way you're devouring me with your eyes right now?"

"I never looked at her like this," he protested firmly. "She pursued me around that penthouse suite until I was cornered against the floor-to-ceiling windows."

"Demonstrate. That's how proper reconstruction works in criminal investigations, isn't it?" I challenged. He rose from his chair as I advanced toward him with calculated menace. He retreated step by step as I stalked him across our bedroom.

"It's taking every ounce of my restraint not to pin you against this wall right now," he admitted, his smile turning wickedly dangerous.

"Did you tell her that?" I suppressed laughter at his increasingly frustrated expression.

"Absolutely not. I was planning my escape route." He continued backing away until the wall trapped him. I closed the remaining distance, pressing my naked body against his clothed form.

"What happened then?"

"She pressed herself against me and began touching me inappropriately."

"Where specifically?"

"My torso."

"Like this?" I flattened myself against him, feeling his unmistakable arousal through his expensive fabric. "Did you become aroused when she touched you?"

"Christ, Lila! Of course not! My body only responds to you." His self-control was evident in the rigid tension of his jaw, the strain around his penetrating eyes.

"Continue your report."

"I realized physical contact would be necessary to extract myself from the situation. I noticed a designer scarf in her closet and formulated a plan. I would restrain her, and if she refused to provide the safe combination I needed, I'd create enough noise to alert hotel security. In such a high-end hotel, response time would be immediate."

"Show me exactly what you did."

In one explosive movement, he gripped my waist and threw me onto our king-sized bed. He seized the silk scarf from the nightstand, secured both my wrists together, and bound them to the ornate headboard. Anticipation coiled in my stomach, excitement building from our dangerous role play.

"Then I stepped away from her. She refused to cooperate with the combination, I shouted for help, and two housekeeping staff plus hotel security arrived within minutes. I departed while she remained restrained." His lips hovered tantalizingly close to mine. "Are you satisfied with my explanation?"

"You claimed you stepped away, but you're still positioned on top of me. Aren't you going to maintain proper distance?" I taunted.

"Not happening. I've provided my full report, but now you're naked beneath me, I'm painfully hard, and you're tied up at my mercy. I have far better plans than maintaining professional distance." He traced burning kisses along my jawline. "You've heard my explanation. Now let me demonstrate what I want to do with you—only you."

His mouth claimed mine in a kiss that drew a moan from deep in my throat. My lips parted eagerly, welcoming his tongue as it danced with mine. Each kiss felt like rediscovering each other—intoxicating, desperate, demanding everything.

"You're absolutely exquisite," he whispered between passionate kisses. "Perfection in every possible way."

His mouth traveled down my throat, sucking hard enough to mark me as his territory, making my body temperature spike and my core grow slick with desire. His skilled hands found my breasts, kneading gently before pinching my nipples and drawing them into his hot mouth alternately. I moaned and arched beneath him, offering myself completely.

He pulled away momentarily, leaving me cold and desperate before quickly stripping off his clothing and returning to cover my body with his heat. His experienced fingers explored lower, parting my sensitive folds and stroking that bundle of nerves until pleasure overwhelmed me in shuddering waves.

I barely recovered before he positioned himself between my thighs and entered me in one powerful thrust that tore a cry from my lips. He moved with vigorous intensity while I writhed beneath him, unable to touch him due to my silk restraints, which somehow amplified every sensation.

My climax crashed over me, my body clenching around him while he continued his sweet assault on my breasts and maintained his relentless rhythm inside me. A second release followed quickly as he drove

deep one final time, finding his own explosive release before collapsing onto me. Eventually, he freed my wrists and rolled us over so I straddled his muscular frame.

"Am I forgiven for the undercover operation?" he asked, mischief dancing in his dark eyes.

"Not yet. We have the entire night ahead of us," I replied, repositioning myself above him strategically. "But I'll ensure you understand that you belong to me and shouldn't respond to calls from other women in this family business."

"Is my dangerous little monster unleashed tonight?" He laughed as I nodded with predatory satisfaction.

For hours afterward, I subjected him to exquisite torture, ensuring he would never question what we shared or forget that he was completely mine, just as I belonged entirely to him in this treacherous world of power and passion.

Chapter 515: Brothers Crossing Lines

Lila's POV

I stifled another yawn while reviewing the latest money laundering reports on my computer screen. Last night with Daniel had been incredible, but now I was paying the price with heavy eyelids and a body that ached in the most delicious ways.

"Good lord, my brother is running you into the ground!" Sybilla placed a steaming mug of espresso on my desk, her expression a mix of amusement and concern.

"That concealer isn't fooling anyone, Tiny One," Jude chimed in with a laugh from his station monitoring the Thorne Group's legitimate business fronts. "Those dark circles have dark circles."

I grabbed the lifesaving espresso, leaned back in my leather chair, and took a long, grateful sip before responding. The Thorne Group offices were a far cry from typical corporate spaces—bulletproof windows, hidden weapon compartments, and surveillance systems that would make the FBI jealous.

"If every night could be like last night, your brother can run me into the ground anytime he wants." I shot Sybilla a mischievous smile that made her eyes widen.

"That's it. I'm moving in with you, Jude," Sybilla announced dramatically.

Both of them burst into laughter at my expense.

"First you steal my friend, and now you're abandoning me?" I clutched my chest in mock hurt, which only made them laugh harder.

"Oh, Tiny One," Jude teased while monitoring the encrypted communications from various Thorne operations, "you have your hot detective to keep you warm at night. Meanwhile, Sybilla and I are just lonely souls in this dangerous world."

"And that's entirely your choice," I pointed out. "How was your night, anyway?"

"Slept like a baby! First time since moving into that safe house with reinforced walls. Honestly, I'm shocked none of the neighboring businesses have filed complaints about the security detail rotations yet." Sybilla's grin was downright wicked.

The reinforced elevator doors slid open with their distinctive metallic hum, and Caleb stormed out looking like he was one security breach away from a complete meltdown. His hands raked through his dark hair as he approached our stations, the weight of running both legitimate businesses and underground operations clearly taking its toll.

"Good, you're all here," he said, tension evident in his voice as he glanced at the monitors displaying various Thorne enterprises. "Xavier's taking some time off from his consigliere duties, so I need you three to step up. I refuse to spend my evenings coordinating operations instead of with my family."

"We've got the family business covered," Jude assured him with his trademark calm while adjusting the surveillance feeds. "Sybilla has been an excellent addition to our intelligence network. Her insights into the Martinez family dynamics are invaluable, and we'll manage the operations just fine. How long will Xavier be gone?"

"Extended leave," Caleb replied with visible displeasure, clearly uncomfortable with losing his chief strategist during such volatile times. "It was unexpected, but I couldn't deny his request."

"Not a problem. Did he mention why? Does he need any backup?" Jude's composure was remarkable—always collected even when managing the delicate balance between Thorne's legal fronts and underground activities.

"He didn't say, but I suspect he's dealing with the same issue you are, Wright." Caleb crossed his arms and fixed Jude with a pointed stare. "Family complications that affect business."

"What do you mean?" Jude's confusion seemed genuine as he looked up from the financial reports he'd been reviewing.

"Ruby handed in her resignation from the casino accounting division yesterday. Ring any bells?" Caleb said bluntly. Jude and I exchanged startled glances. "Are you going to tell us about you and Nora splitting up, or are we continuing this charade while it affects your focus on family operations?"

Jude exhaled deeply, his fingers pausing over the keyboard that connected to Thorne's various enterprises. "No need for pretenses. She initially asked for space when things heated up with the territory disputes, and then recently requested a divorce. I'm still processing it all because frankly, I don't even understand how we reached this point."

"Worse than I thought." Caleb maintained eye contact with Jude. "Family instability can compromise operations. Do you need time off? Or anything else? We can't afford distractions right now."

"I'm fine. I've got these two beautiful women taking care of me." Jude gestured toward Sybilla and me with a forced smile while closing sensitive files on his screen.

"Watch it—one has a brother and the other has a boyfriend who could snap you like a twig without breaking his detective's code," Caleb joked, bringing a genuine laugh from Jude. "Don't forget you have allies who care. The family will be upset if they're left out. Come to my estate Sunday—all of you. That includes you, Sybilla. Ivy's been dying to meet Daniel's sister properly."

Caleb turned toward his reinforced office but paused when Sybilla called his name.

"Caleb? Xavier didn't recognize me when I first arrived and..." Sybilla's voice trailed off uncertainly, clearly worried about the complicated dynamics between the allied families.

"He's handling some Martinez family business out of state. He won't be at Sunday's gathering, if that's what concerns you." Caleb's mouth quirked into a knowing half-smile before he retreated to his office. Sybilla visibly relaxed.

"Let's get to work, ladies. The next few weeks will be chaos while we maintain operations without our chief strategist," Jude declared, dividing surveillance duties and legitimate business tasks between us.

By day's end, exhaustion had settled deep into my bones. I decided to skip my evening law classes—sleep was my only priority. Thank god it was Friday. I stood in the building's secure lobby with Sybilla, waiting for Daniel who was running late from his detective duties. I'd convinced her it was safe to wait in the lobby rather than the more secure upper floors.

"Lila, toothless gator!" The familiar voice made my stomach drop as it echoed off the marble walls. I turned to see my younger brother Justin approaching with his two constant companions—trouble magnets I knew all too well. Every bad decision Justin ever made involved these two parasites from the lower rungs of Sullivan family operations.

"Justin, you never mentioned four-eyes turned into such a hottie," one of them said, his gaze crawling over my body like a physical violation while completely ignoring the building's obvious security measures.

"You think so? I don't see the appeal." Justin's laugh—cold and cutting—sent chills down my spine. It was the laugh I'd always associated with the cruelest aspects of family business. "Help yourself, just keep mother's orders clean and simple."

"And who's the babe with her? Another friend? This assignment from Claire might be more profitable than we thought," the second associate remarked, eyeing Sybilla with obvious intent.

"What do you want, Justin?" I asked, clinging to the hope that despite everything, blood still meant something in our world. He stepped closer, and fear coiled in my stomach as I noticed the concealed weapons under their expensive suits.

"What do you think? I'm here to escort you home for a family meeting." His smile was pure malice, the kind that preceded violence in our world. "And you'd better come willingly before this becomes messier than necessary."

"She's not going anywhere with you!" Daniel's voice boomed across the space like thunder. He had just pulled up in his unmarked detective vehicle and was striding toward us, fury radiating from every movement, his hand instinctively positioned near his service weapon. "Girls, get in the car now. And you, punk—turn around and walk away. Tell Claire she'll never control Lila again. Neither will you."

"Who's this guy, Justin?" one of his associates asked, shifting nervously as they recognized the authority and danger emanating from Daniel.

"Lila's boyfriend," Justin sneered with false bravado. "Just some detective playing hero with his badge. But we outnumber you today, detective. You can't take all three of us without causing problems for everyone."

When I moved forward, terrified Justin might escalate this into the kind of violence that would compromise Daniel's position, Sybilla gripped my arm and practically shoved me into the car with surprising strength.

"My brother knows what he's doing, Lila. Trust him!" She slammed the door and slid in beside me, her hand finding mine in a protective gesture learned from years in the Martinez family.

"You really want to challenge a decorated detective with friends in high places?" Daniel's voice was deadly calm, carrying the authority of someone who'd navigated both legitimate law enforcement and family politics. "Go ahead. I'd enjoy watching you spend quality time in a cell while I explain to your superiors how you tried to kidnap a witness under police protection."

"Justin, he's connected. I'm out," one associate backed away, hands raised, finally recognizing the magnitude of the mistake they'd made.

"Don't be such a coward! He can't handle all three of us," Justin insisted, but his voice wavered with uncertainty.

"Problem here, detective?" A uniformed officer approached from a patrol car that had materialized as if from nowhere, followed quickly by backup.

Since Claire's appearance at our apartment, Daniel had coordinated with Thorne security to station surveillance near my workplace, school, and our building. I'd thought it excessive, but now felt only grateful relief.

"Yes, we have a situation," Daniel replied with professional calm as two more officers joined them, clearly part of a coordinated response. "These three are prohibited from approaching Lila Sullivan or my sister under a protective order. Document their identities, distribute them to all units, and escort them beyond city limits. Make sure they understand the consequences of returning."

"With pleasure, detective. These boys are in for an educational ride," the lead officer replied with a smile that promised nothing pleasant for Justin and his companions.

They efficiently handcuffed Justin and his associates, confiscated Justin's keys and any weapons they carried, and loaded them into separate patrol cars. Daniel slid into the driver's seat beside me, his jaw tight with barely contained rage.

"Why were you in the lobby waiting?" His voice vibrated with barely contained anger mixed with fear for my safety.

"I thought it would be safe for just a few minutes in the secure building," I whispered, flinching when he slammed his palm against the steering wheel with enough force to make the entire vehicle shake.

"Do you realize what could have happened if I'd been delayed at the precinct? Just imagining that piece of garbage touching you again makes me want to forget everything about due process." His knuckles turned white around the wheel.

"I'm sorry," I said even more quietly, understanding how my misjudgment had endangered not just myself but potentially compromised his position.

"Don’t apologize, little one." His embrace was fierce but gentle as he pulled me against his chest. "I know this situation with your family is hell for you, but please be more careful. I’d lose everything that matters if anything happened to you."

"Nothing will happen," I promised, running my fingers through his short dark hair. "And I’ll be more careful." It was a vow to him and to myself—one I intended to keep, knowing that in our world, second chances were rare and mistakes could be fatal.

Chapter 516: She Simply Left

Xavier’s POV

For weeks, I’d been grasping at shadows, trying desperately to understand where Ruby and I had gone wrong. Every day felt like navigating a minefield of family politics and underground dealings, never knowing what might trigger her next outburst. Her constant irritation hung between us like a wall I couldn’t breach, no matter how many late nights I spent away from Thorne family business trying to fix us.

The uncertainty had bled into my work as the family’s consigliere. I’d been operating on autopilot, barely registering the new assistant who had replaced Jude after Caleb relocated him to oversee our West Coast operations. There was something vaguely familiar about her movements through the Thorne compound’s executive offices—efficient, nearly invisible, yet somehow managing to organize the complex web of legal documents and territorial agreements perfectly. The family’s business continued smoothly, my desk remained pristine with contracts and municipal permits properly filed, but I’d hardly exchanged more than a few words with her.

I made a mental note to invite her for coffee at the compound’s private café. I always made it a point to know everyone who handled sensitive family matters, especially those with access to our legal operations. Jude had been exceptional at understanding the delicate balance between legitimate business and family interests, but when Caleb specifically requested him for the expansion into California’s port cities, I couldn’t refuse. Breaking in someone new to our particular way of conducting affairs required energy I simply didn’t possess these days.

Just as I was about to rise from my mahogany desk to locate my mysterious assistant, my secure phone rang. The voice on the other end—one of Ruby’s security detail assigned to our penthouse—sent ice through my veins. She was packing everything. All of it.

Before I could process this devastating information, Caleb pushed through my office door without his usual knock, confusion and concern etched across his face.

"Xavier, why did Ruby submit her resignation from the family's cultural foundation?"

My stomach dropped to my Italian leather shoes. "When I figure that out, I'll let you know."

I snatched my keys to the Aston Martin and bolted from the compound, racing through the city's controlled intersections where our influence kept traffic flowing smoothly. When I pulled up to our building, a black sedan waited at the curb—not one of ours. Ruby stood beside it, handing the driver her final piece of luggage. When she spotted me, she froze, guilt flashing across the face that had captivated me for years.

"I'm not even worthy of a goodbye?" I kept my voice steady despite the earthquake happening inside my chest, despite the way my world was cracking along fault lines I hadn't seen coming.

Ruby's eyes softened with something that looked dangerously like pity. "Xavier, don't make this harder than it needs to be."

"Harder? No, Ruby, I'm offering you the dignity you deserve." I gestured toward our building, toward the life we'd built together in the penthouse that overlooked the city we helped run from the shadows. "Let's go upstairs and talk."

"There's nothing to discuss, Xavier! I'm leaving." Her voice carried an edge of desperation, as if every second in my presence was torture she could no longer endure.

"Really? Don't you think I at least deserve to know why? Was I that impossible to live with?" I wasn't trying to change her mind—some part of me, the part trained to read people and situations, already knew it was over—but I needed answers. I needed something to hold onto when the emptiness came calling.

"Xavier, it's not like that. Listen, I'm sorry, but..." She hesitated, her gaze drifting past my shoulder toward the city skyline where the Thorne family's legitimate businesses rose like monuments to our

carefully constructed empire. "This life isn’t working for me anymore. It hasn’t been working for months, and you know it."

"You don’t love me." Not a question. A realization that crashed through me like a freight train carrying concrete and rebar.

"I did fall in love with you, but everything changed."

Her refusal to meet my eyes, to look at the man who’d shared her bed and her secrets, told me everything I needed to know about where we stood.

"Yes, everything changed. You changed." I exhaled slowly, surrendering to the inevitable with the same calculated acceptance I brought to losing territorial negotiations. "Be happy, Ruby."

She started to say something more, lips parting as if she had explanations or apologies queued up, but I turned away. I couldn’t watch her disappear into that sedan. I couldn’t bear to beg her to stay when I knew it would only deepen wounds that were already bleeding me dry. I walked toward our building’s entrance, each step requiring more effort than the last, like moving through quicksand.

Behind me, I heard the car door close with finality and the engine purr to life. The sound shattered what remained of my carefully guarded heart. I entered our lobby, nodded to security, and locked myself in my study overlooking the harbor where Thorne family shipping interests moved legitimate cargo alongside more profitable ventures.

I collapsed onto the black leather couch where we’d shared countless evenings discussing everything and nothing, and only then did I allow the pain to consume me completely.

Hours passed in darkness as I sat motionless, feeling the void expand inside me until blessed numbness replaced the agony. When I finally emerged from my grief-induced stupor, I realized I couldn’t spend another night surrounded by her ghost. Her perfume lingered on the silk pillows, her laughter echoed from the kitchen where she’d made coffee every morning, memories lurked in every corner like accusations.

The decision crystallized with startling clarity. I pulled out my encrypted phone and called the one person whose loyalty never wavered.

"Caleb, she left me," I said when he answered, fighting to keep my voice from breaking completely.

"Christ, Xavier. What do you need? I'm coming over." I heard movement on his end despite the late hour, heard him already reaching for his coat.

"No need to come. I just need time away, an extended period. Can you spare your consigliere that long?" I was already mentally packing, already seeing the Mediterranean horizon.

"Take whatever time you need, but know that I'm here for you, wherever and whenever you need me." Caleb's loyalty ran deeper than business, deeper than family obligations—he was the brother I'd chosen.

"Thanks, brother. See you when I return." I ended the call and set the phone aside.

I pulled out my travel case and packed methodically—clothes for warm weather, documents for international travel, enough cash for extended solitude. After a scalding shower, I left detailed instructions with building security and transferred immediate family business to my most trusted associates.

Hours later, I stood at the airport's private terminal, purchasing a ticket to the one place that had healed me before—Sicily, where the Thorne family's oldest connections still honored traditional ways of handling heartbreak and rebuilding strength.

As the plane lifted into the night sky, I closed my eyes and surrendered to the darkness, hoping that somewhere across the Atlantic, among the ancient hills where honor and respect still meant something, I might find the pieces of myself that Ruby had taken when she walked away.

Chapter 517: Underground Sanctuary

Wright's POV

I stared at Sybilla's contact on my encrypted phone, debating whether to cancel our plans for the underground club tonight. But Xavier's sudden disappearance from Thorne territory had me concerned—when he returned from whatever family business had called him away, he'd need solid allies around him. Besides, networking in the families' social circles might prove beneficial for my own standing.

After showering and dressing in my tailored black suit and silk shirt—appropriate attire for the exclusive establishments frequented by our kind—I drove through the city's shadowed streets to the Martinez family compound to collect Sybilla. We'd arranged for her to stay at my penthouse again tonight, away from the main family residence. I genuinely valued her company—she possessed sharp wit, ruthless charm, and the kind of straightforward honesty rare in our circles. At Thorne headquarters, we'd developed an efficient partnership handling sensitive financial transactions. I pressed the compound's security buzzer and waited, adjusting my platinum cufflinks.

"Well, look who decided to show up," Daniel said as the reinforced door opened, his smile masking the wariness that never left his eyes. After the security system verified my identity, he gestured me inside. "Let's cut to the chase, Wright. What exactly is happening between you and my sister?"

"Relax, Inspector. Sybilla and I maintain strictly professional boundaries, nothing more," I assured him, suppressing amusement at his protective stance. Daniel commanded respect throughout both legitimate law enforcement and underground circles—antagonizing him would be supremely unwise.

"Then explain why she spent the night at your place yesterday," he said, his detective's instincts sharp as ever.

"And she's staying over again tonight so you and Lila can have the compound to yourselves. Don't worry—separate floors, separate everything." I kept my explanation measured and clear.

"Fine, I'm trusting you here. But remember—she carries the Martinez name." His warning carried the weight of family honor. "Have a seat. She's still preparing herself."

"You and Lila decided against joining us tonight?" I asked, settling into the leather armchair that probably cost more than most people's cars.

Daniel’s expression transformed into genuine warmth. "And waste the privacy my thoughtful sister is providing? Not a chance." His eyes held the contentment of a man who’d found his anchor in this dangerous world.

We discussed our concerns about Xavier’s whereabouts, with Daniel sharing his theory about which family territories might have demanded the consierge’s attention. The conversation shifted to Lila’s volatile family situation—specifically her brother showing up unannounced at Thorne offices. I expressed regret for not maintaining security around the women until Daniel’s arrival—I hadn’t anticipated them venturing into potentially hostile territory alone.

"Wright! Sorry for making you wait!" Sybilla appeared in a stunning cocktail dress that showcased her elegant silhouette, every inch the sophisticated heiress she was born to be.

"Damn, Sybilla! You look incredible," I complimented as she turned gracefully, her designer heels clicking on the marble floor.

"Think I’ll catch myself some interesting company tonight?" she asked with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"No entanglements—they’re dangerous in our business," Daniel interjected, causing Sybilla to roll her eyes dramatically.

"Not those kind of entanglements. And since when do you worry about my social life?" she challenged.

"I know exactly what kind of ’company’ you mean, and those are precisely what concern me," Daniel replied sternly. "Wright, I’m counting on you. Watch over her, discourage any opportunists, and maintain appropriate boundaries."

"Are you her brother or her bodyguard?" I laughed, surprised by the intensity of his protectiveness.

"Both, when necessary! I don’t want some ambitious upstart thinking he can use her to gain access to our family," he said firmly.

"Don’t worry, Wright. I’ll be the one using them for information!" Sybilla teased, making Daniel’s frown deepen considerably.

"Let’s leave before your brother assigns you a permanent security detail. Couldn’t you convince them to join us?" I asked her.

"The lovebirds are staying home for quality time together," Sybilla smirked while Daniel looked mortified by her directness.

"No point denying it—that’s exactly what you’re planning," I added, trying to lighten the mood.

"She’s not wrong, detective." Lila appeared beside Daniel, whose expression immediately softened at her presence.

"It’s your fault for being so captivating," Daniel replied, making Lila blush despite her composure.

"Time to leave, Wright, before we witness something requiring memory suppression," Sybilla grabbed my arm, and we departed amid laughter and good-natured protests.

The underground club pulsed with energy—live musicians performed on the elevated stage while bodies moved to hypnotic rhythms in the dimly lit space reserved for family associates and their guests. Sybilla spotted an empty VIP booth and led me there, where her contact—a polite, energetic young man from a neutral territory—waited with champagne already chilled. He greeted Sybilla with practiced deference and introduced himself to me with the firm handshake of someone who understood hierarchy. Within minutes, I found myself genuinely enjoying their company, surprised by how relaxed I felt in this exclusive environment.

"Well, well. Little Sybilla Martinez." A striking woman approached our booth. I recognized her immediately from family briefings, though she showed no sign of remembering our previous encounter.

"Dear God, Sasha. Disappear," Sybilla said with unconcealed disgust, making me chuckle quietly.

"Don’t be rude. Aren’t you going to introduce your companions?" Sasha swayed slightly, clearly intoxicated on premium liquor.

"Absolutely not. Now leave," Sybilla replied bluntly.

"Then I’ll introduce myself," Sasha turned toward me with a practiced smile designed to manipulate. "Hi, I’m Sasha Mendez. Pleasure to meet you."

"Trust me, the pleasure is entirely absent. I’m Wright, associate of Inspector Martinez. I was present when security removed you from the compound in considerable disarray. Honestly, I’d prefer avoiding future encounters," I stated coldly.

"You’re as unpleasant as Daniel," she complained bitterly. "You should find more agreeable friends, Sybilla."

"My associations are none of your concern," Sybilla shot back with icy precision.

"I’ll inform the family matriarchs about the company you keep," Sasha threatened weakly.

"Do that, and while you’re at it, explain how you were discovered compromised and restrained in a downtown hotel. The family councils will find that fascinating, and they’ll definitely share details with your own relatives," Sybilla countered with deadly calm. "Now disappear, you disgrace."

Sasha retreated, her face twisted with humiliation. Shortly after, several young women from respectable families asked to join our booth due to the crowded venue. We welcomed them, and the evening transformed into hours of sophisticated conversation, premium drinks, and carefully guarded revelations. As the night wound down, one particularly attractive socialite leaned close to me.

"So, handsome, want to continue this evening at my family’s estate?" Her voice carried invitation despite the alcohol’s influence. Despite her beauty and obvious connections, I wasn’t ready—emotionally, I remained unavailable, even though my previous relationship had ended definitively.

"You’re stunning, darling, but my timing is complicated right now," I replied gently but firmly.

"That’s unfortunate. Perhaps another time when circumstances align better." She placed a brief kiss on my lips before rejoining her companions with practiced grace.

"Why refuse her? She was gorgeous and well-connected!" Sybilla asked as we walked toward my armored vehicle after bidding farewell to her contact.

"I’m simply not there yet," I answered honestly, and she nodded with understanding.

"What about you? Why dismiss all those potential suitors tonight?" I countered as we approached the car.

"Because I’m not ready either," she replied with a knowing smile, sliding into the passenger seat. "Let’s go home. I’m looking forward to that luxurious guest suite and sleeping late tomorrow."

I couldn’t help laughing at her continued complaints about Daniel and Lila’s enthusiastic nighttime activities echoing through the compound’s walls. In this short time, Sybilla had become genuinely important to me—a trusted ally I deeply valued having in my corner within these treacherous family politics.

Chapter 518: Buried Secrets Surface

Gideon’s POV

The covert investigation Daniel had assigned me sent adrenaline coursing through my system. Everything about this case reeked of organized coverup, yet had been conveniently buried as unfortunate coincidence by local authorities clearly in someone’s pocket.

I reached the rural township early Saturday morning, methodically cruising through streets to map the terrain. This was a compact community surrounded by sprawling agricultural estates stretching beyond the horizon. The logistics of providing discreet medical services to scattered properties would be complex, but the estate where the woman had allegedly died during childbirth sat just a short drive from town via a private access road maintained by family money.

After my reconnaissance drive, I circled back to the commercial district for deeper surveillance. I wandered the town square, grabbed lunch at a family-owned diner, and engaged elderly locals in casual conversation. Posing as someone scouting investment opportunities in the area, I hoped to extract useful intelligence, but nobody volunteered anything substantial. The town possessed an unsettling stillness, as though dangerous secrets lay buried beneath its wholesome veneer.

My next target was the private medical practice serving the area's elite families. A young woman staffed the reception desk. She wasn't my primary objective, but could potentially guide me to the right contact. I approached without revealing my law enforcement connections—this investigation demanded absolute discretion.

"Excuse me, miss. I need to locate a nurse who works here—the veteran one. What's her name again?" I feigned temporary memory lapse, confident the receptionist would supply the missing information.

"Oh, that would be Sonia," she responded with an eager smile, leaning forward conspiratorially. "I swear she's been here since they founded this place."

I thanked her for refreshing my "memory" and she offered an understanding nod.

"A business associate asked me to discuss locating someone with her. Is she working today?" I maintained friendly professionalism, recognizing that in a community this insular, my presence would become dinner conversation within hours.

"She's off shift today, but you could visit her residence. It's quite close." The receptionist proved surprisingly accommodating, providing detailed directions to Sonia's address and mentioning she lived independently.

The house was indeed nearby—a well-maintained cottage with decorative stonework and cultivated flower beds framing the entrance. I announced myself at the gate, and shortly a sharp-eyed woman appeared at the window before inviting me inside.

"Sonia?" She confirmed with a cautious nod. "I'm Gideon. A colleague directed me to find someone, and he suspects you might know their current location."

"Come in," she instructed, motioning toward her sofa while claiming the armchair across from me. "Who exactly are you seeking?"

"A nurse who collaborated with you years ago. She provided services to remote estate residents—"

"That parasitic snake Aria?" Sonia interrupted with obvious disgust. "Why would anyone want to track down that corrupt woman?"

"My colleague has legitimate reasons," I answered evasively, unwilling to expose my true mission.

"She systematically extorted money from vulnerable families, convincing them the doctor wouldn't make house calls but she would provide equivalent care. She dispensed prescription medications without proper authorization. The doctor remained completely unaware—there are countless isolated estates and compounds around here that are difficult to monitor."

"Does she still reside locally?" I inquired.

"No, she vanished years ago when the doctor uncovered her operation."

"How did he discover it?"

"She delivered an infant and the mother suffered massive hemorrhaging. The husband rushed his wife and newborn to the medical facility. Subsequently, the woman became hysterical, insisting she'd delivered twins and one had been stolen."

"Stolen?" I pressed forward attentively.

"Exactly. The husband swears only Aria entered the birthing room. She managed the delivery while he waited outside. Afterward, she informed him his wife required rest due to complications, collected payment, and departed. When he entered, there was one baby and his unconscious wife. Being inexperienced parents, he trusted Aria, but when he touched his wife, she was burning with fever and the bedding was saturated with blood. He contacted a neighbor with transportation, secured help, and

brought them to the clinic. She had severe internal bleeding—the doctor barely stabilized her. When she regained consciousness, she became frantic about having two babies."

"And the doctor terminated the nurse following that incident?"

"Yes, there were additional suspicious cases too. But you understand how these situations unfold—the police claimed insufficient evidence, dismissed everything as tragic coincidence. That detective is compromised, only pursues investigations that benefit his handlers."

"The same detective from that period still operates here?"

"Yes, identical one. But his wife controls everything—him, the station, all decisions. She's constantly protecting Nathaniel's youngest son from consequences. The detective's wife maintains close ties with the boy's mother."

"Nathaniel?"

"The agricultural processing magnate. Decent man, nearly lost his sanity when his first wife died. But he rapidly married that vindictive woman Claire. Social scandal—rumors circulated that Claire was his mistress, pregnant simultaneously with his wife. After his wife's death, they wed, though their daughter had already been born. Now Claire pretends to be this righteous figure, constantly at church, attempting to silence the gossip. The disturbing coincidence is that his first wife also died during childbirth—both mother and baby—on the exact same day the other woman nearly bled to death at the clinic."

My pulse accelerated. Sonia was providing precisely the intelligence I required.

"So Nathaniel's first wife gave birth the identical day as the woman the doctor rescued?"

"Correct, Nathaniel's wife experienced premature labor."

"What an extraordinary coincidence. The doctor saved one but couldn't save the other?"

"One of those devastating accidents. They occupied an estate nearby, but that day his wife was alone with household staff. Instead of summoning the doctor, the staff called some unauthorized midwife—I don’t know who. When Nathaniel returned, both his wife and baby daughter were deceased."

"How horrific."

"I always suspected the fortunate outcome for the woman the doctor saved came at the expense of the other’s death. If he’d gone to the estate, he wouldn’t have been at the clinic when the hemorrhaging woman arrived. I never comprehended why the staff didn’t fetch the doctor. But she died in Crest Lake shortly afterward anyway."

"Another death? Why would she be at a dangerous lake?"

"That’s precisely it—nobody ventures there recreationally. It’s treacherous, with unstable ground beneath the surface. Let me prepare coffee so we can continue talking. I rarely have visitors, and when someone calls, I become quite chatty."

"I’m finding our conversation extremely informative, Sonia." Her initial wariness had completely dissolved.

I departed Sonia’s residence after dinner armed with crucial intelligence, including Aria’s current whereabouts. The deeper I excavated this case, the more convinced I became that something sinister had transpired involving powerful families and systematic coverups. I possessed substantial material to discuss with Daniel upon my return.

Chapter 519: Morning Unraveled

Daniel’s POV

The morning light filtered through the bulletproof windows of my penthouse, casting shadows across Lila’s bare back as she slept peacefully beside me. She lay on her stomach, her hands tucked beneath the pillow, with only the silk sheet covering her from the waist down. Her golden hair spilled across the pillow like liquid fire. I couldn’t resist reaching out, tracing my finger down the length of her spine, planting soft kisses along her shoulder blades until she stirred. She glanced at me sideways, her amber eyes still heavy with sleep, a lazy smile spreading across her lips.

"Finally awake?" I teased, continuing to trace patterns on her skin.

"No, still dreaming," she replied with a sleepy grin.

"What about?" I asked, nuzzling her shoulder.

"Not what. Who," she corrected, a mischievous glint in her eyes.

"And who might this lucky person be?"

"A certain Greek god who runs half the city's police force," she murmured, making me smile.

"And what is this god doing in your dream?"

"Tempting me, kissing me everywhere. I'm seriously considering surrendering to his authority."

"Who's being dangerous now?" I laughed, loving the sound of her giggle. I captured her lips with mine as she turned beneath me, pulling me closer with eager hands.

Our intimate moment was shattered by the harsh ring of the secure intercom. I mentally cursed whoever was destroying my perfect Saturday morning in our fortress.

"Someone needs to answer that, big guy," Lila said with a laugh as I continued kissing her neck.

"If we ignore it long enough, they'll disappear," I muttered against her skin.

"What if it's Sybilla and she forgot her access code? Or worse, what if there's trouble brewing?"

"Tiny one, I’m the one with trouble brewing right now. If it’s Sybilla, she can wait."

Lila laughed again, but the intercom continued its relentless ringing.

"You should probably get that," she insisted, and with great reluctance, I pulled myself away to answer.

To my dismay, it was my father announcing an early morning visit. I told the doorman to escort him up shortly and returned to the bedroom with a groan.

"Tiny one, my father’s on his way up," I said, watching Lila’s eyes widen in surprise.

"I need to alert Sybilla he’s here."

"You go answer the door. I’ll text Sybilla and prepare some coffee," she decided, springing into action with practiced efficiency.

I rushed through my morning routine and opened the reinforced door just as my father arrived. Strangely, he seemed to be in an unusually pleasant mood for someone who typically conducted business with an iron fist.

"Son, good morning! Perfect timing that you’re off duty today," he said, opening his arms for a rare embrace.

"Is everything under control?" I asked suspiciously.

"Absolutely. Where are the ladies?" he inquired, clearly referring to Lila and Sybilla.

"Good morning, Mr. Martinez," Lila appeared, wearing her diplomatic smile – the one I’d seen her use when navigating delicate family politics. "Sybilla’s on her way, and coffee’s brewing. Please make yourself comfortable."

"Always so gracious, dear. Thank you." My father shook her hand and took a seat, his calculating eyes following her movements with unusual interest.

Something felt off about his demeanor. His courtesy toward Lila seemed rehearsed, strategic. Lila set an elegant breakfast spread and invited us to the mahogany table. My father immediately claimed the seat next to her.

Before long, Sybilla arrived with Jude in tow, and my father's cheerful facade instantly hardened like concrete.

"Dad, this is Wright, our associate and the girls' colleague," I explained carefully.

"Colleague? What do you mean?" My father looked sharply at Sybilla.

"Oh, I forgot to mention, Dad – I secured a position," Sybilla announced with a proud smile.

"For heaven's sake, Sybil, you've never held legitimate employment," my father scoffed, wiping the smile from her face. "I came here specifically to bring you home. You've imposed on your brother long enough, and your mother is inconsolable."

"Well, she'll have to remain that way because I'm not returning," Sybilla replied firmly.

"Sir, with all due respect, your daughter is an exceptional asset to our organization," Jude interjected, earning a dangerous look from my father.

"And who exactly are you to evaluate my daughter's capabilities?" my father challenged, his tone carrying the weight of authority that had crushed lesser men.

"Wright Sawyer. I believe you're familiar with my parents – they own Global Brand Strategy, and your enterprises are in their extensive portfolio." My father visibly stiffened. "Though currently, I'm serving as Caleb Thorne's personal assistant."

"Of course I know your parents. My apologies, I had no idea you were their son. Weren't you previously working under Xavier Black's guidance?" My father struggled to maintain his composure.

"I was, but since Caleb's wife stepped back from active operations, I assumed her role as his assistant, and Sybil became Xavier's right hand," Jude explained with a confident smile.

"This must be some kind of mistake," my father said, staring at Sybilla in disbelief.

"Not at all, Dad. Turns out all that money you invested in those exclusive academies wasn't squandered after all," Sybilla replied triumphantly.

"And you're actually excelling in this position?" my father asked skeptically.

"May I answer that?" Jude interjected. "Sybilla is performing exceptionally. She has an innate understanding of our business operations – clearly inherited from your bloodline. I'm surprised you never offered her a role in your organization. She's a valuable asset to any enterprise."

Jude knew perfectly well why my father had never given Sybilla that opportunity, but he was clearly enjoying putting Elias Martinez in an uncomfortable position within his own son's territory.

"Well, this is unexpected news. I suppose you're truly determined not to return home?" my father conceded.

"Absolutely, Dad," Sybilla confirmed with a smile.

"Your mother will be devastated," he sighed. "But what about your wife, Jude? I understand you're married."

"I'm currently pursuing a divorce," Jude replied, his smile fading.

"I apologize for the intrusion," my father said awkwardly. "So why were you two together this morning?"

"Oh, because I spent the night with him," Sybilla answered casually, drawing everyone's shocked attention. She looked around innocently. "What?"

"Jude, clarify this immediately," I demanded, suddenly protective.

"Nothing to clarify," he said, shooting Sybilla an exasperated look. "She stayed at my place, in the guest quarters, alone. We attended a business function that concluded late."

"You two are insufferable!" Sybilla exclaimed, pointing at my father and me. "I'm an adult who makes her own decisions. Dad, I'm not coming home. Even after you canceled my accounts, froze my access, eliminated my allowance, and confiscated my vehicle, leaving me with just three suitcases of possessions, I survived. I'm not going back."

My father sighed deeply. "I suppose there's nothing more I can accomplish. But contact your mother – she deserves to hear this directly from you."

"I will, but not today," Sybilla stated firmly.

"Children, always a challenge," my father remarked, then turned his attention to Lila. "And you, Lila? Did you also abandon your family defying your parents' wishes?"

And just like that, my perfectly peaceful Saturday morning in our secure haven completely unraveled.

Chapter 520: Unknown Territory

Lila's POV

I lowered my espresso cup and met Don Martinez's calculating gaze across the mahogany table. The tension in his private study was palpable, thick with the weight of unspoken power dynamics that governed our underground world.

"Don Martinez, I left my family's territory to pursue my law degree. As I mentioned, my father supported this decision completely. My mother, however, like your wife, would have preferred I remained within our family's sphere and accepted an arranged marriage. That path never aligned with

my aspirations," I explained, maintaining a respectful tone. Despite his probing interrogation, he commanded respect as the head of the Martinez dynasty, and I intended to honor that tradition.

"I see. You're a woman with ambition. And now you work as Caleb Thorne's legal secretary. I assume Daniel helped secure that position within their organization?" His tone carried implications that made my spine stiffen with discomfort.

"That's incorrect, Don Martinez. Daniel and I actually first met at Caleb's wedding ceremony. I maintain close relationships with both Caleb and his wife through legitimate channels. I served as Ivy's bridesmaid, with Daniel as my escort for the traditional ceremony. Before joining Thorne Enterprises, I worked under Dominic West's guidance," I clarified, refusing to let his insinuations undermine my professional integrity.

"West has quite the reputation with women in our circles. Were you romantically involved with him?" The question was deliberately provocative, testing my composure.

I felt Daniel tense beside me, his protective instincts flaring as he prepared to defend my honor. I placed my hand gently on his arm beneath the table, silently requesting his restraint.

"Don Martinez, I was working at a boutique when Dominic approached me with a professional opportunity within his art acquisition business. I accepted his offer, and our relationship remained strictly professional throughout our association. Eventually, he recommended me to Caleb's organization when they required someone with my legal background and discretion. I remain grateful to both gentlemen for advancing my career within our community. I should also mention my friendships with their wives, as well as Jude, Zoe, and Finn - names I'm certain carry weight in your circles. My relationship with Daniel developed naturally, well after these professional connections were established," I responded calmly. From my peripheral vision, I caught Daniel's proud expression.

"I apologize for my directness. It seems the stress of recent family matters has affected my usual diplomacy," Don Martinez said, appearing somewhat chastened. "I should have recognized your connections immediately, particularly considering you control significant interests in a highly profitable money management enterprise."

"There's been a misunderstanding, sir. I only hold thirty-five percent of our family's operations. My grandfather structured the inheritance with thirty-five percent to me, thirty-five percent to my elder brother, and thirty percent to my father. They handle all operational decisions. My brother deposits

what he claims represents my share into a private account, though I never access those funds since my legal salary meets my needs adequately," I explained.

"No, Lila, I rarely make errors regarding financial matters. According to my sources, you control fifty percent of your family's money laundering network, with your brother holding the remaining fifty percent. This includes the art gallery and real estate holdings that serve as your primary fronts - all split equally between you both. Those properties represent considerable value within our underground economy. I'm confident in this intelligence," he replied with a self-assured smile.

"He's accurate, Lila. Father never miscalculates business figures. He conducted a thorough investigation into your family's operations," Daniel interjected, his voice tight with anger. "What gave you the authority to investigate her?"

"Don't be so dramatic, Daniel! I didn't initiate a personal investigation. I became interested in acquiring a stake in their operation and wanted to make a legitimate business proposal. Discovering Lila's substantial ownership was unexpected, which prompted deeper inquiry into the family structure. This represents standard business practice - you understand these protocols," his father responded smoothly.

"Don Martinez, you could have approached me directly with any questions. I would have provided honest answers without requiring covert investigation," I said, maintaining measured tones despite my growing unease with his methods.

"Would you really have been forthcoming, Lila? Because I still have several pressing questions regarding your family's operations," he replied with a smile that suddenly appeared predatory.

"Please ask whatever concerns you, and I'll respond truthfully. Though I maintain you're mistaken about my stake in our family enterprise."

"Trust my assessment, Lila. When father states something with certainty, particularly regarding business matters, he's invariably correct," Daniel assured me, exchanging a meaningful look with his father. I felt increasingly confused - how could I control half our operations without knowledge?

"Why doesn't your younger brother hold any shares in your family's business structure, Lila?" Don Martinez's question caught me completely off guard.

"He demonstrates no aptitude for our type of work and avoids responsibility consistently. That's precisely why my grandfather distributed the inheritance exclusively between my father, elder brother, and myself," I answered automatically, my mind now racing with questions I needed to address with Beckett immediately.

"Your grandfather showed remarkable wisdom in that decision. And your brother appears exceptionally skilled at managing your family's interests, though he declined my partnership proposal outright." His smile remained unchanged. "Would you consider selling a portion of your shares to my organization?"

"It's strictly a family enterprise, sir. As I mentioned, I avoid involvement in operational decisions. My brother holds my power of attorney, and I trust his judgment completely. If he rejected your proposal, he undoubtedly had sound reasoning," I replied, eager to redirect this conversation away from business matters.

"Could you facilitate a meeting between your brother and myself? My representative extended the initial offer, but I prefer conducting such negotiations personally," he requested.

"Certainly. I'll mention your interest during our next conversation, and we can arrange an appropriate meeting," I agreed, seeing no harm in facilitating this introduction.

"Excellent! Children, your company has been most enlightening, but I must attend to other family matters." Don Martinez stood and approached me. "Thank you for the exceptional coffee, my dear." Unexpectedly, he kissed my forehead in a gesture of patriarchal blessing before addressing Daniel. "Son, I haven't abandoned my expectations for you, but I'll allow you space for now. Wright, the pleasure was mine. Young lady, would you escort me out?" he said to Sybilla, who rose and departed with her arm linked through her father's.

"Are you alright, Lila?" Daniel squeezed my hand gently.

"I need to contact Beckett immediately. Do you truly believe your father's intelligence about my ownership is accurate?" I asked, confusion evident in my voice.

"I have absolute confidence in his information. But don't worry, we'll reach Beckett soon," Daniel reassured me, gently caressing my cheek.

Sybilla returned and collapsed into her chair with an exhausted sigh.

"Well, he’s finally gone. I’m still uncertain whether he came to visit me or to pursue business opportunities with Lila." She studied our expressions carefully. "What? Daniel, surely you recognized the true purpose behind this visit?"

"I think we need to contact Gregory immediately and resolve this situation properly," Daniel said, reaching for his secure phone.