Mafia Mask 521

Chapter 521: Hidden Art Empire

Daniel’s POV

I ended the call with my brother Gregory and turned to face three anxious faces staring at me from the penthouse couch. The intelligence Gregory had just shared through our encrypted line left me completely stunned.

"What did he say?" Sybilla asked impatiently, leaning forward with that familiar Martinez intensity.

I looked directly at Lila, trying to process what I’d just learned. "Do you actually understand the scope of your family’s operations?"

Her confused expression told me everything. "It’s just a regional art authentication and acquisition company. My grandfather started it as a small gallery, and yes, my father and Beckett expanded it over the years, but it’s still basically a family business." She shrugged with that innocent gesture I’d grown to adore. "I’ve told you this before, Daniel."

"Have you ever actually discussed the business operations with Beckett?" I pressed, knowing this conversation was about to shatter her assumptions.

Lila shook her head. "Never had any interest. When my grandfather died, he left Beckett in charge of managing my inheritance since I was still a minor. The moment I turned of age, Beckett wanted to hand everything over, but I wanted nothing to do with the family business. I signed power of attorney giving him complete control before Claire could manipulate the situation. I only kept the trust fund account that was already established in my name. The rest—the galleries, the acquisitions, the investments—I never cared about any of it. Then I left for college."

"Lila, your ’small’ family business is actually the dominant force in high-end art acquisition and authentication across the entire Eastern seaboard. They control the most exclusive auction houses, have partnerships with major European dealers, and their client list reads like a who’s who of collectors and museums. Beckett seems to have inherited your grandfather’s golden touch—every acquisition increases in value, every authentication becomes sought-after, every investment multiplies. What your family has built is a empire," I explained carefully.

Jude frowned from his position in the leather armchair. "So where does your father fit into all this?"

I moved to sit beside Lila, who was staring at me with those wide caramel eyes. "With the Sullivan family's remarkable success and influence in the art world, my father wants to establish a partnership. He's looking to merge certain Martinez family interests with their operations to expand into international markets. Gregory said Dad had no idea it was your family's empire, Lila. He was shocked to discover you technically own half of everything."

"This has to be some kind of mistake," Lila whispered, her voice barely audible. "You've met my family—we're just normal people who appreciate art. My father only has a minor partnership role with Beckett."

"A 'minor partnership' that controls authentication for half the major auction houses on the East Coast and has exclusive dealing agreements with collectors who spend millions annually. Your family doesn't just participate in the art market, Lila—they practically control the high-end segment. Beckett has built an empire that influences what pieces get sold, where they go, and for how much," I explained as gently as possible.

Sybilla smirked with that knowing Martinez expression. "So Lila's basically art world royalty. That explains Dad's sudden enthusiasm about her joining the family."

"Exactly. Seems like Lila has suddenly earned herself a very different kind of respect from my father," I said with obvious sarcasm.

Jude looked between us with confusion. "I'm not following the significance here."

"Lila controls more wealth and influence than she realizes—likely an enormous amount tied up in art, real estate, and exclusive contracts," Sybilla clarified with brutal honesty. "My father now considers her 'suitable' for his heir."

"That can't be right," Lila mumbled, clearly struggling to process this revelation.

I took her small hands in mine, feeling how they trembled slightly. "Lila, look at me. You know this changes absolutely nothing between us, right? This information means nothing to how I feel about you."

"I know that." She sighed deeply, that sound that always made my chest tighten with protectiveness. "If any of this is actually true, I'm signing everything over to Beckett immediately. He's the one who's worked for it, who understands the business, who's made it successful. He deserves the inheritance, not me."

I pulled her against my chest, breathing in her familiar vanilla scent. "Whatever you decide to do, I'm completely behind you."

"How about we table this heavy conversation since it clearly doesn't change anything important?" Jude suggested with his easy grin. "Let's grab lunch and actually enjoy this beautiful day. One of you wealthy heirs can cover the bill, since apparently you're all loaded beyond belief."

His comment managed to break through the tension, and we all burst into genuine laughter.

"You're impossible!" Sybilla playfully swatted his arm. "Stop pretending to be some regular guy—you're just another rebellious heir playing at being normal."

"Oh, sweetheart, rebellious really isn't my style," Jude replied, though his smile carried a hint of sadness. "My parents did cut me off from the family shipping business when I got married against their wishes. Looking back, they probably made the right call."

"Just finalize those divorce papers and marry me instead," Sybilla teased with mock seriousness. "Your parents will be thrilled, my parents will throw a celebration, we'll combine our trust funds and disappear to Monaco to live like proper heirs. How does that sound?"

Jude laughed genuinely. "I have to admit, your logic is flawless. You're gorgeous, brilliant, entertaining, and Monaco is paradise. We'd probably have an amazing time together."

"Weren't you actively avoiding an arranged marriage, Sybilla?" I frowned, distinctly uncomfortable with my friend openly flirting with my sister.

"Big brother, you're not seriously comparing Jude to that pathetic Grant nightmare, are you?" Sybilla gave me a look of pure disbelief. "What an overprotective brother I'm cursed with!" She leaned over and kissed my cheek affectionately, while Jude and Lila exchanged highly amused glances.

"Daniel, your sister is going to date someone eventually. Wouldn't you prefer it be someone you actually trust?" Jude was clearly enjoying provoking my protective instincts.

"Absolutely not," I grumbled. Despite everything, I still saw Sybilla as that little girl who used to beg me to reach the cookie jar from the highest kitchen shelf.

"I love you too, big brother," Sybilla rested her head on my shoulder with exaggerated affection. "But like Jude pointed out, I will have a boyfriend eventually, and then I'll get my revenge for all the noise you and Lila make every night."

"Sybilla!" I scolded, my voice louder than intended. All of them burst into laughter at my shocked expression.

"Stop acting so scandalized, Daniel," Jude chided. "Your girlfriend is past her teens. Your sister is older than that. Sybilla, if you want to start evening the score, I could always stay here tonight."

"For God's sake, Jude!" These two were going to drive me completely insane. At least their ridiculous banter succeeded in making Lila smile and forget about the inheritance bombshell. "Come on, lunch is definitely on me. And you—keep your hands completely off my sister."

My stern warning fell on completely deaf ears. Jude and Sybilla walked arm in arm ahead of us toward the elevator, their instant rapport already reaching a level of comfortable intimacy that made me deeply, deeply uncomfortable.

Chapter 522: Hidden Scars Revealed

Lila's POV

I spent the entire day consumed by thoughts of what Daniel had revealed about my family's empire. His father's investigation into the Sullivan family's financial networks left me reeling with questions I'd spent years avoiding. The truth was I'd deliberately stayed ignorant about our business operations. Beckett

had tried countless times to explain the intricacies of our money laundering fronts and legitimate enterprises, offering me what he called my rightful position as heir, but I'd always dismissed him. My only real desires in life, besides my education and independence, had been earning my mother's love and approval.

"I can practically see those gears turning in that beautiful mind of yours." Daniel's arms encircled me from behind as I stood motionless on the penthouse balcony, gazing at the city lights below as if they might illuminate answers to my confusion.

"Just processing everything about my grandfather's trust fund," I replied, leaning back against his solid chest.

"Want to talk about it?" He gently turned me around, his dark eyes searching mine with that protective intensity that made my heart skip.

"I keep wondering if the only reason Claire shows any interest in me is because of the money." I let out a shaky breath as Daniel lifted me effortlessly, carrying me to the leather armchair in our bedroom where he settled me on his lap like precious cargo.

"What makes you think that?"

"She constantly pursues contact with me, yet clearly despises me. It makes no sense." I nestled against his chest, finding comfort in his familiar warmth. "Some time before my eighteenth birthday, her entire approach suddenly shifted. She wasn't exactly nurturing, but the beatings stopped, though she still monitored my every movement like a hawk. She even pretended to show genuine concern." I felt myself slipping back into those painful memories. "She initiated actual conversations, dragged me to charity galas where other family wives gathered, even called me 'daughter' occasionally instead of just barking orders. As my birthday approached, Beckett invited me to his private office to discuss my inheritance. He wanted to transfer complete control to me, but I had absolutely no understanding of how to manage such complex financial assets. I told him if grandfather trusted him enough to put him in charge initially, there must have been solid reasons, so nothing should change. He wisely advised me to keep quiet about our conversation, which I readily agreed to."

"You made the smart choice trusting someone who genuinely cares about your wellbeing," Daniel said, pressing his lips to the crown of my head as I continued my story.

"Shortly before turning eighteen, I convinced my father to let me spend the night at Beckett's penthouse, claiming he wanted to take me to dinner at some exclusive restaurant. Claire agreed immediately, saying it spared her from having Beckett's presence contaminate her pristine home. Early the next morning, I signed the power of attorney documents making Beckett my official representative in all family business matters. He handled everything through a discrete notary from the neighboring district to prevent any gossip from spreading through our social circles. When I returned home that afternoon, Claire greeted me with an unnaturally bright smile that should have been my first warning.

She rose from her designer sofa with arms extended in false welcome, guiding me to sit beside her like we were close confidantes. A man I recognized as our city's most expensive notary was waiting in the marble foyer. Claire announced that now that I was officially an adult, we would 'correct' my grandfather's obvious mistake. She wanted me to sign fresh power of attorney documents giving her complete control over my entire inheritance, claiming I was far too naive and inexperienced to manage such substantial assets, and that Beckett shouldn't handle them since he was 'that woman's son.' Her way of referring to him always infuriated me, as if his mother's memory somehow made him less family. To me, he's more my brother than anyone else in that house ever was."

"That's because he genuinely loves you, and you love him too," Daniel remarked, gently rubbing soothing circles on my back as I rested against him.

"Exactly," I agreed before continuing the painful recollection. "I informed her that I trusted Beckett completely and preferred keeping things exactly as they were. I explained she needn't worry since I'd already legally given Beckett power of attorney that morning. She became absolutely livid, dismissed the notary with barely concealed rage, and the moment his car pulled away, she grabbed me by the hair and dragged me upstairs demanding explanations. She locked me in my bedroom, and when I close my eyes, I can still feel the burning sting of leather cutting across my back. Thankfully, Beckett had suspected something when he learned Claire had contacted a notary. He came to discuss things with us, but when he heard my screams echoing through that house, he broke down my bedroom door."

Daniel gently wiped away a tear that had escaped down my cheek, his jaw clenched with barely restrained fury.

"She used a whip on you?" His voice was deadly quiet, the kind of tone that made hardened criminals confess everything.

"Many times over the years. She kept that leather whip in the hallway cabinet directly across from my room. She'd lock me inside and lash me repeatedly, not caring where the strikes landed, then threaten me to stay silent around my father or face worse consequences.

That day, Beckett physically removed me from the house. It wasn't his first rescue mission, but I always returned eventually out of misplaced loyalty. She's supposed to be my mother, damn it! I always believed she was just temperamental but loved me underneath all the cruelty. Until that day shattered every illusion."

"What happened after Beckett took you?" Daniel's entire body had gone rigid beneath mine, though he tried moderating his tone for my sake.

"Beckett told my father everything that had been happening behind closed doors. I stayed with him for some time until emotions cooled. I decided to take those college entrance exams that had been calling to me for months. I'd always been studious and genuinely loved learning. The exams were scheduled for soon after, so Beckett drove me there, I completed them, and we returned. I went back to that house, and some time later received my acceptance results. Only then did I tell my father, who secretly arranged for me to move here for school. The time after my birthday was nearly unbearable—she beat me repeatedly whenever father wasn't around, argued constantly with Beckett about family business, and pressured me daily to surrender control of my assets to her."

"How did you manage to resist signing?" Daniel asked.

"Initially, I simply endured the beatings in stubborn silence. Then I started begging my father to let me accompany him to business meetings just to escape the house. Even then, she found opportunities to corner me alone and apply pressure. I nearly gave in completely when I finally moved here to start school. The physical abuse ended with the distance, but her threats and manipulations continued through constant phone calls." I sighed heavily against his chest. "Do you think surrendering everything to Beckett would make her finally leave me alone?"

"My beautiful girl," Daniel said softly, his voice heavy with protective love, "I hate saying this, but you need to understand that woman doesn't love you the way a real mother should. She's not acting with any genuine maternal instincts."

"I refuse to give her access to that money because I know she'll immediately hand control to her precious son, and together they'll squander everything grandfather built. Plus, it would completely betray my grandfather's final wishes. Beckett deserves to keep managing everything—he works tirelessly for our family's legitimate businesses." My brother was truly honorable, and I knew he'd never abandon my father or me regardless of family politics.

"Whatever you ultimately decide, I'm completely with you," Daniel kissed the top of my head and inhaled deeply. "At least my parents will back off pressuring us now. Horrible as the reasoning may be, it eliminates one major problem."

I nestled closer in his protective lap, surrounded by his intoxicating scent and soothed by his gentle touch stroking my back. I drifted into sleep, only to face vivid nightmares filled with cracking whips, desperate screams, and searing pain across my skin. Throughout that long night, I woke repeatedly to find Daniel stroking my hair tenderly, whispering comfort and reassurance until morning light finally broke through our windows.

Chapter 523: Hidden Empire Revealed

Lila's POV

Between Daniel's father's recent visit to our penthouse and dinner at Caleb and Ivy's fortified estate, I hadn't found time to contact my brother about the unfolding territorial negotiations. Now, during my lunch break at Thorne Corporation, I finally managed to reach Beckett about the dangerous developments threatening our family's empire.

"Hey, little Lila! How's my beautiful sister holding up?" Beckett's voice carried its familiar warmth despite the chaos surrounding our family's operations. No matter what blood feuds or territorial disputes swirled around him, he never failed to greet me with genuine affection that reminded me of simpler times.

"I'm surviving. How about my number one brother?" I teased, seeking comfort in our childhood ritual. His rich laugh filled the line—this had been our lifelong tradition. Since we were children, I'd called him my favorite brother, and he treasured it. Truth was, he genuinely was my favorite among the Sullivan bloodline.

"Missing you something fierce. So much that I'm planning another visit this weekend. Got room for me in that fortress of yours?"

His sudden eagerness raised red flags. After all, I'd lived under Daniel's protection in this city for months without Beckett making the journey, yet now he wanted to return just days after his last clandestine visit to Thorne territory.

"You and Katarina always have sanctuary here. I'm thrilled you're coming, but is there something specific driving this urgency?" We'd never danced around dangerous topics, so I pressed directly.

"Yes," he admitted without hesitation. "We need to discuss the family territories, and I genuinely miss having you close." His tone confirmed my suspicions—something significant was shifting in the underground power structure.

"Interesting timing. I wanted to ask about our operations too. Daniel's father visited us recently—you know he controls that massive legitimate food distribution empire. He's making moves on our family interests."

"He made an offer, but I refused outright. Are you interested in entertaining his proposal?"

"Absolutely not. If you declined, I trust your instincts completely. He wants to arrange a sit-down with you, though."

"That's acceptable, but I'd rather not partner with Martinez interests. I prefer keeping our territories strictly within Sullivan control."

"I feel exactly the same way," I agreed, then hesitated. "But Beckett, why did Daniel's father claim I control half our operations and assets? And that Father isn't even listed as an active partner anymore?"

"That's precisely what I wanted to discuss face-to-face. We've restructured everything because Father is divorcing your mother through the family tribunal."

My stomach clenched with dread. "So it's true about my ownership?"

"Yes, Lila. Father wanted to protect our assets and territories. You know Justin and your mother—she would strip Father of everything and destroy our operations through sheer incompetence. Does knowing this disturb you?"

"It's not disturbing—just shocking. I don't understand what's happening in our world. Plus, Daniel's father seems to believe our empire is far more extensive than I realized."

"Sister, you really need to involve yourself in family business—I've always insisted on this. Things aren't what they appear. Our operations are thriving beyond imagination, Lila."

"I don't care about the territories, Beckett. I would have signed everything over to you already. What terrifies me is my mother's reaction when she discovers I control half of our empire." That was my genuine fear—her already vicious treatment would become absolutely lethal.

"You're not signing anything over. I manage your interests, but ownership belongs to you. As for your mother, neither Daniel nor I will allow her anywhere near you."

"I'm scared, Beckett," I confessed, my voice trembling with vulnerability. "Justin cornered me at the building entrance recently with those worthless street soldiers of his."

"What did that animal attempt?" The protective fury in his voice was immediate and dangerous.

"Nothing, thankfully. Daniel arrived in time, but Justin promised he'd come collect me," I explained. "I live in constant terror. I can't even walk alone because I'm terrified my mother might appear, attack me, drag me back to Sullivan territory, and force me into marriage with Connor's heir. I can't continue living like this, afraid of my own blood."

"Lila, breathe slowly. I promise we'll resolve this permanently. Trust me." I did trust him, but couldn't envision any solution that wouldn't end in bloodshed.

"I do trust you. But what if I transferred everything—all territories, operations, accounts—to you? Maybe she'd abandon me then. I think she only torments me because of the power and wealth."

"Calm yourself. We'll discuss everything when I see you—I have extensive information to share. And that woman will leave you in peace, I absolutely guarantee it." He sounded so certain, but I couldn't share his confidence given our mother's ruthless nature.

"When are you arriving?"

"Later this week. Hold tight, sister. Everything will work out perfectly. Soothe that worried heart of yours." His words enveloped me like protective armor.

After our call, I felt marginally less agitated but still anxious about my mother's inevitable retaliation. I decided to update Daniel and dialed his secure line.

"Tiny one, you need to take a deep breath," Daniel instructed after I recounted everything.

"I can't. I'm terrified beyond reason. Do you understand what it's like to fear your own flesh and blood?" My voice quavered.

"I can't imagine that particular hell, my beautiful," his tone softened with understanding. "Promise you won't leave this building until I'm with you. I don't want that punk cornering you again."

"I won't," I assured him, too frightened to consider otherwise.

"Daniel, I'm considering pausing law school until this territorial war is resolved," I admitted, voice shaking.

"Tiny one, the semester's nearly finished. Wouldn't it be smarter to complete it and decide during break?"

"Perhaps." He was absolutely right, but my terror made academic concerns seem trivial.

I returned to work, attempting focus, when my phone rang. The receptionist informed me my mother was calling the main Thorne line. Since deactivating my personal cell after her violent invasion of Daniel's apartment, she'd resorted to contacting my workplace. I instructed the receptionist to transfer her call.

"Lila, why is your personal line disconnected?" She was already screaming.

"Because I’m finished tolerating your psychological warfare. I’m only answering now to tell you never to contact my workplace again."

"You insolent, disrespectful, ungrateful child! I am your mother, Lila."

"Act like my mother and perhaps we’ll communicate again."

"Listen carefully, Lila. Mind your tone with me. Isn’t it sufficient what your boyfriend did to your brother? Restraining my son and exiling him from our territory—absolutely outrageous! How could you permit this, you useless girl?"

"I would have permitted far worse. Justin threatened me with his crew. Mother, I’ve had enough. You won’t strike me anymore. Justin won’t intimidate me anymore. Leave me alone, or the next time you touch me, I’ll file assault charges through legitimate channels."

"What blasphemy! I’m your mother—" I disconnected.

"Your mother causing territorial problems?" I looked up to find Caleb standing before my desk, rendering me speechless. He pulled out his encrypted phone and made a brief call. "My security chief will send a list of people banned from entering Thorne properties. Their calls shouldn’t be transferred to any of our people." He ended the call and focused on me.

"Lila, contact building security and provide names and numbers of those harassing you. I want this place to be your absolute sanctuary."

He squeezed my hand gently, and I felt overwhelming gratitude. My mother might not love me—a deep, painful wound—but I had family willing to shed blood protecting me. In this brutal reality, their loyalty offered undeniable comfort.

Chapter 524: Grandfathers Hidden Empire

Lila’s POV

The entire week rushed by in a chaotic haze. Anxiety gnawed at me as I waited to hear what my brother needed to tell me about the Sullivan family operations.

Today was the day Beckett would arrive and finally explain everything about our grandfather's underground empire, but I'd already made up my mind about what to do, regardless of what he said. When my phone lit up with my father's name, a smile automatically spread across my face.

"Dad!" I answered with genuine happiness.

"My sweet girl! Beckett mentioned you've been concerned about the family situation," he said, worry evident in his voice.

"These sudden changes in the organization caught me off guard."

"Listen to me, darling. Trust your brother. Beckett would move heaven and earth to keep you safe from the other families." He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know – my brother would sacrifice himself for me without hesitation.

"I do trust him. Are you coming to New York today too?"

"No, Beckett will stay there for several days to handle territorial matters. I need to manage things with our legitimate businesses." He paused. "Lila, be vigilant. Claire is spiraling out of control since learning about grandfather's true legacy."

"I'm terrified of her, Dad. And what she might do to secure her position."

"I know, sweetheart. I've hired someone reliable to monitor her movements. We'll know immediately if she leaves our territory. Still, stay alert – I can't bear the thought of her orchestrating something against you again."

"What about the annulment proceedings with the Commission?"

"That's precisely why she's livid. Beckett helped me secure the family assets before filing with the Council. All I have now are the legitimate front businesses and some clean cash accounts. She'll only get the restaurant chain, and she's furious. I'm hoping that once the money flow from the laundering operations stops, Justin might finally decide to contribute something worthwhile to the organization, considering he abandoned his training in the family business ages ago."

"I can imagine her rage. But I doubt Justin will ever amount to anything in this life."

"Exactly why you need to be careful until this power struggle settles."

Someone called for my father in the background – likely one of his lieutenants. We said goodbye, and his words echoed in my mind – to be careful until things settled down. But when would that be in our world?

Later that day, Beckett and his wife arrived at Thorne Corporation with Daniel, using the legitimate business as cover for our family meeting.

"Look at my little sister, all grown-up behind that executive desk, learning the clean side of operations," Beckett teased.

I couldn't help but smile. I hadn't expected him to come to the Thorne offices, thinking he'd go straight to the safe house apartment.

"I am grown-up!" I stood to embrace him, inhaling the familiar scent of expensive cologne and danger that always surrounded my brother.

"Not quite. Standing next to Daniel, you look even smaller." My brother laughed as I playfully swatted his arm in mock offense, though we both knew size meant nothing in our world – it was about intelligence and ruthlessness.

Before heading to the secure location, we went out for dinner at one of the family's protected restaurants. Jude and Sybilla joined us, making for an evening filled with conversation, laughter, and the kind of enjoyment that could only happen when surrounded by trusted allies. By the meal's end, Jude

and Sybilla had convinced Beckett and his wife to visit one of the family-owned nightclubs the following night, and all four were trying to persuade Daniel and me to join them.

We returned to Daniel's fortified penthouse late. Beckett acknowledged my anxiety and asked if I wanted to discuss family business, but I decided it was better to wait until morning when our minds would be clearer for such serious matters.

Nevertheless, I was awake at first light the next day, old habits from a childhood in a dangerous world dying hard.

"Still rising with the roosters, sis?" Beckett appeared in the kitchen doorway, wearing an impeccably tailored suit that probably cost more than most people's cars.

"Old habits die hard. That's a new suit, isn't it?" I pointed out, recognizing the Italian craftsmanship.

"Like it? I'm looking pretty intimidating for the meeting with the other families today, right?" I laughed; my brother was both devastatingly handsome and deadly serious about his image in the organization.

"You're intimidating regardless, brother." I hugged him around his waist. "I've missed you so much."

"Missed you too, but you're thriving here under Daniel's protection. This arrangement suits you." He squeezed me tighter, and I felt the subtle bulge of his shoulder holster.

"I agree completely," Daniel said, entering the kitchen, which suddenly felt cramped with these two powerful men who commanded respect in their respective territories. "I want a hug too."

"Get your own sister," Beckett grumbled with mock annoyance, and I laughed, noticing Daniel's amused smile and the way his hand instinctively moved to check his own concealed weapon.

"You're in a suit today too," I observed, admiring my detective who straddled both worlds so skillfully. He didn't wear suits daily for his police work, but when meeting with family heads, appearances mattered.

"We’re meeting my father’s associate in the Commission," Daniel explained, prompting me to look questioningly at Beckett.

"Lila, the Sullivan territory and operations remain just yours and mine. I have no interest in partnerships with other families, but since you mentioned Daniel’s father wanted to discuss possible alliances, I’ll extend the courtesy of hearing him out in person," Beckett clarified. "If you want to consider territorial agreements, though, we can discuss it."

"I already told Beckett I don’t think it’s wise to mix our operations," Daniel interjected.

"As I’ve said before, I trust your judgment about family politics, Beckett. I’ll support whatever you decide," I assured him, earning a smile that reminded me why even hardened criminals feared crossing him.

"Great, now sit down. I need to explain some things about our inheritance from Grandfather’s empire," Beckett pulled out a chair for me with the same protective gesture he’d made since childhood. "Let’s start from Grandpa’s death. His will divided the legitimate assets between Dad, you, and me, as you know."

"Yes, portions of the front companies and clean money," I confirmed.

"That was just the public part read immediately after his death for the authorities. Remember there was another section to be opened on a specific date, with only direct blood heirs present?" When Beckett mentioned this, a foggy memory of hushed conversations and Claire’s fury surfaced.

"Vaguely. I recall Mother was furious because Grandpa had frozen certain operations until that second reading," I strained to remember when that was supposed to happen.

"The date was set for some time after you came of age. By then, you’d already left town and given me power of attorney, so Dad and I decided it was best if you didn’t return for the reading, given the danger," Beckett explained, and so far nothing seemed unusual for our world.

"That was probably for the best. What did it reveal?" I pressed.

"The second part divided the money laundering operations through three major territories – the docks, the art auction houses, and the high-end real estate network. All three territories belong to us equally, Lila. Grandpa also stipulated that if Dad divorced Claire through the Commission, he would be immediately stripped of his position, with his territory transferred to us. Grandpa's empire was vastly larger than anyone realized – even Dad was unaware of the full scope of operations." I listened as if Beckett was describing strangers, not our family's criminal enterprise.

"But Dad hasn't finalized the annulment yet. And why would Grandpa discourage it? He despised Claire," I questioned.

"Grandpa left Dad a letter explaining everything. He knew Dad couldn't endure the marriage forever, and that upon divorce, Claire would claim half of everything through Commission law. She and Justin would destroy our operations with their recklessness and exposure to law enforcement. Remember Justin had already proven himself incompetent in family business by then?" I nodded, recalling Grandpa's concerns about Justin inheriting Claire's worst traits and dangerous impulsiveness.

"Justin was always a liability," I muttered.

"So Dad, already contemplating the annulment, formally renounced his inheritance through the proper channels, allowing it to be divided between Grandpa's remaining heirs – us. Claire couldn't challenge this when she discovered it through her informants. Dad endured the marriage for quite some time to protect the timing."

Everything clicked into place with terrifying clarity.

"So everything belongs to just you and me? For all this time?" I was stunned by this revelation about controlling such vast criminal operations.

"Yes. It's an enormous empire, Lila. We kept everything secret so Claire wouldn't discover the truth before the annulment was filed with the Commission. She'll be livid when she learns all she's getting are the legitimate restaurant chains. We didn't tell you because you were already overwhelmed adapting to this life, and we knew you'd react exactly like this. We wanted you to mature and understand the weight of power before you learned everything." I stared at my brother as if seeing him anew – not just as my protector, but as a true don.

"That explains why you pushed me to learn about the business operations," I said, feeling lightheaded at the scope of responsibility.

"Exactly. You're incredibly powerful now, Lila. I know that doesn't interest you, but it's our reality. Grandpa secured our future in this world."

My brother squeezed my hand, and I took a deep breath, regaining the composure that had been drilled into me since childhood.

"Fine. How do we transfer everything to you?" I asked determinedly.

"That's not happening. We remain in this together. We're siblings and partners; you can't escape our legacy that easily." Beckett smiled warmly, but with the steel underneath that made him feared.

"But if I own nothing, she'll leave me alone. Beckett, I can't live fearing she'll force me into a marriage alliance with Connor's psychotic son." The possibility terrified me more than any physical threat.

"Sis, transferring your territories won't make her back off. She'll be so enraged she'll want blood." Beckett showed me an angle I hadn't considered in our dangerous world.

"Then what should I do?" I was exhausted by the constant danger.

"Keep being vigilant. I've implemented measures to protect your operations; she'll never touch them. I'll explain our security protocols in detail later – you need to get to work maintaining your cover, and I have Commission business to handle."

Beckett spoke like the criminal mastermind he was, but I only saw my protective big brother who had taught me to shoot and how to read people for threats.

Chapter 525: Truth in Envelope

Beckett's POV

After finishing breakfast at the Thorne family's private dining room, we left Lila with Daniel's sister Sybilla at the legitimate front office of our money laundering operations. My sister's anxiety was written across every feature of her delicate face. The tremor in her hands betrayed the depth of her terror. I couldn't fault her for it. Throughout her entire life, that manipulative snake Claire who masqueraded as her mother had subjected her to psychological torture that would break most people.

"I'm deeply concerned about Lila's state of mind," I confided to Daniel as we drove through the city's financial district toward the luxury hotel where his father conducted his shadow empire meetings. "She's absolutely terrified of what we might discover today."

Daniel's knuckles went white against the steering wheel, his jaw clenched with barely controlled fury. "I'll be completely transparent with you, Beckett—I want that vicious woman eliminated. Lila confided in me about the systematic abuse, the psychological manipulation Claire used to control her." His dark eyes flashed with the kind of murderous rage that reminded me he was Martinez blood through and through. "What kind of monster tortures a child for decades just to maintain power?"

"Trust me, I understand that bloodlust completely. When I first uncovered the full extent of what Lila endured under that woman's roof, I nearly lost all semblance of control myself. The only reason I didn't put a bullet between Claire's eyes was because Lila pleaded with me to show restraint, still believing in some twisted maternal bond that I'm absolutely convinced never existed. This DNA analysis will provide the concrete evidence we need to confirm what our instincts have been screaming." My fingers drummed an agitated rhythm against my knee, anticipation and dread warring in my chest as I thought about the results waiting for us.

"When that laboratory report proves she's nothing more than a kidnapper who stole Lila's true identity, I'll ensure that parasitic woman never breathes the same air as Lila again," Daniel promised with the cold finality of a man who'd orchestrated numerous permanent disappearances in his role as a formidable inspector.

From the luxury leather back seat, Katarina leaned forward between us. "If Claire actually orchestrated a baby switch decades ago for financial gain, can our legal contacts still press criminal charges after all this time?"

"If we can establish it constitutes kidnapping and identity theft for the purpose of defrauding a major crime family, absolutely," Daniel replied grimly. "But navigating the statute of limitations will require delicate maneuvering. The detective investigating this case for us believes something fundamentally doesn't align with Claire's fabricated story. We'll debrief with him immediately after concluding business with my father."

"We've structured an incredibly demanding schedule today. I genuinely appreciate your assistance navigating all these moving pieces," I said, grateful for allies who understood the intricate web of family politics and blood obligations that governed our world.

Daniel glanced toward me, his expression softening slightly. "Beckett, I would walk through literal hellfire for Lila. Her happiness and safety take precedence over everything else in my existence." The profound tenderness that entered his voice whenever he spoke about my sister reassured me that she'd found a protector who truly comprehended her worth beyond her monetary value to our organization.

We arrived at an opulent penthouse suite that screamed old money and established power. The expansive living area featured pristine white Italian leather sofas, sand-colored Persian carpeting imported at tremendous expense, matching armchairs upholstered in the finest materials, and an impressive conference table crafted from rare Brazilian hardwood. Carefully selected decorative pieces in neutral earth tones complemented the breathtaking panoramic view of the city's skyline that stretched below us like a kingdom waiting to be claimed. The magnificent setting perfectly matched the man who greeted us with calculated warmth—Elias Martinez—impeccably dressed in a hand-tailored charcoal suit that probably cost more than most people's annual salary.

"Son, excellent morning!" he exclaimed, embracing Daniel with the performative affection typical of our kind. "Thank you for facilitating this crucial meeting with Mr. Sullivan. I've been eager to explore potential collaborations."

"Father, I'm merely providing escort services for Beckett," Daniel replied with characteristic stiffness, his tone carefully neutral. "Lila made this meeting possible through her connections."

"Ah, and how is my absolutely delightful daughter-in-law progressing? Why didn't the lovely girl accompany you gentlemen today?" Though Elias appeared genuinely personable and charming, Daniel had warned me extensively about his fox-like cunning and ruthless business practices that had eliminated countless rivals over the decades.

After Daniel handled the formal introductions with proper family protocol, Elias greeted me with calculated enthusiasm before turning his attention to Katarina with practiced aristocratic charm, taking her manicured hand and kissing it with a theatrical slight bow that belonged in European royal courts.

"Mrs. Sullivan, your exquisite face seems remarkably familiar to me," he observed with keen interest, studying her classical features with the analytical gaze of a man accustomed to cataloging useful information about everyone he encountered.

"Perhaps you recognize me from my previous international career before I retired from the public spotlight," Katarina responded with her signature dazzling smile that had once graced magazine covers across several continents.

"My wife was a highly successful international fashion model who collaborated with the most prestigious luxury brands before stepping away from that world to focus on our family enterprises," I explained with obvious pride in her accomplishments.

"Of course—the incomparable Katarina Barrett!" Recognition illuminated his weathered features as memory clicked into place.

"Katarina Sullivan now, permanently and exclusively," she corrected with gracious firmness, her wedding rings catching the morning sunlight streaming through floor-to-ceiling windows.

"Beckett, you are indeed a fortunate man to have secured such a remarkable woman," he remarked, regarding me with newfound respect and interest that hadn't been present moments earlier.

For the following hours, we discussed intricate business propositions that could reshape both our territories. I had to admit grudgingly that Elias Martinez possessed exceptional intellect—charming, devastatingly intelligent, and articulate in ways that made him genuinely dangerous. By our meeting's conclusion, I found myself genuinely intrigued by several partnership concepts he'd presented. While I harbored absolutely no interest in granting him any measure of control over my family's carefully constructed empire, certain joint ventures he proposed could significantly boost our profit margins while expanding our legitimate business facades.

"Elias, these concepts definitely merit serious further development and consideration," I acknowledged diplomatically. "Perhaps you and Daniel should visit our primary operations and agricultural holdings sometime soon."

"I would be absolutely delighted by such an opportunity! But shouldn't you consult Lila first before making such commitments?" he asked with curious interest, seemingly surprised that I would include my sister in such high-level strategic decisions.

"That consultation is entirely unnecessary—Lila grants me complete autonomous authority over all business matters and strategic partnerships. Though I should mention for complete transparency, I fulfill every single request she makes without question, which directly explains my presence here today supporting this meeting."

"So Lila represents your singular weakness?" he observed with a knowing smile that suggested he understood exactly how family loyalties functioned in our world.

"Without the slightest hesitation or qualification. I would commit any act, cross any line, sacrifice anything for my sister's wellbeing and happiness. As long as you remain important to her continued contentment, you'll matter significantly to me as well."

"In that case, Daniel, you'd better maintain exemplary behavior," he joked with paternal authority, earning only a stoic, unreadable expression from his son. "Please, all of you must visit our family compound and business headquarters soon—we're bound by marriage now, after all."

I noticed Daniel's subtle huff of disapproval and made a mental note to inquire about the underlying family tensions later when we had privacy.

After concluding our productive meeting, we departed for our appointment with Daniel's police contact who'd been conducting the covert investigation.

"What exactly is the current situation with your father's expectations?" I asked directly while Daniel navigated through heavy downtown traffic.

"He wants me permanently embedded in the family's criminal enterprises. I strongly prefer maintaining my position as a detective," Daniel stated with characteristic simplicity that concealed deeper complications.

"And what about his sudden intense interest in Lila specifically?" I pressed, sensing undercurrents of family politics that could affect my sister's safety.

"You're remarkably perceptive—that analytical skill explains your continued success in this business," Daniel acknowledged with grudging respect. "My parents weren't remotely enthusiastic about my relationship with Lila initially. They're obsessively fixated on social standing and bloodline purity, but discovering she's a legitimate heiress to a major crime family fortune completely transformed their attitude."

"I see clearly now. Did they subject her to any form of mistreatment or disrespect during that initial period?" I asked with deceptive calm, though my tone carried unmistakable menace.

"Nothing overtly direct or actionable. They attempted to orchestrate a reunion between me and a strategically useful ex-girlfriend to systematically sabotage my relationship with Lila and simultaneously pressure me to abandon law enforcement entirely. Their scheme backfired spectacularly and permanently damaged their credibility," Daniel chose not to elaborate further, but I mentally resolved to discuss those specific details with Lila privately later.

We met Gideon, Daniel's trusted investigative contact, at a deliberately unremarkable restaurant that specialized in providing privacy for sensitive conversations. He appeared completely ordinary and forgettable—exactly the type of individual who could blend seamlessly into any crowd while gathering intelligence—but his excitement about his investigation results was immediately apparent and infectious.

He methodically detailed everything he'd uncovered from interviewing the elderly private nurse Sonia—information that even I, with all my resources and connections, hadn't managed to obtain. By the time he finished his comprehensive report, I shared his growing suspicion that something fundamentally sinister surrounded the circumstances of my biological mother's suspicious death decades earlier.

"My primary target now is this Aria character," Gideon explained with professional focus. "I'm absolutely certain she possesses crucial information that could break this case wide open, but before approaching her directly, I'm thoroughly researching her activities and vulnerabilities over the intervening years. I need significant leverage against someone demonstrably cunning and dangerous."

"Excellent work, Gideon. Your thoroughness is exactly what this situation demands," I said with genuine appreciation for his methodical approach.

"Here’s the comprehensive list you requested of women who worked in administrative positions alongside the employee who died under suspicious circumstances," Daniel handed over the meticulously prepared document I’d specifically requested.

"Perfect timing and execution. Now I can systematically track down that employee’s surviving sister again." As if summoned by our conversation, Gideon’s phone rang with perfect timing. "What incredible synchronicity—it’s her calling right now!" He answered immediately with professional warmth. "Mae, hello there! Yes, I’m doing very well, thank you."

His expression brightened noticeably as he listened intently to whatever information was being shared. "That’s absolutely fantastic news! Can I arrange to collect them today? Wonderful! I’ll see you very soon then." Ending the call, he looked genuinely triumphant. "She’s located several complete boxes of her deceased sister’s personal belongings and professional documents. Says I can take absolutely everything and discard whatever isn’t directly useful to our investigation."

"Perfect timing indeed," Daniel remarked with satisfaction.

"I’ll retrieve them immediately. Do you want to participate directly in the investigation process, Inspector?" Gideon asked with barely contained excitement.

"Absolutely, without question. Let’s plan to meet at my secure apartment tomorrow morning," Daniel confirmed decisively. "You’ll want to personally examine whatever we discover, right Beckett?"

"Definitely, though I’m increasingly worried about Lila’s inevitable questions and emotional reactions."

"Don’t worry, love," Katarina interjected reassuringly. "I’ll arrange an elaborate shopping expedition with the girls to keep them thoroughly occupied and distracted."

"Everything seems to be falling into perfect alignment," I noted with cautious optimism. "Now we just need those crucial DNA results to confirm our suspicions."

We departed immediately for the private laboratory, my anxiety mounting exponentially with each step closer to absolute truth. At the reception counter, I requested our completed results with as much

composure as I could manage. The clerk returned momentarily with a sealed envelope that seemed to weigh a thousand pounds in my trembling hands. We found seats in the sterile reception area—I couldn't possibly wait another second for confirmation. Opening the envelope with deliberate care, my heart nearly stopped as I scanned the definitive contents that would change everything.

Chapter 526: Devastating Lab Results

Daniel's POV

Beckett sat across from me in the sterile laboratory office, his face drained of color as shock rendered him speechless. Beside him, Katarina had gone completely still, as if the very air had been sucked from her lungs. My stomach churned with dread as Beckett passed me the laboratory report with trembling hands. I stared at the results, my mind reeling against the impossible truth printed before me.

"Positive? This cannot be accurate. Lila cannot possibly be that viper's daughter!" The notion that Lila shared blood with that manipulative witch was utterly inconceivable to me. After years of navigating the treacherous waters of both law enforcement and family politics, I thought I had seen every possible betrayal and deception our world could offer.

When Beckett first voiced his suspicions about Lila's true parentage, the theory had seemed ludicrous. But as evidence mounted and pieces of the puzzle clicked into place, the terrifying possibility became increasingly plausible. Now I held undeniable proof in my hands - a DNA analysis confirming that Lila was indeed Claire's biological offspring, not the switched child we had desperately hoped to find.

"This is absolutely impossible, Daniel," Beckett's voice shattered with raw emotion. "Lila cannot be the daughter of that poisonous woman. Look at how perfectly she resembles our mother. You have seen the vintage photographs from the family archives." Tears carved tracks down his weathered face as overwhelming despair consumed him. I felt equally devastated by this revelation.

Katarina rose gracefully from her leather chair and approached the reception counter with purposeful strides. Several tense minutes later, she returned accompanied by the laboratory's chief supervisor. The distinguished gentleman settled into the chair beside us and patiently explained that their genetic testing procedures were state-of-the-art with virtually no possibility for error. Beckett remained stubbornly unconvinced. He retrieved his phone and displayed comparative photographs of both Lila and his deceased mother to the lab director.

"Are you absolutely certain there exists no possibility of laboratory error? Could the striking resemblance between these two women simply be extraordinary coincidence?" Beckett challenged as the supervisor carefully studied the digital images.

"Perhaps the young lady's mother bears a remarkable similarity to the woman in this photograph," the supervisor suggested diplomatically. Beckett immediately displayed Claire's picture on his screen. "I see the distinction now. These two women share no physical resemblance whatsoever. If you harbor concerns about accuracy, we can conduct a secondary test at no additional charge, though we would require fresh samples. Ideally from both women directly."

"One of these women died many years ago," Beckett replied, slumping back into his chair with defeated resignation.

"Oh absolutely not, Beckett Sullivan. I recognize that expression - do not you dare surrender now!" Katarina warned with fierce determination blazing in her eyes.

"Lucinda, I cannot return to that fortress-like mansion. I cannot possibly obtain another sample without raising Claire's suspicions," Beckett attempted to reason with his formidable wife.

"What are the statistical chances that samples were accidentally mixed up within your laboratory's processing system?" Katarina fixed the facility director with a penetrating stare that could intimidate seasoned mafia soldiers.

"Practically impossible, Mrs. Sullivan. Our security protocols and chain-of-custody procedures are extraordinarily stringent. If such a catastrophic mistake had occurred, it would be absolutely devastating to our reputation. We would be obligated to reprocess every single test that was handled alongside this particular sample. Complete organizational chaos would ensue," he explained with obvious professional pride.

"Then prepare your laboratory for chaos!" Katarina declared, rising dramatically from her seat. "I will personally deliver fresh samples to your facility." She accepted his business card with resolute determination and strode toward the exit. "Let us move, gentlemen!"

I exchanged meaningful glances with Beckett, who simply shrugged his shoulders in familiar resignation. We dutifully followed Katarina from the laboratory building. Unwavering determination radiated from her every calculated movement like an aura of lethal purpose.

"Listen very carefully to what I am telling you both. I will handle the DNA sample situation personally, and you two must focus your efforts on conducting a thorough investigation. We are going to liberate Lila from this demon's clutches or I am not Katarina Barrett Sullivan!" she declared with the fierce intensity of a woman defending her family's honor.

"How exactly does she plan to accomplish this seemingly impossible task?" I asked Beckett quietly while Katarina climbed into the driver's seat of her luxury sedan.

"I have absolutely no idea, but you can bet your life she will somehow make it happen," Beckett replied with a mixture of admiration and trepidation, causing me to smile despite our dire circumstances.

"Then why do you appear so deeply worried?" I questioned, wondering why he was not more enthusiastic about his wife's unshakeable confidence.

"Because when my wife commits herself to achieving the impossible, even the earth itself begins to tremble." I could not help but laugh at his dramatic assessment.

Back at my secure apartment, we had several hours before collecting the women from their respective offices. We utilized this time productively, discussing various strategies for permanently removing Claire from Lila's life, though we seemed to be facing an insurmountable dead end at every turn.

My encrypted phone rang, displaying an unfamiliar number on the screen. "Hello?" I answered cautiously.

"Daniel, it is me." My stomach plummeted at the sound of Sasha's slurred voice. "Do not hang up this call. I am absolutely desperate, Daniel, you cannot do this to me." Her words were barely coherent between hysterical sobs, clearly indicating she had been drinking heavily.

"Sasha, leave me alone! Find someone else to torment with your melodrama." I noticed Beckett and Katarina watching me intently from across the room.

"Daniel, I am deadly serious! This is not some pathetic joke. Either you come talk to me immediately, or I will kill myself!" she screamed with unhinged desperation.

"Go ahead then, Sasha! Do it! Just stop calling me!" I ended the call abruptly, my patience finally exhausted.

"Your former wife?" Beckett asked simply.

"Long complicated story, but Lila knows everything about the situation," I assured him. His expectant gaze made it clear he wanted complete details, so I explained the entire sordid affair.

"You should have informed me about this marriage from the beginning, Daniel. We are family now, and family does not keep such crucial secrets from one another," Beckett said with a mixture of disappointment and concern etching his features.

"I know, and I apologize for that oversight. The situation with Sasha has been a nightmare I preferred to keep buried," I admitted, running my hands through my hair in frustration.

"Speaking of family matters, how are things progressing with your father and Gregory's collaborative efforts?" Beckett inquired, shifting our conversation toward more immediate concerns.

"Their partnership continues to strengthen. Gregory has proven invaluable in navigating the complex political landscape, and my father appreciates his strategic insights. The alliance benefits both our organizations significantly," I explained.

Beckett nodded thoughtfully. "Good. We will need all the political leverage we can muster to handle Claire's eventual removal from Lila's life."

A memory surfaced of Lila describing her confrontation with Sasha at the restaurant. The way she had handled my deranged ex-wife with such composure and authority had filled me with both pride and admiration. Lila possessed an inner strength that reminded me why I had fallen so completely in love with her.

My phone rang again from another unknown number. The voice that greeted me sent ice through my veins like a winter blade.

"Sir, I am the night manager at Summit Hotel. We discovered Miss Sasha Mendez unconscious in her suite. She appears to have mixed alcohol with prescription pills in potentially lethal amounts. There was a suicide note with your contact number. An ambulance transported her to the hospital, but paramedics indicate her condition is critical."

I listened in stunned silence, unable to believe she had actually followed through with her threat.

"What hospital?" I asked, already knowing I would have to go despite my hatred for the woman.

"Metropolitan General, sir. The emergency department."

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed with an incoming call. Lila’s name appeared on the screen.

"Daniel, Jude will be escorting Katarina and me home tonight. There have been some concerning developments at the office that require additional security measures," Lila informed me, her voice carrying the professional tone she used when discussing business matters.

"Understood. Beckett and I may be delayed this evening. I will explain everything when I see you," I replied, grateful that Jude would be there to protect her.

Chapter 527: Final Emergency Call

Daniel’s POV

The encrypted phone buzzed with an urgent call from the private medical facility that handled Martinez family emergencies. Sasha had been found unconscious in her penthouse after mixing prescription pills with expensive whiskey. The family doctor explained she’d left specific instructions to contact me immediately if anything happened. I felt my blood run cold as I processed the implications this would create for our carefully maintained territories.

"What's the situation, Daniel? Problems with Lila?" Beckett immediately sensed trouble, his protective instincts for his sister kicking in.

"No," I struggled to find the right words. "My former wife overdosed on medication and alcohol. They found her collapsed and rushed her to our family's private medical wing." I paused, running a hand through my hair. "She left explicit orders for them to reach out to me first."

"That's deeply troubling!" Beckett's expression hardened. "What's your plan of action?"

I exhaled heavily. "I need to get to the medical facility. Despite all the political complications between our families, we had a marriage contract witnessed by both organizations. I'll have my father contact her family's consigliere, but until they mobilize..." I looked at Beckett, seeking his counsel. "I can't abandon her there without family representation, can I?"

"I think you should discuss this with Lila first," Katarina interjected, her voice measured but insistent.

Beckett nodded his agreement. "Katarina's right, but I understand the family obligations you're facing. Don't worry—I'll handle the explanation with my sister."

"Appreciated. I'll contact Lila during the drive." I rose from my chair and moved toward the door, only to find it opening as I reached for the handle. Lila stood there, security keycard in hand, her expression shifting to surprise as she saw me. "Tiny one! Perfect timing!" I pulled her into a protective embrace.

"Hey, big guy," she said, leaning back to study my face. "What's developing? You look deeply concerned."

I quickly briefed Lila on the situation with Sasha, watching her expression cycle through concern, comprehension, and finally weary resignation.

"Go, Daniel. We can handle our conversation later," she said, her voice strained.

"Lila, I—" I started to explain that I'd respond this way for any family member in crisis.

"Just go! It’s manageable," she snapped, clearly struggling with the situation.

"No, it’s not manageable." I grasped her hand decisively. "She’s accompanying me!" I called over my shoulder to Beckett and Katarina as I guided Lila toward the exit.

During the drive to the medical facility, I contacted my father through secured channels, briefing him on Sasha’s condition and requesting he reach out to her family’s leadership. After ending the call, I glanced at Lila, who maintained silence beside me.

"Lila, I feel partially responsible for this crisis," I confessed, gripping the steering wheel tighter.

She turned toward me, frustration evident in her voice. "Why, Daniel? This woman will never cease her interference in our lives if she discovers that creating dramatic scenes captures your attention. Every time she orchestrates a crisis, you respond immediately."

"I understand how this appears," I said quietly. "But earlier today she contacted me through untraceable channels—I only answered because I didn’t recognize the encryption signature. She threatened to end her life if I refused to meet with her." I swallowed hard. "And I told her to proceed with it. Your brother witnessed the entire exchange. I can’t escape the feeling that this situation is partially my responsibility. Can you comprehend that?"

"Oh, Daniel!" Lila sighed heavily, exasperation clear.

The traffic signal ahead shifted to red, and I stopped, turning to frame her face in my hands, forcing direct eye contact.

"Tiny one, you are my entire world. Nothing and no one holds more importance than you do. But if I don’t respond to this, it will torment me indefinitely." I held her gaze intensely, barely registering the impatient honking from the vehicle behind us as the light changed to green. "Tell me how to proceed. If you want to return home, we’ll reverse course immediately."

Lila’s expression softened. "Let’s proceed to the medical facility." She released another frustrated sigh. "But you need to establish absolutely clear boundaries with her, her family, and your father that you belong to me now. You’re only there fulfilling basic family obligations, and this is the final time."

"My beautiful," I said, brushing my thumb across her cheek. "You have no cause to feel threatened by her or anyone else. I am entirely yours." I leaned in for a kiss, the impatient horns blaring behind us.

At the medical facility, we checked in at the secure reception desk, and a family-affiliated nurse directed us to a private waiting area, assuring us the attending physician would brief us shortly. A while later, my father strode in, his commanding presence filling the sterile space.

"Any developments, Daniel?" he asked without preamble.

"Nothing yet. We're awaiting the physician's assessment," I replied.

He shifted his attention to Lila. "Lila, how are you managing? What regrettable circumstances for our families to convene under."

"Indeed, quite unfortunate, Mr. Martinez," Lila responded coolly as my father took her hands in what seemed like a comforting gesture, though I remained suspicious of his political motivations.

"Daniel, you and Lila can depart. I'll await that troubled girl's family representatives," my father stated with authority, not offering a suggestion.

"Dad, I'm remaining until they arrive," I said firmly. "I want to understand her medical status and make it absolutely clear that they must handle Sasha's affairs going forward. I'm committed to Lila, and this is the final time Sasha draws me into her manipulations."

"Very well," he conceded, settling into a chair beside Lila. "I encountered your brother today. Thank you for facilitating that introduction."

"It was nothing," she replied with a diplomatic smile.

"You know, Lila, you and your family represent quite remarkable people," my father continued, earning a curious look from Lila. "Your brother's wife is Katarina Barrett—a significant force in high-end fashion circles."

"Yes, Katarina has achieved incredible success," Lila acknowledged. "But we maintain very grounded principles, sir."

"Your brother extended an invitation to visit your business operations and agricultural holdings. Did he mention it? We might develop a mutually beneficial partnership." My father's unusual attentiveness toward Lila surprised me.

"We haven't had opportunity to discuss business yet," she explained carefully. "Because of this crisis with Sasha, I barely crossed the threshold before we departed. But if my brother believes it's advantageous, I'm confident it would prove beneficial. As I've mentioned previously, I don't directly involve myself in company operations."

Lila maintained the conversation with practiced diplomacy, keeping my father at respectful distance.

"Family of Sasha Mendez?" A physician entered the waiting area, and I immediately stood.

"I'm her former husband. What's her condition?" I asked, tension evident in my voice.

"She'll make a complete recovery," the doctor assured us. "The dosage was significant but not fatal. The alcohol consumption presented greater medical concerns. We've performed gastric lavage and administered counteractive treatments. She's in her private room now, sedated."

"Would you like to see her?" he asked, and I nodded. He led us to a room where Sasha lay motionless, her complexion paler than usual but otherwise stable.

"How long before she regains consciousness?" my father inquired.

"At least several hours, but recovery depends on her individual system," the doctor replied before departing.

I stood at the foot of the bed, contemplating what drives someone to such desperate measures. In Sasha's case, it seemed more about manipulating attention than genuine despair. Using suicide threats

as leverage to force my presence was deeply troubling—she required psychiatric intervention, something I'd recommend to her family's leadership. Lila settled onto the couch across from the bed, and my father exited the room. I joined Lila, taking her hand in mine, searching for words that remained elusive.

Chapter 528: Family Lines Drawn

Lila's POV

The minutes crawled by as I sat on the leather chair in the private wing of the hospital that served the city's elite families. Daniel remained silent beside me, his jaw clenched as he stared at the woman lying in the bed across from us. His father Martinez had been uncharacteristically attentive since we arrived, even making a trip to the hospital's executive lounge, returning with expensive imported coffee and gourmet sandwiches from the facility that catered exclusively to the families who controlled this city's underground empire. His sudden kindness made me reflect on how differently people treated me now that they knew I was Sullivan family blood, compared to when they thought I was just another scholarship student trying to escape the streets. It was becoming clearer by the second that power changed people's perceptions, and this realization made me want that inheritance less and less.

"Mmm... oh... Daniel..." Sasha stirred in her hospital bed, her performance as transparent as glass.

Daniel glanced at me with the wariness of a man walking through enemy territory. I gave him a small nod, granting him permission to approach her. He released my hand reluctantly and moved toward the bed, keeping his distance like she might contaminate him.

"I'm here, Sasha," he said, his voice carrying the authority of a man who commanded both badge and respect in the underworld.

"You came." Even from where I sat, I could see her calculating smile and her manicured hand reaching out for his.

"I came because you left me no choice," he replied, his tone cutting through her act like a blade.

"Darling, don't be so harsh. I'm fragile right now. Hold my hand, take care of me like you used to when we were married by family contract." Sasha's manipulation was pathetic. The private physician who owed favors to the Martinez family had already confirmed that the amount of medication she'd taken

wasn’t nearly enough to be dangerous, which only proved my suspicion that this was just another power play in the endless game of family politics.

"Sasha, you used our marriage to trap me before, and I was fool enough to honor it. Not this time. I’m only here because leaving someone from our circle alone in a crisis would reflect poorly on the Martinez name. But once the Mendez family arrives, I’m done with this charade." Daniel’s words carried the weight of a man who’d learned to navigate between law enforcement and family loyalty.

"Daniel, you can’t abandon your responsibilities to me as your wife." Right on cue, tears started streaming down her perfectly made-up face.

"Sasha, our marriage ended when you chose to betray family trust, and it was the best thing that could have happened. I found Lila, and I’m with her now. That’s not changing because she’s the woman I’ve chosen to stand beside me in this life. You’re being desperate and manipulative."

"If you don’t honor your obligations to me, I’ll destroy myself," Sasha wailed, as if she was suffering unbearable torment instead of nursing wounded pride.

I sat quietly, observing this theater while Martinez watched with visible disapproval. The irony wasn’t lost on me that he was the one who had originally supported this woman’s return to his son’s life. Suddenly, the door burst open as an elegant couple swept into the room with the entitlement of old money and political connections.

"THIS IS YOUR FAULT, DANIEL! YOUR FAULT!" The woman, unmistakably Sasha’s mother, shrieked like a harpy.

"Lower your voice. This is a medical facility," Daniel snapped, his inspector’s authority cutting through her hysteria.

"Mother, he’s responsible for this! He told me to end my life when I begged him to honor his commitments as my husband." Sasha sobbed dramatically from her bed while Daniel stood there, visibly stunned by the audacity of her lie.

"You ungrateful bastard! What did you do to my daughter?" The man who'd entered with the woman advanced toward Daniel while the mother rushed to her daughter's bedside.

"What did I do? What about what your daughter did to me and my family?" Daniel's voice rose with barely contained fury. "This spoiled, manipulative woman inserted herself back into my life just to cause chaos and try to reclaim a position she forfeited through her own choices."

"Enough, Daniel!" The mother abandoned her daughter's side to confront him. "You have obligations toward Sasha as her husband that transcend your current... diversions. Whatever little affair you're having, end it now and return to honor the marriage vows made between our families."

My heart pounded as I watched this grotesque display of old-world entitlement. I'd never imagined such despicable people existed, even within the circles I was slowly learning to navigate. Daniel looked ready to explode while his father remained calm beside me, watching the scene unfold with calculating eyes.

"Wife? Please!" Daniel laughed bitterly. "You're all just parasites feeding off family names. I haven't had any responsibilities toward your daughter in years, because she chose to void those marriage contracts herself."

"Listen here, you arrogant prick, you won't discard my daughter like she's disposable." Sasha's father moved closer to Daniel, both men clearly ready for a confrontation that could escalate beyond words.

"That's rich! Wake up, Mendez. Your daughter is running a con. She never intended serious harm to herself. This is all an elaborate scheme to manipulate me back into our marriage, but it won't work this time." Daniel's voice carried the steel of a man who'd seen through every lie.

Amid the chaos, Sasha's mother finally noticed me sitting quietly in the corner. Her eyes narrowed with pure venom.

"Is this the little nobody you're slumming with, Daniel?" She stalked toward me. "What is she doing here? Did you bring this social climber to witness my daughter's pain? GET OUT OF HERE RIGHT NOW!" She screamed at me, but Daniel stepped between us like a shield.

"Don’t you dare speak about my wife like that! Yes, my wife! She’s not some nobody. She’s here solely because I wouldn’t leave someone from our world alone until family arrived. Sasha and I finished our business long ago, and that’s final. You should focus on getting your daughter the help she needs instead of trying to resurrect dead marriages." Fury radiated from Daniel like heat from a forge.

"Daniel, you can’t abandon Sasha. She’s suffering because of you. You know this isn’t her first episode," the woman pleaded, clearly trying to manipulate him through guilt.

"It’s not the first time she’s staged this performance, you mean. She’s not suffering, and if she is, take her to a psychiatrist instead of trying to force me back into marriages that serve no one. In fact, you should take her anyway because her behavior is far from stable." Daniel was visibly struggling to maintain his composure.

"You arrogant piece of trash! You will end this affair with this street rat and take responsibility for my daughter because honor demands it." Her father repeated what sounded like rehearsed threats.

"That’s enough!" Martinez’s voice thundered through the room with the authority of a man who’d built an empire. "All of you, be quiet." He rose with impressive dignity. "I was wrong about you, Sasha. And I apologize, Daniel, for supporting this woman, thinking your previous marriage could be salvaged and that she was suitable for our family. But now, Mendez, listen carefully: once Sasha is discharged, take her home and control her. Make sure she never bothers my son, my daughter-in-law, or any member of my organization again."

"Daughter-in-law?" Sasha gaped at him in disbelief.

"Yes, Sasha. I’ve accepted that Daniel and Lila belong together, and she’s proven herself worthy of our family name. I’ve welcomed her as my son’s chosen partner. That’s her place in my family, my home, and in Daniel’s life. Accept that you can’t change this and move on with your life as Daniel suggested." His tone brooked no argument.

"But, Martinez..." Sasha’s mother looked desperate.

"One more thing, Mendez. Ensure Sasha stays away from all of us, or I’ll call in that substantial debt your family owes mine. You understand what that means for your business interests and your political

connections, don’t you?" I didn’t want to know the specifics of what he was threatening; I just wanted to escape this suffocating room.

"Fine, Martinez. If you’re willing to throw away decades of profitable partnership and threaten me with financial ruin over your son’s current romance, so be it." Sasha’s father backed down, his voice subdued by the weight of real consequences.

"Daniel, I believe we’re finished here," Martinez turned to his son.

"Not quite yet." Daniel’s reply was ice-cold. He came to me, extending his hand, which I took as I stood. He led me to Sasha’s bedside. "This woman, Sasha, is extraordinary, and I love her completely. I will never leave her, especially not for you or any family arrangement. Never contact me again." With that, he guided me out of the room with his father following closely, but not before Martinez delivered one final warning.

"Remember, Mendez, I’ll destroy everything you’ve built if you come near my family." He closed the door behind us, his threat chilling even me. Only when we reached the hospital’s marble lobby did he speak again. "Lila, I apologize for this circus and for my past errors in judgment. I genuinely thought I was acting in my son’s best interests."

"Mr. Martinez, I understand a father wanting what’s best for his child, but I can’t understand wanting to take away what makes him truly happy." I met his gaze directly, unafraid.

"You’re a wise woman," he smiled with genuine warmth. "I hope we can understand each other moving forward."

"As far as I’m concerned, we’re fine. And thank you for defending me in there." I couldn’t deny he had stood up for me when it truly mattered. He simply smiled in response.

"Call me later, Daniel. Take care of each other," he said before departing.

"Little one, I’m sorry you had to witness that spectacle..." Daniel’s eyes were full of regret.

Despite the ugliness of the situation, I respected his refusal to leave Sasha completely alone in her moment of staged crisis, but I desperately wanted this to be the last time we'd deal with her manipulation.

"Daniel, I don't know what leverage your father has over the Mendez family, but even I could tell that unstable woman and her parents will leave us alone now. That's enough for me. Let's go home, you've been very badly behaved today, and I need to teach you a lesson." I teased. He looked at me playfully, a smile tugging at his lips as he pulled me into his arms.

"I love your lessons, tiny one, but remember your brother is staying at our place tonight," he laughed.

"Then you'd better keep quiet," I replied with a smile, which made him laugh even harder.

Chapter 529: Music Box Secret

Daniel's POV

The penthouse was empty when we returned from the private medical facility, save for a note from Sybilla mentioning they'd be back late. After a long shower, my little one demonstrated quite thoroughly that she was the only woman I should ever turn to in times of crisis. Not that I harbored any doubts, but watching her take control and dominate me like that was something I'd never tire of, especially after the tension of recent family operations.

"What's with the satisfied grin, big guy?" Lila emerged from our walk-in closet, catching me sitting in the bedroom armchair with what must have been a ridiculously smitten expression.

"Can't help it. This smile is permanently etched on my face thanks to you." I pulled her onto my lap and captured her lips with mine, tasting the sweetness that had become my addiction.

"Stop that, we have company now." She laughed against my mouth, though her body pressed closer.

"Didn't seem to bother you earlier tonight." My hand found its way to her breast, causing her to shiver involuntarily. "Sure you want to leave this room? I could make some calls, clear the apartment."

"Yes, it’s getting late." She quickly jumped off my lap, straightening her silk robe. "Besides, your family connections mean we can’t just ignore everyone."

When we reached the dining area, distinctly grumpy faces greeted us, with Beckett looking particularly murderous in that Sullivan family way.

"What’s wrong with everyone?" Lila asked, perplexed by the hostile silence. "Bad evening?"

"Bad doesn’t begin to cover it, Lila," Beckett replied with the stern authority of someone who’d inherited control of a major criminal enterprise at a young age. "I nearly kicked down your bedroom door tonight thinking this boyfriend of yours was torturing you for information."

"Well, he was, honey," Katarina interjected with a sly smile that would have made her modeling career proud. "Just not in the way you’re thinking, but in the way I demonstrated earlier. And don’t be ungrateful your evening wasn’t terrible at all."

"For Christ’s sake, Katarina!" Beckett glared at his wife with the intensity he usually reserved for rival family negotiations. "She’s my baby sister, and this Martinez bastard is corrupting her."

"In my defense," I laughed, enjoying how easily I could rile up the Sullivan heir, "she’s definitely the deviant in this relationship."

Lila’s head dropped in embarrassment. "Daniel!" she scolded, mortified by my candor in front of her brother.

"Tiny one, there’s no point playing innocent. You’re delightfully wicked and I adore that about you." I pulled her close, marking my territory. "And Beckett, drop the protective act. Your sister isn’t a child anymore, and she chose to be with a Martinez."

"What hypocrites!" Sybilla burst out laughing from her position at the counter. "You get all protective when I mention dating anyone from the other families. And you, Beckett, complaining about these two when your wife was equally vocal tonight. I should have invited Jude to stay then we’d have had multiple bedrooms of screaming"

"SYBILLA!" I cut her off, shocked by her boldness. "What exactly is happening between you and Jude?" I demanded, causing everyone to burst into laughter at my sudden shift to overprotective mode.

"See?" Sybilla pointed at me triumphantly. "Complete hypocrite!"

We were still enjoying our coffee and discussing family business when the security system announced visitors. I went to answer it, and Zoe strode in like the dangerous socialite she was.

"I have arrived, detective! Where's my Tiny Cipher?"

Behind Zoe's theatrical entrance, Finn merely shrugged apologetically, used to her dramatics.

"Come in, Finn," I welcomed him with the handshake reserved for trusted family associates. "And you, crazy girl, no embrace? You disappear for weeks on that European assignment and don't miss your friends?"

"Oh detective, you know I always miss my friends." Zoe laughed, embracing me with the familiarity of someone who'd helped me through multiple family crises. "Here, brought you something from Milan." She handed me a gift bag. "Now where's Tiny Cipher?"

"We're having coffee, this way." I guided them with my arm around Zoe's shoulders. When she spotted everyone at the table, her expression transformed completely.

"Oh. My. God!" Zoe started bouncing like an excited child despite her sophisticated exterior. "Is that I can't believe it! Katarina Barrett! I'm literally your biggest fan! I once flew all the way to Milan just to see you walk the runway! I'm so emotional right now!" Everyone broke into laughter as Katarina stood to embrace the starstruck Zoe. "Guys, what an amazing surprise! How did you know about my obsession with her work?"

"Zoe Miller fangirling? Never thought I'd live to see the day!" I couldn't stop laughing at her uncharacteristic loss of composure.

"Not just anyone, detective. It's HER." Zoe emphasized dramatically. "This woman isn't just in the fashion world she IS the fashion world!"

"So I've lost my friend to my brother's wife?" Lila teased, leaving Zoe completely stunned.

"Wait say that again. Your what?" Zoe looked genuinely shocked. Few things genuinely rattled Zoe, but this clearly did. Lila repeated that Katarina was her brother's wife, causing Zoe to blink rapidly in disbelief. "It never once occurred to you to mention that your Katarina was THE Katarina Barrett?"

"Honestly? No, Zoe," Lila replied nonchalantly, making Zoe gasp dramatically.

"I don't know if you deserve your present anymore," Zoe declared with theatrical indignation.

After proper introductions and Zoe sharing highlights from her European intelligence gathering, Katarina seized the opportunity to implement their plan.

"Zoe, I'm desperate for a proper spa treatment. There's nowhere decent in our territory, and Lila mentioned you know an exceptional private establishment." Katarina delivered her line perfectly, sending Zoe into another round of excitement, exactly as I'd predicted. She resembled a child discovering treasure pure, unbridled joy.

"I'm taking Katarina Barrett to my spa!" Zoe beamed with the satisfaction of someone about to show off exclusive connections. "You'll love it there, Katarina. I can make reservations for all of us right now." She immediately grabbed her phone to arrange everything through her network.

Within moments, the women were heading out for their beauty day, leaving us to handle family business.

As soon as they left, I called Gideon and confirmed we were ready. He was bringing boxes of belongings from the Sullivan family's deceased housekeeper, items that might contain clues about the family's buried secrets. We'd already briefed Finn on our investigation, which had visibly excited him. Gideon and Jude arrived simultaneously, and we went downstairs to help with the containers.

"These boxes are massive, Gideon," I commented, surveying the enormous containers now dominating my living room.

"They are," Gideon agreed grimly. "Good thing you called reinforcements. Each of us can tackle one box and make this go faster. The housekeeper's sister said this was everything she kept, and anything useless can be discarded."

"Any luck with that list of contacts?" I asked, hoping to locate the housekeeper's confidante.

"Unfortunately not," Gideon sighed. "But she remembered her friend's nickname 'Beardie.' Apparently her sister found it hilarious because the friend despised it. Got stuck with it after losing significant weight during a family crisis."

"Well, let's start searching," I instructed. "Everyone take a box, set aside anything potentially relevant. If you're unsure, separate it for group analysis." With that, our investigation began.

Time passed as we sifted through endless papers, notes, bills, trinkets, planners a lifetime of carefully preserved secrets. After gathering what each of us deemed significant, we reconvened at the table.

We methodically analyzed each item, discarding the irrelevant ones. Eventually, we were left with notes mentioning "Beardie," some photographs, and the housekeeper's diary with its final pages torn out pages that, based on the dates, coincided with Beckett's mother's suspicious death. Yet nothing concrete revealed Beardie's identity or any information about what really happened to Beckett's mother.

I noticed Finn intensely examining a simple wooden music box. It appeared ordinary but had peculiar overlapping circular carvings on its exterior that could be rotated.

"Fan of music boxes, Finn?" Jude inquired curiously.

"Despise them, actually. My mother collects them and forces everyone to help clean them worst punishment imaginable," Finn replied absently, still focused on the object. "I'm almost certain she has one identical to this."

Finn stared at the box with unusual concentration, rotating the circles almost compulsively. He closed it, opened it, turned it various ways, then wound it up to play music. This cycle repeated endlessly.

I was about to ask him to stop with the irritating repetition when he wound it once more, rotated the circles in a specific pattern, and smiled triumphantly.

"I knew it. My mother's box had the same secret mechanism," Finn spoke as if we'd been following his thought process. The box made an audible click as he lifted a hidden panel in the lid, revealing a secret compartment containing a small key and a receipt with an address.

"If this isn't significant, nothing here is," Finn declared confidently.

We exchanged shocked glances. That key undoubtedly guarded something important we just needed to discover what family secret it would unlock.

Chapter 530: Inner Circle Revelations

Daniel's POV

After their luxurious spa retreat, the women returned energized and unanimous in their desire for an evening out. Zoe, in her typical commanding fashion, had already arranged everything. The Famiglia Club became our destination—an exclusive establishment we hadn't frequented in quite some time. This wasn't just any venue; it was neutral territory where different mafia families could conduct business without the usual territorial tensions. Caleb and Ivy joined us, along with Dominic and Gemma, completing our inner circle.

Following dinner in our private suite—one of the soundproof rooms reserved for family discussions—Zoe shattered the comfortable silence. "So, who's volunteering to start?" She had just finished entertaining us with tales of her decadent getaway with Prince Finn, heir to a shipping empire.

Caleb shot her a puzzled look. "Start what, princess?"

"Bringing me up to speed, obviously," Zoe replied, adjusting her diamond bracelet. "I was away handling family business for quite some time—my diplomatic mission was absolutely divine, as you now know. I

want every detail about what transpired while I was securing our European connections. Most importantly, where the hell are Xavier and Ruby hiding?"

That was Zoe in her element—eccentric but fiercely protective of our brotherhood's inner workings.

"You're not the only one wondering about those two," Dominic interjected, swirling his whiskey. "I'm curious myself. By the way, the family missed having your intelligence network around, Zo."

Zoe flashed him her signature knowing smile. "I'm aware of that, West!"

"I suppose I'll break the ice," Caleb volunteered, his voice carrying the weight of someone who'd seen too much family drama. "Ruby walked away from Xavier. Nobody knows the exact reasons—you know how these family secrets go. He's taken off to handle some overseas business for a while. He's struggling with it, but I think the distance will help him regain his focus. Sometimes you need to leave the territory to see clearly."

"Ruby left Xavier?" Zoe's jaw dropped, her shock mirrored on Dominic and Gemma's faces. "Nora definitely knows what's happening—those two have been sharing secrets like sisters in a convent. What did she tell you, Jude?"

Jude's expression darkened, the kind of look that preceded bad family news. "Sorry, Zo, I can't help there. Nora filed for separation."

"What did you just say, Wright?" Zoe leaned forward, her instincts sharpening. "When did this bomb drop? I knew something felt off during our last family gathering. Come on, give me everything."

Jude explained how Nora had initially requested space, which explained her recent trip to their family's estates. Then, without warning, she served him separation papers through her attorney and refused all contact. She provided virtually no explanation, just the cold legal statement that she wanted to dissolve their union.

"But I won't sign those documents until she has the courtesy to face me and explain herself properly," Jude concluded, pain evident beneath his controlled facade. "Years of marriage deserves more than legal paperwork delivered by strangers."

Ivy squeezed his hand supportively. "Jude, you're an honorable man. If you want my honest assessment, she's the one losing out. Just sign the papers and focus on your own interests. Don't waste energy on someone who doesn't value what you bring to the family."

"Thanks, Ivy," Jude replied, "but after years of building something together, I need to understand the why. She claimed she was confused and needed space before vanishing. Then came the legal demands through intermediaries. I deserve explanations, not evasion."

We all understood Jude's position. In our world, closure meant everything, and proper explanations were the minimum someone deserved after years of loyalty.

"We're all here for you, Jude," Zoe assured him, then smoothly pivoted. "Now, Ivy, how's your perfect little empire with your perfect don and perfect heirs?"

"Oh, Zo, everything is absolutely perfect!" Ivy replied, triggering laughter around our table. The truth was, Ivy and Caleb had genuinely built something remarkable together—a rare love match that also strengthened both families' positions. "The major news is I stepped back from active operations. I decided I want to be present while my children learn the family business."

"I can't believe it!" Zoe gasped. "Ivy, you're a full-time family matriarch now? That's serious work, girl!"

"It's absolutely exhausting," Ivy admitted with a laugh. "Max has endless energy, and with the quartet running in different directions, I'm constantly managing someone's activities around the estate. But I wouldn't trade this life for anything."

Caleb kissed her forehead tenderly. "Maybe now I can convince her to give me one more heir. I've always envisioned a large family dynasty."

"Now you're definitely not convincing me!" Ivy shot him a mock glare.

"Gemma?" Zoe prompted, turning her attention.

"I’m returning from maternity leave next month," Gemma answered confidently. "Unlike Ivy, I’m maintaining my role in family operations, and I’m definitely not planning another child. But yes, my life is pretty perfect too, Zo!" She flashed an exaggerated smile.

"That means you’re behaving yourself, West!" Zoe concluded with a pointed look at Dominic.

Dominic chuckled. "I’ve reformed my ways, Zo. Family life suits me."

"Your turn, Tiny," Zoe said, focusing on Lila.

"Nothing dramatic to report," Lila replied simply. "My inspector is wonderful, law school is progressing well, work at Thorne is great, and my mother still despises my choices." Her summary was deliberately concise.

"I sense there’s more to unpack there," Zoe observed, exchanging a subtle glance with Finn. "Sybilla, you’re new to our family circle. Share everything."

"My life lacks the drama everyone else seems to attract," Sybilla responded. "I relocated here to escape my mother’s marriage arrangements, and now I’m working as Xavier’s executive assistant."

"You and Xavier have history, don’t you?" Zoe pressed, and Sybilla nodded reluctantly.

Jude laughed. "Tell them the whole story, Sybilla." He addressed the group. "They haven’t crossed paths for years. When they last met, she was barely out of finishing school. Xavier didn’t even recognize her in the office. He’s been so consumed with the Ruby situation that he hasn’t realized his assistant is Daniel’s sister."

My sister shifted uncomfortably as everyone erupted in laughter.

"I can’t believe it," Zoe said, eyes sparkling with intrigue. "And you haven’t revealed yourself? Why the deception?"

"Because we're enjoying the entertainment too much," Caleb admitted. "Picture Xavier's expression when he finally connects the dots. He'll look absolutely stunned."

"Actually, when he figures it out, he'll probably terminate my employment," Sybilla muttered, almost inaudibly.

"Xavier won't fire you, Sybilla!" I interjected firmly. My closest ally wouldn't betray my sister like that.

"Why would you think that, Sybilla?" Zoe asked, clearly fascinated.

"Because he despises me," Sybilla stated flatly. "He only tolerates me because of Daniel. And you know that's true, little brother." She fell silent then, refusing to elaborate further.

"Where did you develop that impression?" I asked, genuinely confused, but she remained tight-lipped.

"If he dismisses you, I'll bring you into my operations, Sybilla," Dominic offered, earning a grateful smile from my sister. "I have a habit of recruiting all the talented people Caleb loses."

"You'll have to take me too," Jude added playfully, ruffling Sybilla's hair. "I can't function efficiently without Sybilla anymore."

"For heaven's sake!" I groaned while everyone continued laughing.

"If they leave, I'm following," Lila declared dramatically.

"Everyone needs to calm down," Caleb said with authority, his voice carrying the weight of leadership. "If Xavier even considers firing Sybilla, I'll handle it personally. None of you is departing my organization." He shot Dominic a warning look. "And you, West, keep your recruitment efforts away from my people."