Mafia Mask 591

Chapter 591: Definitive Measures

Lila’s POV

After weeks of pushing myself to catch up on missed legal coursework, I was finally back on track with my studies at Columbia Law. The semester was drawing to a close, and I couldn’t wait for the break. Exhaustion had become my constant companion, making it difficult to concentrate during constitutional law lectures. Today felt particularly brutal, with each class dragging on endlessly as professors droned about precedent cases that seemed irrelevant to the real power structures I now understood governed this city. When the final bell rang, I quickly gathered my casebooks and rushed toward the exit, where I found Sybilla and MP waiting near the black town car that always shadowed me these days.

"Look at you two, practically attached at the hip these days," I said, placing my hands on my hips and giving them a playful suspicious look. Ever since Sybilla had fled her family’s arranged political marriage and found refuge in her brother’s territory, she and MP had become inseparable.

MP threw his arm around my shoulders as we started walking toward the vehicle. "Don’t get jealous, sweetie. You’re still my number one girl in this concrete jungle."

"So I lose my status elsewhere?" I feigned hurt, which made them both laugh. The casual banter helped ease the tension that constantly knotted my shoulders these days, living in a world where every friendship could be a strategic alliance.

"Off campus, you share the title with Sybilla," MP replied, pulling Sybilla closer and kissing her cheek. Two upperclassmen walked by, eyeing MP with obvious envy, unaware that his charm was purely platonic and his real interests lay elsewhere.

Few people at Columbia knew about MP’s sexual orientation. Not because he was hiding it, but because past experiences with prejudice had made him cautious about whom he trusted. We’d met in the law library during my first semester when I was struggling to reach a constitutional law textbook on the top shelf. He’d noticed, flashed me a warm smile, and retrieved it for me. Our friendship blossomed naturally from there, and he’d become one of my closest confidants in a world where genuine connections were rare and precious.

"If you're this territorial with friends, I can't imagine how you'd be with a boyfriend," Sybilla teased, making me laugh despite my fatigue. She had no idea how territorial Daniel could be, or how his protective instincts extended to monitoring my every movement through discrete security details.

"Speaking of which," MP interjected, "let's hurry, Sybilla. I'm missing my man something fierce."

"You'll have to keep missing him," Sybilla replied with a knowing smirk. "Daniel asked me to collect Lila. Said he'd explain everything when he returns."

My attention snapped to Sybilla immediately. "Explain what?" This seemed odd, especially given the delicate situation with Sasha's legal maneuvering that had been casting shadows over our relationship.

"I honestly don't know, Lila. When I left the penthouse, he seemed stressed about something. He just asked me to pick you up and said he'd fill you in when he returns," she repeated with a shrug, though I caught the slight tension in her voice that suggested she knew more than she was letting on.

"Did he go back to the precinct?" I pressed, convinced she was holding back information, but she simply shrugged again. In this world, information was currency, and even among family, some secrets were closely guarded.

"Since Lila's Greek god is nowhere to be found," MP suggested, "why don't we grab some food and hang out for a bit? I know a place."

Despite my obvious lack of enthusiasm, Sybilla jumped at the idea. "I'm in, and so is Lila. I'll call Jude to join us."

"Guys, I'm exhausted," I protested weakly, but my objection fell on deaf ears as Sybilla was already dialing Jude's number on her encrypted phone.

We ended up at an upscale establishment Jude recommended in Little Italy. The moment we walked through the heavy wooden doors, the mouthwatering aromas of authentic Italian cuisine awakened my dormant appetite. The place exuded old-world elegance—mahogany tables covered with pristine white linen, crystal glasses that caught the warm light from vintage chandeliers, and walls adorned with

photographs that looked like they chronicled decades of family history. A sign in elegant script announced they were a family establishment, serving the community for generations.

According to Jude, their signature osso buco was precisely why we were there. The restaurant bustled with well-dressed patrons who spoke in hushed tones, creating the kind of atmosphere where business could be conducted over excellent wine. A maître d' who recognized Jude immediately seated us at a prime table overlooking Mulberry Street, where black sedans moved like silent sentinels through the evening traffic.

"Jude, isn't that meal too heavy for this hour?" Sybilla questioned with concern, though her eyes sparkled with anticipation.

"No one's counting calories tonight, Sybilla!" MP chimed in, clearly delighted by the sophisticated surroundings.

"Exactly," Jude agreed as a sommelier appeared with a bottle of Barolo. "Today calls for comfort food and fine wine. Great food and aged red wine."

I ordered a sparkling water, as did MP, while Sybilla and Jude claimed the wine glasses with the reverence the vintage deserved.

"Since you're staying sober, MP, you're my designated driver. I took a taxi here," Jude said.

"I must say, Jude, I'm surprised you know about this place," I commented. "It's not the type of establishment our usual crowd frequents." Most of our university friends preferred trendy spots in SoHo, not traditional Italian restaurants that clearly catered to a more established clientele.

Jude smiled mysteriously. "Tiny Cipher, you'll be even more shocked to learn that Xavier introduced me to this gem."

"You're kidding!" Sybilla's eyes widened. "Xavier? Here? No way. He only goes for the most exclusive places."

"Are we talking about the same Xavier?" Jude squinted at her with amusement.

"Xavier Black of the impeccable suits and superiority complex," Sybilla replied with mock disdain, though there was something else in her voice—something that sounded almost like fondness.

"I don’t think you know him as well as you think. Yes, he appreciates refinement, but he has deep respect for tradition," Jude said before placing our order with practiced ease. "Now explain this attitude toward Xavier."

Sybilla nearly choked on her wine but managed to respond coherently. Her feelings for Xavier were becoming increasingly obvious to those who knew her well.

"Well, maybe someone replaced the real Xavier with a more human version, because the Xavier I know isn’t this pleasant guy you’re describing." Sybilla’s persistence made me want to have a heart-to-heart with her about her obvious attraction to Thorne Corporation’s chief legal counsel, especially since she’d been avoiding the topic since I’d figured it out.

Our meal progressed amid laughter and carefully modulated conversation, with Xavier remaining the central topic of discussion. The osso buco truly lived up to its reputation—Jude wisely ordered portions for Sybilla and me to share, as the serving was substantial, presented on fine china that spoke of old family recipes and generational pride. I enjoyed watching Jude, Sybilla, and MP interact so comfortably together, forming genuine bonds in a world where trust was the most valuable commodity. As Jude signaled for the check with the quiet confidence of someone accustomed to fine dining, my encrypted phone vibrated.

"Excuse me," I said, seeing Daniel’s secure line on the screen. "I’ll take this outside." I stepped onto the sidewalk, where the evening air carried the sounds of the city—distant sirens, the rumble of expensive engines, the kind of urban symphony that had become the soundtrack to my new life.

"Hey, big guy. Everything alright?" A black SUV with tinted windows rolled past slowly, its occupants invisible behind bulletproof glass.

"Hi, little one. You’re not at the penthouse?" Daniel sounded surprised by the background noise, and I could hear the exhaustion weighing down his usually commanding voice.

"Not yet. I went out for dinner with Sybilla, MP, and Jude." I heard Daniel sigh heavily, a sound that sent worry coursing through my veins.

"Where are you?" I asked, though I suspected I already knew the answer.

"I'm glad you went out. I'm at Thorne territory, handling something that couldn't wait. I'll take the first flight back tomorrow." The exhaustion in his voice was unmistakable, but underneath it was something harder—the tone he used when dealing with serious family business.

"Family problems?" I asked worriedly, though Sybilla's relaxed demeanor earlier suggested the Martinez family wasn't in crisis.

"No, little one. I came to talk to Sasha," he said after a brief pause that spoke volumes about the delicacy of the situation.

"Oh. Was it that urgent?" I trusted him completely, but I couldn't deny the sharp pang of jealousy that pierced through me. Sasha represented everything I feared about his past—the political marriages, the legal manipulations, the world where love was secondary to power.

"It was, but nothing for you to worry about. Just something I needed to resolve definitively."

"I thought Sasha was already resolved." My jealousy was definitely more than just a spark now, and I could hear the edge creeping into my voice despite my best efforts.

"Now she is, permanently. Can we discuss this when I return? I don't want to ruin your evening with business talk."

"Fine. We'll talk tomorrow." Was I jealous? Absolutely. Was I upset he went to see that woman without telling me? Without question. Did I want to wait until tomorrow to learn what was so urgent he had to fly across the country? Of course not. But I had little choice—he sounded drained, and I was standing on a busy street where any conversation could be overheard.

"Enjoy your night, little one. Sleep well. Kiss." His farewell lacked his usual warmth, with no mention of loving me, which was all my anxious mind needed to start conjuring countless scenarios involving his beautiful, dangerous ex-wife.

Chapter 592: Hidden Family Secrets

Lila’s POV

I said goodbye to Jude and MP almost mechanically, my mind consumed by thoughts of another city where Daniel was confronting his past. Since Sybilla had been drinking at the Thorne family gathering, I slid behind the wheel of the armored sedan, forcing myself to focus on the empty streets while my thoughts churned with uncertainty.

"Now that we’re safely back in your fortress and I’m not about to die from your distracted driving, spill it, Lila. What’s eating at you?" Sybilla demanded the moment our penthouse door sealed shut behind us.

"Your brother went to see his ex-wife!" The words exploded from me, heavy with all the frustration I’d been swallowing.

"Sasha, huh?" Sybilla’s expression shifted to something unreadable, her usual playful demeanor replaced by the calculated look that reminded me she was Martinez family blood. "Let’s change into something comfortable and talk properly. Living room or bedroom?"

"Can we talk in my room? We could chat until we fall asleep," I suggested, craving the comfort of familiar surroundings.

Sybilla’s nose wrinkled in disgust. "In the bed you share with my brother? Absolutely not! I know what happens in there between you two. It’s either the surveillance-free couch or my room."

Despite my dark mood, that made me laugh. "Fine. I’ll change and meet you in your room. I want to talk lying down."

When I entered Sybilla’s bedroom, she’d already constructed a fortress of silk pillows against the mahogany headboard. I climbed onto the king-sized bed beside her, settling into the half-sitting position she’d created with the precision of someone raised in luxury.

"Alright, Lila. Open the floodgates," she encouraged, turning to face me with those sharp Martinez eyes that missed nothing.

"He went after her, Sybilla. They're divorced, and he still went chasing after that manipulative witch." The childish whine in my voice wasn't lost on me, but I couldn't suppress it.

"What's with this jealousy storm? My brother is completely devoted to you, and you know it. If he went to see Sasha, there must be a crucial reason. Plus, he didn't hide it from you." Her logic was sound, but the knot of anxiety in my stomach remained tight.

"He could have discussed it with me before going," I muttered, knowing I was grasping at straws. "And he was strange on the phone. He didn't even say he loved me." I recounted our conversation, which prompted Sybilla to burst into genuine laughter.

"Seriously, Lila? This paranoia isn't like you! If Daniel didn't love you, he wouldn't have severed all ties with our parents—"

I bolted upright, adrenaline spiking through my system. "What did you just say about Daniel and your parents?"

"You don't know?" Sybilla's eyes widened in horrified realization. "Damn it. Daniel's going to have me disappeared."

"Not if I disappear him first. Talk, Sybilla. Now."

"Daniel had a massive confrontation with our parents. Knowing my brother, it was pretty final. He cut them off completely."

"Why?" I pressed, feeling dread pool in my stomach like ice water.

"Why?" She looked at me as if it were the most obvious thing in our world of power plays and family loyalty. "You, of course."

"You'll need to give me more than that." When she hesitated, I pulled out my trump card. "Or I swear I'm calling Xavier right now to tell him who his mysterious assistant really is."

"Low blow, Lila!" Sybilla groaned, facing me fully with resignation. "Fine, I'll tell you, but if Daniel has me exiled from the family for this, you're taking me in."

"He wouldn't do that," I assured her, though I wasn't entirely certain.

"It happened while you were still unconscious in the hospital after the Justin situation. Claire approached Daniel with information that our father had contacted her about forming an alliance to break you two up." The revelation hit me like a physical blow.

"When exactly did this happen?"

"I don't know all the details. I just know Daniel had already warned our father to back off where you were concerned. When he discovered the alliance with Claire, he completely severed ties with our parents—told them never to contact him again or face the consequences."

"Your mother too?"

"Lila, in the Martinez family, whatever my father decides, my mother supports without question. It's how she's survived being married to a man who controls half the judges in the state."

"But Claire could be lying," I reasoned, knowing her capacity for manipulation and deceit.

"I don't think so. How would she even know our parents wanted to break you up otherwise? She also told Daniel that our father eventually backed down from the plan, though she claimed not to know why. Daniel's convinced it's because he discovered you have substantial wealth and are a partner in Thorne Corporation."

"So purely calculated self-interest," I said flatly.

"That, and knowing you have independent wealth means you're not after the Martinez fortune or political connections. I'm sorry, Lila, but my parents have this terrible flaw of assuming everyone's motivated by greed or power."

"I understand to some degree," I admitted. "Maybe they're trying to protect their family's position. I'm sure countless people try to infiltrate your circle for money and influence."

"Yes, and it's exhausting, but that doesn't give them the right to assume everyone's the same or to interfere in our personal lives. They're obsessed with maintaining power but blind to genuine character. The man they want me to marry is basically a sophisticated version of that pathetic Justin."

"You say the strangest things! But Daniel shouldn't have fought with your parents because of me."

"He can and he did. He fought to protect you, Lila, because he loves you more than family politics. So stop thinking nonsense. Didn't you fight with Claire when you thought she was your mother? You had your reasons; Daniel had his. The problem now is my parents are pressuring me to help reconcile them."

"Your parents aren't like Claire, right?" I asked cautiously. "Not abusive—just controlling and politically minded?"

"They're not cruel like Claire was, no. But they could definitely be better parents. My mother could stop trying to force me into strategic marriages, and my father could not have cut off my trust fund for refusing his political arrangements."

"I'll talk to Daniel when he returns," I decided. "I don't like being the reason for this family rift, especially since your father was courteous to me when we met."

"Lila, don't stir this up! Daniel will have my head when he finds out I told you."

"I'm the one who's going to tear him apart for keeping this from me!"

I was genuinely furious. It felt like Daniel didn't trust me enough to share something so monumental. Beyond my jealousy about Sasha, I was deeply hurt that he'd fought with his parents over me and never mentioned it. What other crucial information was he withholding from me?

Chapter 593: A Mothers Embrace

Lila's POV

I was halfway through my lunch when Daniel's text appeared on my phone screen: "Just arrived. Heading directly to the precinct." I typed a simple "okay" in response, though my fingers itched to say more.

"Would it kill him to actually call me?" I muttered, pushing away my half-eaten sandwich. My appetite had vanished completely.

The Thorne Group offices felt particularly empty today. Sybilla and Jude were out handling external negotiations—Jude had swung by my place this morning to collect Sybilla before they headed off to meet with one of the family's legitimate business partners. Without their usual chatter filling the workspace, the hours crawled by painfully slow.

As afternoon turned to evening, there was still no word from Daniel. Sybilla called to inform me that Caleb had summoned her and Jude to the estate to work on sensitive family matters for the remainder of the day, which effectively left me completely isolated. Only Katelyn from the executive suite occasionally stopped by to exchange pleasantries, but otherwise, my mind had free rein to conjure up all sorts of scenarios about Daniel's absence.

By closing time, my irritation had evolved into genuine concern. Why hadn't Daniel reached out yet? In his world of underground politics and legitimate law enforcement, silence usually meant complications. Gathering my belongings, I trudged out of the Thorne building with slumped shoulders. On the sidewalk, my attention was drawn to a woman standing with her back to me. She wore an immaculate white knee-length dress with elbow-length sleeves that screamed expensive boutique. Her figure was slender, complemented by glossy black hair that hung perfectly straight just below her shoulders. Everything about her posture suggested the refined elegance of old money.

"Get a grip, Lila," I scolded myself. "You're so obsessed you're seeing Daniel in every dark-haired stranger now."

Before I could look away, chaos erupted. A young cyclist lost control of his bike and, in his desperate attempt to stay upright, grabbed onto the elegant woman, pulling her down with him. I rushed forward to help, extending my hands to steady her.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed while regaining her footing.

The cyclist scrambled up without so much as an apology, grabbed his bicycle, and shouted over his shoulder, "My bad, lady!" as he pedaled away into the downtown traffic.

"'My bad, lady?' That boy nearly killed me," she huffed indignantly, watching him disappear down the street. Her accent carried the cultured tones of someone accustomed to respect. Then turning to me with genuine warmth, she added, "Thank you so much, dear."

I bent down to retrieve her designer purse. "Are you alright, ma'am? I mean, besides the broken heel and scraped knee."

She offered me a kind smile that reminded me of the grace I'd seen in the wives of family patriarchs. "A bit sore, but I think I'm—" She paused, glancing down at her once-pristine dress, now soiled and sporting a small tear along the side. "Oh no, I'm not okay. Look at this mess." The reality of the incident seemed to hit her all at once.

"Don't worry, I'll help you. Do you have a car nearby?"

"No, I've been waiting for a taxi, but they seem nonexistent in this city." Her frustration was tinged with humor.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "It's rush hour—taxis are practically mythical creatures right now. My car's just over there. Let me drive you wherever you need to go."

"Oh, I couldn't possibly impose on you, dear." Her embarrassment seemed genuine, the kind of refined politeness that came from a lifetime of proper etiquette.

"It’s really no trouble. I think we should get you to a hospital for that dizziness you mentioned."

"It’s just temporary—I’ve been experiencing these spells lately. Probably stress from family matters."

"Better safe than sorry. My car’s right over there—lean on me."

There was something remarkably graceful about her as she placed her arm around my shoulder. To any passerby, we might have appeared as close friends rather than strangers brought together by circumstance. After helping her into the passenger seat of my luxury sedan, I navigated into the flow of traffic, heading toward the private medical center that served the city’s elite families.

"Quite an impressive vehicle for such a delicate young woman," she remarked without judgment.

"I’ve heard that before. Fell in love with it at first sight at the dealership."

"Excellent choice—makes you look commanding. A woman needs presence in this world."

"Thank you. You’re not from around here, are you?"

"No, I’m from a smaller community upstate. I travel extensively for family business, but prefer the tranquility of rural estates."

"I’m originally from a small town too, but I’ve fallen for this city’s energy and opportunities."

"That’s the privilege of youth. What brought you here initially?"

"College, and then work with one of the established families."

"Wise choice. Education and the right connections are invaluable. I always told my children that knowledge is the one possession no one can take from you—it’s your ticket to anywhere in our world."

"Absolutely true. How many children do you have?"

"A few. They're all building their own lives now, which is as it should be, though a mother never stops worrying about the choices they make."

"I can only imagine the complexities of raising children in prominent families."

Our conversation flowed naturally as we drove, laughing and sharing stories like old acquaintances. She was cultured, worldly, and striking in her elegance—clearly from the same social circles I'd grown accustomed to since joining Daniel's world. At the medical center, we entered the emergency wing arm-in-arm. While she completed the necessary paperwork, I fetched water from a vending machine. Upon my return, I found a nurse had already placed her in a wheelchair.

"This nurse and her dramatic wheelchair," she joked, accepting the water. "Dear, I'm being such a nuisance."

"Not at all. Your company is delightful," I replied, meaning every word.

"Let's see... my patient who was struck by a..." A familiar voice entered the room. Zander, Gemma's brother who worked at this exclusive medical facility, stopped mid-sentence when he spotted me. His professional demeanor gave way to a warm smile. "Don't tell me you were the victim."

"No, Zander. My friend here was. I'm just accompanying her."

"She's been my guardian angel, doctor," the woman said appreciatively.

"This young lady truly is an angel—you're fortunate to have found her," Zander replied. "She's connected to some very good people."

"You two know each other?" she asked, intrigued.

"Yes, we’re friends through mutual family connections," I confirmed with a smile.

"That means VIP treatment for you, but don’t tell my supervisor—he also knows her circle and might try to steal my patient," Zander whispered conspiratorially.

"You know Dr. Taylor too? What a small world our community is," she remarked, pleasantly surprised.

"I’ll wait outside for privacy," I said, squeezing her hand gently. "Take good care of her, Zander!"

Later, Zander invited me back in to explain that she needed blood work, a CT scan, and a specialist consultation for suspected inner ear issues.

"Dear, this could take quite a while. Please don’t waste your evening on me," she insisted.

"I’m not going anywhere. I won’t leave you alone in a hospital. Besides, I’m genuinely enjoying your company," I assured her.

"Since you’re staying, you can accompany her to the CT scan," Zander instructed. "The nurses will collect her soon. I’ll bring the specialist afterward. But I recommend calling a family member."

"That’s not necessary, doctor," she protested softly.

"It absolutely is. You’ll need supervision at home," Zander insisted before leaving.

"Would you like me to call someone for you?" I offered.

"My children and I aren’t on the best terms right now," she admitted sheepishly. "I made some difficult decisions regarding family matters, and they have their reasons for keeping distance."

"That’s nonsense! They’re your children—they love you. Whatever happened, they’ll want to be with you now," I encouraged.

"You must be a wonderful daughter," she squeezed my hand affectionately.

"I try. My mother passed away, and I would have given anything to hold her hand when she needed me." My eyes filled with tears, mirroring hers.

"Oh, come here!" She pulled me into a maternal embrace that felt surprisingly comforting. "Your mother is watching over you, I'm certain." Her words brought unexpected warmth. I hugged her tighter, feeling a connection I hadn't expected.

"Hand me my purse, please. I'm going to call my daughter."

Chapter 594: Mystery Woman Revealed

Lila's POV

I stepped back to give the woman privacy as she reached for her phone with trembling fingers. Settling into the corner chair of the emergency room, I watched her dial a number, only to be met with silence. Her second attempt yielded the same result. Tears gathered in her eyes as she tried a third contact.

"Hello, my love!" Her weathered face brightened when someone finally answered. "Yes, I know I shouldn't have come to the Thorne building unannounced. But that's not why I'm calling. I was struck by a courier's motorcycle outside the financial district... no, don't panic, I'm unharmed. This remarkable young woman witnessed everything and insisted I come to the hospital because I was experiencing vertigo. Yes, it happened again. The doctor suspects it might be an inner ear condition, but they want to run comprehensive tests. They requested I contact family. No, the others didn't answer, but my guardian angel is here and promised to stay with me." She offered me a grateful smile. "Can you come? Of course, I'll await your call. I'm at Taylor Memorial. Yes, I'll relay that message. Goodbye."

She ended the call with a weary sigh. "My children didn't pick up. That was my husband - he's driving from our estate, though it'll take considerable time for him to reach the city. He expresses his gratitude for your compassion."

A solitary tear rolled down her cheek. I couldn’t restrain myself - I approached her and gently wrapped my arms around her shoulders. Though she appeared to be in her early sixties, her fragility in that moment made her seem even more delicate.

"Please don’t worry about it. I’m here and I’ll remain until your husband arrives," I assured her. "If necessary, I could even take you to my apartment."

Her lips curved into a faint smile. "My middle son would think we’re both insane - me for trusting a stranger’s vehicle, and you for inviting a stranger into your home."

I chuckled softly. "That sounds precisely like something my boyfriend would say as well."

Three cheerful nurses entered the room, their expressions softening when they observed our embrace.

"How touching!" one exclaimed. "It’s wonderful to witness a daughter caring for her mother." I simply smiled in response. "Don’t worry, everything will be perfectly fine."

"Look at that - now you’re my fourth daughter!" My newfound friend beamed as she extended her arm for the nurse to draw blood samples.

Following the blood work, we were guided through the hospital corridors to the radiology department. The nurses directed me to a small waiting area, promising to summon me once the examination was complete. The wait wasn’t lengthy before a nurse appeared to collect me. We returned to the emergency room, conversing and laughing while awaiting Zander’s return with the specialist.

Our conversation was interrupted when a disheveled woman burst through the office doors, followed closely by a man in an expensive suit.

"Mom!" The woman launched herself onto the hospital bed, embracing the patient. I stood frozen, my mind struggling to process the scene unfolding before me.

"Lila?" The man stared at me in bewilderment. "What are you..."

Before he could complete his sentence, the woman released her mother and spun around at the mention of my name.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice rose with incredulity. "I can't believe Dad contacted you too! Dear God, Daniel is going to be absolutely livid! He's already furious and has half the force searching everywhere for you because you're not responding to your phone." Her words poured out so rapidly I could barely follow, and now my head was spinning.

"Wait, you two are acquainted?" My patient friend looked between us, her expression puzzled.

"Oh, Mom! Stop this charade!" the younger woman snapped.

"Don't speak to her in that manner!" I instinctively defended the woman I'd grown so fond of in such a short time. The daughter's jaw dropped at my intervention.

"I just realized we never exchanged proper names," I explained, approaching the bed. "We connected so naturally that I forgot we were complete strangers. And when you completed the admission forms, I wasn't present..."

"That's absolutely true," the older woman nodded. "We bonded as if we'd known each other our entire lives, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did. I'm Lila Sullivan. It's truly an honor meeting you." The woman covered her mouth in astonishment.

"Oh my heavens! I'm Beatrice Martinez!" We stared at each other, truly seeing one another for the first time, recognition dawning simultaneously on both our faces. "Lila, I honestly had no idea it was you."

"I believe you," I said sincerely, seeing her genuine surprise mirroring my own shock.

"What precisely is happening here?" The daughter looked between us, completely bewildered.

"I went to the Thorne Group offices today, sweetheart," Beatrice explained, emotion thickening her voice. "I wanted to speak with you since you've been refusing my calls. Daniel won't answer either." Her eyes glistened with unshed tears, and I felt my own emotions rising in response. "I thought you might talk to me if we met face-to-face."

"You're the one who told me to forget I had a mother," the daughter accused bitterly.

"That was spoken in anger, Sybilla. Sometimes parents are too harsh when attempting to guide their children. In our desperation to protect you from the family business, we forget that we don't possess all the answers and can make grievous mistakes. I made a terrible mistake, and I acknowledge that, but you won't even allow me to apologize." Beatrice wrung her hands nervously. "While waiting for a taxi outside your building, I was struck by a motorcycle courier. Lila witnessed it happen and helped me, but I had absolutely no idea she was Daniel's girlfriend."

Sybilla stared at her mother, clearly stunned by this revelation. Just then, Zander entered with another doctor, glancing around the room with curiosity.

"Mrs. Martinez, it appears we share many mutual acquaintances. Your surname - are you perhaps related to Inspector Daniel Martinez?"

"He's my son," she replied, voice thick with emotion. "Are you friends as well?"

"Yes, I have the privilege of calling your son a friend. He's an extraordinary man who's helped many families in this city."

"Literally extraordinary in stature, right Zander?" Jude joked, successfully lightening the mood and drawing laughter from everyone present.

"He takes after his father," Beatrice said with unmistakable pride shining in her eyes.

"It's an honor to provide care for you, ma'am. Now I'll need these three to step outside while the ENT specialist examines you," Zander said kindly, and we filed out of the room.

"Lila, what was that entire exchange about?" Sybilla asked, still appearing dazed by the coincidence.

"Exactly what she explained, Sybilla," I answered simply, still processing the surreal situation.

"I can’t believe this incredible coincidence. And why haven’t you been answering your phone? Daniel has been frantically searching for you with every resource at his disposal. Let me inform him I found you." Sybilla rummaged through her designer purse for her phone.

"I already sent him a message," Jude mentioned as I retrieved my own device.

"Oh, my battery completely died. I didn’t notice," I explained, checking my phone’s black screen.

Moments later, Daniel charged through the emergency room entrance like a man possessed, looking stressed and thoroughly agitated. I could tell from his thunderous expression and the tension radiating from his massive frame that I was in serious trouble now.

Chapter 595: Radio Silence Explained

Daniel’s POV

I sent a message to my little one the moment I arrived in Port Harbor, but her response was unusually cold and brief. She was clearly displeased with me—normally her texts overflowed with sweet words and affection. I needed to call her immediately, but Adler had already informed me that the precinct was in complete chaos today. We had agreed I would arrive by noon, and though he said there was no urgent deadline, he promised to notify me if the situation became critical—which it clearly had.

I decided to postpone calling Lila until I could assess the situation at the station. When I walked through those doors, it was absolute pandemonium. Between the ongoing investigations into the dockside smuggling operations, processing statements from witnesses in the Thorne family territory disputes, and handling fresh arrests from last night’s casino raid, the hours evaporated like smoke.

By late afternoon, I finally found a moment to catch my breath and tried calling my little one, but the call went straight to voicemail. This was completely unlike her. After everything she had endured with Claire’s schemes, her phone had become practically welded to her hand, and this sudden radio silence triggered every alarm bell in my head.

Between juggling cases involving territorial disputes between rival families and coordinating with the narcotics division on cartel infiltration, I kept trying to reach her. I called Thorne Group's legal department only to learn from the receptionist that she had already departed for the day. When I contacted my sister Sybilla, she informed me that while Lila had been away from the office for most of the day, she had spoken with her briefly before closing time and everything seemed normal.

But experience in both the police force and growing up in the Martinez family had taught me never to ignore my instincts. When you have witnessed the worst of what both the legitimate and underground worlds can unleash, paranoia becomes your most trusted companion.

I reached out to everyone in our network—from Thorne family associates to Lila's college friends—and nobody had any knowledge of her whereabouts. They all attempted to reassure me, suggesting she was probably attending her evening law classes or studying at the university library. Then I remembered to contact MP at the underground club where she sometimes went for legal consultation work. When I called, he confirmed she had not appeared yet but promised to alert me the instant she showed up. Meanwhile, my anxiety was climbing to dangerous levels, and my mother's persistent calls were only making everything worse. She knew perfectly well I was not speaking to her—why could she not respect that boundary?

Making the entire situation more complicated, I was drowning in cases and could not abandon the station after taking the entire morning off to travel here. The ongoing investigation into money laundering through high-end art galleries—a specialty of the Sullivan family's legitimate operations—required my immediate attention. I had no choice but to ask Sybilla and Jude to check our penthouse apartment and report back if Lila was there.

In the midst of this storm of stress gnawing at my nerves, my brother Gregory called, his voice carrying an uncharacteristic note of genuine concern.

"What is it, Gregory?" I snapped, my patience worn razor-thin by the day's events.

"Mother went to Port Harbor. Has she attempted to contact you?" His tone matched the gravity I was feeling. What in hell was Mrs. Martinez doing in my territory?

"She tried calling repeatedly, but I ignored every attempt. She knows exactly where I stand regarding her and her husband's political machinations," I reminded him of my decision to completely sever ties with the family's business operations.

"Daniel, I understand your position, but she is genuinely suffering—first Sybilla cut off all communication, now you have done the same..." Gregory had always served as our family's diplomatic mediator, the rational voice who could find middle ground in any conflict, but in this particular situation, compromise was not remotely possible—not for me.

"They made their choice when they decided to manipulate the judicial system for their own agenda. I warned them repeatedly about the consequences."

"I acknowledge that, but you must admit they have been good parents—overbearing and intrusive with questionable methods of achieving their objectives, certainly, but fundamentally good parents nonetheless."

"Listen carefully, Gregory, I am not changing my position on this matter. Lila nearly died or could have been forced into marriage with that psychopath."

"Daniel, Mother is not herself lately. She has even stopped her constant criticism of Sloane and ceased micromanaging every aspect of my life."

"Classic emotional manipulation tactic, Gregory. Do not fall victim to it."

"Perhaps you are correct, but she is currently in the hospital. Father and I are boarding a flight immediately. Apparently, she was struck by a cyclist and began feeling unwell, and some young woman assisted her in getting medical attention."

"Trust me, this is simply another one of her elaborate schemes to regain control."

"I do not believe so, because that young woman is still there with her at the hospital. She is undergoing various medical tests as we speak. So please, set aside your anger temporarily and visit the hospital. Before it becomes too late for regrets."

"Look, Gregory, I am completely overwhelmed with problems here, but I will attempt to stop by if circumstances permit. Which hospital?"

"Taylor Hospital. As I mentioned, Father and I are traveling there now."

"Fine, keep me informed of any developments." I suspected our mother was playing the sympathy card to manipulate the family dynamics, but Gregory's concern seemed absolutely genuine. Perhaps I was wrong about her motivations. I felt conflicted about the situation, but I would not lower my guard easily. *oom*

"Brother, do not hold onto this bitterness indefinitely."

"I will consider your advice."

After wishing my brother safe travels, I tossed my phone onto the desk with more force than necessary. Still no communication from Lila, and Sybilla should have reached our apartment by now—why had she not called with an update? Just as I reached for my phone to contact her directly, a text message from Jude appeared on the screen. Reading its contents, I froze in complete disbelief—what in God's name was Lila doing at the hospital with my mother?

This situation demanded immediate attention and resolution. Checking my watch, I noted my shift was officially ending. Whatever cases remained could wait until tomorrow morning; I would transfer the most urgent matters to the night shift detective.

I wrapped up my responsibilities as quickly as possible and headed directly for the hospital, my mind racing through countless possibilities. How had Lila ended up in the company of my mother? This had to be some elaborate scheme orchestrated by my parents—they must have engineered this meeting to gain access to Lila and use her as leverage against me. If they believed they could manipulate me through her, they were gravely mistaken. I would not allow them anywhere near her. This perfectly explained her radio silence throughout the day.

The drive felt interminable, my irritation mounting steadily with every mile that passed. When I finally arrived at Taylor Hospital, I parked haphazardly in the first available space and rushed through the entrance doors. From the main lobby, I immediately spotted Lila standing between Sybilla and Jude near the information desk; she appeared apprehensive, perhaps sensing the fury radiating from me as I

approached. I stopped directly in front of her, placed my hands firmly on my hips, and locked eyes with her.

"Did you happen to lose your phone today, little one?"

She held my gaze steadily without flinching, and then, completely unexpectedly, burst into unrestrained laughter—not merely a polite chuckle, but full-blown, genuine laughter that echoed through the hospital corridor as if I had delivered the most amusing joke she had ever heard.

I stared at her in complete confusion, mirroring the bewildered expressions on Jude and Sybilla's faces. What on earth had gotten into my little one's head?

Chapter 596: Hospital Room Reunion

Lila's POV

My heart hammered against my ribs as Inspector Daniel Martinez stormed through the private wing of the hospital like a man possessed. His tailored suit was wrinkled, his usually perfect hair disheveled, and his face carried the kind of storm that made even hardened criminals think twice. He planted himself directly in front of me, hands on his hips, those piercing eyes narrowed to dangerous slits.

Something about his theatrical entrance, so quintessentially him, triggered an unexpected reaction. A laugh bubbled up from deep inside me, and once it started, I couldn't stop. I doubled over, cackling until my sides ached and tears streamed down my cheeks. This was Inspector Martinez, the man who could make entire criminal organizations tremble with a single look, reduced to a frantic husband because of a dead phone battery.

Jude frantically waved a magazine at me like a fan while I gasped for air. Sybilla pressed her hand to her mouth, fighting her own urge to laugh at the absurdity. Daniel just stared at me like I'd completely lost my mind, which only made me laugh harder.

When I finally caught my breath and wiped the tears from my face, I extended my phone to him with a shaking hand. He snatched it, examined the black screen, and let out a sound somewhere between relief and exasperation.

"A dead battery? Seriously, Lila? Do you have any idea what went through my head when you vanished?" His voice carried that authoritative edge he used during interrogations, but underneath was pure worry.

I lifted my chin with defiance that would have made my Sullivan family ancestors proud. "No, I don't know, because you were too busy chasing after your legally-not-quite-ex-wife yesterday to bother explaining what the hell is going on."

He opened his mouth to fire back but stopped abruptly. His angry expression melted into something far more dangerous – that predatory smile that meant trouble. "Wait just a minute." He pointed at me as his grin widened. "You're jealous. My little Sullivan princess is actually jealous."

"Don't flatter yourself, Inspector Martinez," I scoffed, crossing my arms and turning away with what I hoped looked like aristocratic disdain rather than a pout. But he was already moving, wrapping his arm around my waist and pulling me against the solid wall of his chest.

"Oh, I absolutely will flatter myself. My beautiful girl is jealous over me." His smile was devastating as he spoke close to my lips, his voice dropping to that low rumble that always made my knees weak. "You don't need to be jealous, little one. I'm completely yours."

"Then why did you go see that woman?" The question came out smaller than I'd intended, betraying the hurt I'd been trying to hide.

"I needed to handle some family business, sweetheart. I'll explain everything when we get home, I promise." His voice softened to that tender tone that could melt steel. "Look at me." Reluctantly, I met his gaze as he traced my features with fingertips that had seen their share of violence but touched me like precious porcelain. "I'm yours, only yours, because I love you. I love you so damn much it scares me."

My carefully constructed anger was crumbling, and I might have kissed him senseless if Dr. Zander hadn't emerged from the private room with another physician, both wearing the kind of expensive suits that screamed 'family doctor to the criminal elite.'

"Daniel, glad you made it. Your mother has been asking for you," Zander said, his tone respectful in the way people spoke to dangerous men. "She's quite remarkable."

"She always was," Daniel agreed, though I detected reluctance in his voice.

The other doctor adjusted his designer glasses. "I need to run two specialized tests, so I'm taking Mrs. Martinez to our exclusive wing upstairs. All preliminary results point to labyrinthitis – inner ear inflammation. With the right medication, she should make a full recovery."

"One of our private nurses will escort her, and you're welcome to accompany her. After the tests, I'll authorize her discharge to your family's preferred recovery facility," he added with the kind of discretion that came with treating families who valued privacy above all else.

"Thank God it's nothing serious," I breathed, relief flooding through me.

Zander nodded reassuringly. "Her other test results are excellent, and the injuries from the... incident... were superficial. My part is finished; I'm transferring her care to our ENT specialist."

"Ear, nose, and throat specialist, to be precise," the other doctor corrected with a professional smile before departing.

"You may go in, but please keep things calm. We don't want our patient experiencing any more dizzy spells," Zander cautioned before following his colleague.

As Sybilla and Jude headed toward the door, I moved to follow but was stopped by Daniel's hand catching mine.

"What is it?" I asked, turning back to him.

"Let's go home," he said firmly, and I recognized the tone he used when giving orders to his team.

"Absolutely not!" I replied without hesitation, channeling every bit of Sullivan family steel I possessed. "Your mother is in there, and we're staying until she's released. She needs her family."

"Lila..." Daniel sighed heavily. "It’s complicated. Let me take you home and explain."

"We’re not leaving, Daniel Martinez! You need to stop this ridiculous war with your parents. Walk into that room, embrace your mother, and be the son she raised. She’s in a hospital! What kind of man abandons his mother when she needs him most?"

"The kind whose mother interfered with the woman he loves," he replied, his eyes flashing with old anger.

"Well, if I’m that woman, then you’re going to march into that room, hold your mother, and stay by her side. When she’s better, you can sit down like civilized people and work through your problems," I said firmly, drawing on every lesson in commanding presence my brother Beckett had ever taught me.

"You don’t understand what happened between us," he protested.

"I know you cut ties because your father considered allying with Sasha to break us up, but changed his mind when he learned about my trust fund. But did you ever hear their side of the story? Did you ask if they knew what she was really planning? No. So you’re going to do exactly what I’m telling you. Afterward, we’ll sit down together and sort this mess out like adults, but this family war ends right now." I was practically vibrating with fury.

He stood there processing my words, but then that wicked smile crossed his face as he leaned down to whisper in my ear: "I’ll do whatever you want, but I want this bossy, fired-up version of my Lila in my bed later tonight."

I froze, stunned that he could think about sex while his mother was in a hospital bed. But before I could respond, he took my hand and led me into the room, causing everyone inside to fall silent.

"Son!" Beatrice Martinez’s eyes immediately filled with tears at the sight of her boy.

"Mom," Daniel said simply, crossing to embrace her. I couldn’t hold back my own tears watching this reunion between mother and son, especially given my complicated history with maternal figures.

"Lila, dear," Beatrice called after releasing Daniel. She extended her hand toward me with the kind of gracious gesture that spoke of old money and older power.

I took her outstretched hand, and she pulled me closer, gently touching my face with her other hand in a gesture so maternal it made my chest tight.

"You're my daughter now too," she said with genuine emotion. The connection between us felt real and warm, nothing like the calculated manipulation I'd grown up with. I hugged her, feeling truly accepted for perhaps the first time in my life. "You must be exhausted, sweetheart, and you've missed your classes."

"I said I'd stay with you, and I'm not leaving just because these two finally showed up," I replied with a smile she returned even more brightly.

"I owe you an apology," she said unexpectedly.

"You don't owe me anything. But later, when you're feeling better, if you want to talk, I'll listen. Right now, your health is all that matters."

She squeezed my hand and looked at her son with pure maternal love. "I understand now, Daniel. She truly is extraordinary." In that moment, I felt her complete acceptance of our relationship, and it filled a hollow place in my heart I hadn't even known existed.

Chapter 597: Lila Takes Command

Daniel's POV

Something wasn't adding up. My mother, the iron-willed matriarch of the Martinez crime family, who had spent extensive time orchestrating attempts to separate me from Lila, was suddenly treating her like a beloved daughter-in-law. The transformation was jarring and frankly, dangerous. After all the power plays they had subjected me to—forcing me to mediate territorial disputes in Greenleaf, their relentless schemes to reunite me with Sasha from the allied Mendez family, and my father's outrageous move of having Lila's background investigated by our street contacts—it was impossible to believe they would simply accept a Sullivan family member without some calculated agenda.

When the hospital staff arrived with a wheelchair to transport my mother to another floor for tests, I noticed details I'd missed initially. Her knees and arms were scraped, and her typically immaculate designer dress was dirty and torn. The evidence confirmed she'd genuinely been struck by a vehicle. This wasn't some elaborate setup—my mother would never allow herself to appear disheveled in public unless circumstances were truly dire. Beatrice Martinez was synonymous with untouchable elegance, always perfectly composed even during the bloodiest family meetings.

During the wait for the doctor's assessment, I observed the interaction between Lila and my mother with growing astonishment. They conversed like seasoned allies, with my mother displaying that relaxed, calculating charm she typically reserved exclusively for family business. Meanwhile, Lila opened up about personal matters she rarely discussed with anyone—her complicated relationship with Claire, recent power struggles within the Sullivan organization, and her longing for genuine maternal guidance in navigating our world. She even recounted how she first encountered me at the high-end car dealership that served as one of our money laundering fronts, and how she fell for me despite knowing my family's reputation—a story that never failed to captivate me. The ease between them was both remarkable and terrifying.

The peaceful scene shattered when my father burst into the room, followed by my brother Gregory and sister-in-law Sloane. One thing I've always respected about my father was his unwavering devotion to my mother, even amid the brutality of our business. Regardless of whether he was negotiating territorial agreements or handling family traitors, she remained his absolute priority. At the family compound, they were inseparable—constantly communicating through subtle touches, meaningful glances that could seal someone's fate. He never left for dangerous operations without ensuring her safety and anticipated her every strategic insight. Now, he rushed to her side like a man possessed.

"Darling, how are you? What did the doctor say?" he asked anxiously, grasping her hand after planting a kiss on her cheek.

"He said you should retire from active operations and travel the world with me," my mother replied with mock seriousness. She'd been pushing this agenda for some time, but my father insisted he would only step down when I returned to lead the family business—essentially, never.

"Why would he recommend that?" My father looked genuinely confused. *freom*

"I'm joking. But he should recommend it." My mother smiled reassuringly. "He hasn't brought the test results yet."

"Then I arrived just in time. Has the young woman who assisted you left? I'd very much like to meet her and express my gratitude for protecting you during such a vulnerable moment." My father seemed genuinely eager to thank my mother's guardian—a rare sentiment in our world where trust was currency.

"No, she's remained by my side since the incident. Lila," my mother called, looking toward Lila who had respectfully stepped back when my father entered. As Lila approached, my mother took her hand. "This is my guardian angel, though I believe you two have already been thoroughly acquainted through our intelligence network."

My father's expression shifted dramatically. He glanced at me standing at the back of the room, clearly caught off guard by this unexpected development.

"Lila Sullivan? But you..." He struggled to find appropriate words. "How did this encounter occur?"

As my mother recounted the events, I learned the truth. Lila had discovered my mother in distress on the street—not the other way around. According to their account, my mother had her back turned and couldn't have recognized Lila before the collision. Perhaps I'd been unfair in my suspicions. Maybe this meeting truly was coincidental rather than orchestrated.

"Lila, I cannot adequately express my gratitude," my father said after hearing the complete account.

"There's nothing to thank me for, Mr. Martinez," Lila responded with genuine warmth that could disarm the most hardened soldier. "I'm simply glad I was there to help Beatrice."

"I was completely wrong about you, young lady. I owe you—" My father was about to apologize—a historic moment, as he never apologized to anyone outside the immediate family.

But Lila gently interrupted him.

"You don't owe me anything, Mr. Martinez. Please don't concern yourself." Classic Lila—always giving without calculating returns, a trait that could be either admirable or fatal in our world.

The doctor entered with my mother's test results, confirming labyrinthitis. He provided instructions on activities she should avoid, particularly stress-inducing situations like family meetings, and prescribed medication. When my father inquired about air travel, the doctor approved but recommended waiting until the following day to allow her to rest and benefit from the medication. With all medical instructions carefully noted by both my father and Lila, my mother was discharged. Only then did my father relax enough to acknowledge Sybilla, Xavier, and me properly.

"I'm incredibly glad you came!" He smiled directly at me before turning to Xavier. "Black, excellent to see you again. Is Sybilla still performing admirably in her position?"

"The pleasure is mine, Mr. Martinez. Yes, your daughter excels in everything she undertakes." Xavier responded with the careful courtesy our world demanded.

"That's wonderful! I suppose I really was a blind fool, wasn't I, daughter?" My father opened his arms, and Sybilla embraced him.

"You're not a fool, Dad, just an idiot who can't recognize talent when it's standing right in front of you." Gregory and I laughed—Sybilla always spoke boldly to our father, who would smile and indulge her rebellious spirit. He often said she was the daughter who could manipulate him effortlessly, despite refusing to let her participate in family operations.

"I'm still your father, show some respect." His attempt at sternness dissolved into laughter.

"Then start recognizing what's directly under your nose!" Sybilla retorted with characteristic fire.

"Well, children, thank you for coming, but now I'm escorting my beautiful wife to rest." My father turned to Gregory, "Can you contact the hotel and arrange reservations?"

Before my brother could respond, Lila surprised everyone by speaking up with the authority of someone born into our world.

"You don't need a hotel, you can stay with us. Right, Daniel?" She looked at me with that same commanding presence I'd found irresistible when she ordered me to see my mother.

"Dear, I appreciate the generous offer, but I don’t think that would be appropriate given the circumstances," my father replied, uncharacteristically cautious about family boundaries. I sighed, knowing what needed to be done.

"Dad, you’ll stay with us. It’s better for Mom’s recovery, and we can finally discuss business and resolve everything." The decision was made—or rather, Lila had made it—and now we needed to navigate this dangerous new territory.

"Are you certain about this arrangement?" I couldn’t recall ever seeing my father so hesitant about accepting hospitality.

"I’m sure," I confirmed, bringing a radiant smile to my mother’s face that could have launched a thousand schemes.

"Then we’ll be staying at our son’s residence, Beatrice!" My father declared with satisfaction.

I glanced at Gregory, who was thoroughly enjoying this unprecedented scene and grinning like an idiot. I knew he’d tease me mercilessly once our parents were out of earshot about my girlfriend commanding the entire Martinez family hierarchy.

Lila turned to Gregory and Sloane with the same commanding authority. "You two are welcome to stay as well. We have plenty of space."

"Wait, what?" Sybilla interrupted, her eyes widening in protest. "If everyone’s staying here, then I’m going to Xavier’s place for the night. I refuse to be stuck in a house full of—"

"You’re staying here, Sybilla," Lila cut her off sharply, her voice carrying the unmistakable tone of a mafia daughter who wouldn’t tolerate defiance. "This is family time."

Gregory burst into laughter at the sight of Lila effortlessly commanding his rebellious sister into submission. "I think we’d be delighted to accept your gracious invitation, Lila. On behalf of the family, I accept."

Chapter 598: Questions Demand Answers

Lila’s POV

I refused to let Daniel’s family stay at a hotel. No matter how luxurious the establishment, it would feel cold and detached, especially when their son owned a secure penthouse where they could stay safely. Daniel had welcomed my family with open arms despite the territorial complications between our organizations. It only seemed right to extend the same courtesy to his blood.

I had another agenda too. I wanted to observe the Martinez family dynamics up close and hopefully bridge the gap that had formed when Daniel chose law enforcement over the family business. I needed to hear their version of events and maybe facilitate some reconciliation. If they stayed at a hotel, I knew Daniel would find every excuse to avoid the difficult conversations that needed to happen.

I also recognized that Sybilla was my secret weapon. She seemed to be the only one who could challenge her father without triggering his legendary temper. So bringing them all together under our heavily secured roof made perfect sense, even if it meant temporarily rearranging our carefully orchestrated living situation.

"Well, I’ll bid farewell to you here," Jude announced as we exited the private medical facility. "Mrs. Martinez, truly an honor meeting you. I pray for your swift recovery. You could easily pass as these three’s sister rather than their mother." He bent down and kissed her hand with the old-world charm that marked him as nobility within our circles.

"Oh, Jude, such a gentleman! Men like you are becoming extinct in this business. Thank you, dear. I hope our territories cross paths again under more pleasant circumstances," Beatrice replied with the warm smile of a woman who understood the delicate politics of our world.

For the drive home, Beatrice insisted on riding with me, along with her husband. Sybilla joined us too, while Gregory and his wife went with Daniel in his armored sedan. During the journey through the city’s protected corridors, Sybilla regaled us with stories from her work at the legitimate front companies, emphasizing how much she loved contributing to the organization’s legal operations. I could detect the subtle challenge to her father for never giving her a real position in the family’s core business.

"You know, Lila," Beatrice said thoughtfully, "I’m from a different era. I always believed a woman’s place was managing the household, supporting her husband’s operations, and raising the next generation. But

nowadays, you young women want more – legitimate careers, independence, influence beyond the domestic sphere."

"Mrs. Martinez," I replied carefully, choosing my words with the precision my legal training demanded, "there are still women who find fulfillment in managing homes and raising families – that's invaluable work, no question. But we can handle multiple responsibilities and still be devoted wives and mothers. Some of us need additional purpose beyond family roles to feel complete, especially in families like ours where understanding the law is crucial for survival."

"Yes, I suppose that's the reality now," she sighed. "Do you think about having children, Lila?" The question caught me off guard, though I recognized it as both maternal concern and strategic inquiry about the family's future.

"I do, but not immediately. I want to finish my law degree first – that education is essential for protecting our interests. But yes, I definitely want children. I want to be the kind of mother my brother says ours was before she was taken from us. Family means everything to me, especially in our world where blood loyalty is everything."

"You are young, dear. But Daniel isn't getting any younger – there's quite an age gap between you. You'll need to have serious discussions to find a timeline that serves both your ambitions and the family's needs." Her observation hit home. I knew Daniel yearned to be a father, to have legitimate heirs who could bridge the gap between his law enforcement career and his heritage. We'd pushed the topic aside during recent crises, but eventually, we'd have to confront it.

"You're absolutely right, but we'll find middle ground. Mrs. Martinez, I love Daniel with everything I have – I'd do anything to protect him and honor this family." I had just parked in our private garage, and I met her gaze directly, seeing approval mixed with assessment in her experienced eyes.

"I know you love him, and he loves you. You'll work it out together!" We shared a smile of understanding. "Just don't make me a grandmother when I'm old enough to be a great-grandmother." I laughed at her joke, recognizing the kernel of truth within it about timing and family planning in our dangerous world.

"You're nowhere near old, but I'll keep that timing in mind." We stepped out of the reinforced vehicle just as Daniel parked his sedan beside us. He emerged looking tense, clearly wondering how the ride had gone and what family intelligence had been exchanged.

"Relax, Inspector, we were just planning when you're becoming a father!" I walked away arm-in-arm with Beatrice, hearing laughter from Gregory, his wife, Sybilla, and a stunned Daniel behind us.

"He's completely speechless," Beatrice whispered, triggering more shared amusement between us.

Back at the apartment, we needed to rearrange sleeping arrangements with security considerations in mind. I offered our master bedroom to Daniel's parents and planned to move some of our belongings to the secure middle room. I asked Sybilla to share with me so Gregory and his wife could have her larger room with the reinforced windows, relegating Daniel to the living room couch. But Sloane surprised me with another suggestion.

"No, Lila, we should stay in Sybilla's room, and Daniel and Gregory can share the other secure room. We can talk strategy all night! Do you have extra bedding?"

"Actually, I have a spare mattress in storage. If you're comfortable with that arrangement, I'd love the company."

Daniel helped move the mattress without complaint, understanding the value of allowing the women to bond separately from the men's inevitable business discussions.

Mr. Martinez insisted on handling dinner arrangements, refusing my offers to cook. He contacted a restaurant from their network and even managed to have clothes and necessities delivered from establishments where the family maintained accounts. Everything arrived with military precision.

The women set the table while maintaining awareness of sight lines and exit routes, and we gathered to share a meal filled with stories of Daniel's childhood rebellions against family expectations. Gregory, slightly older than Daniel and bearing a striking resemblance, seemed less conflicted than his brother but more cautious than Sybilla. After dinner, I served coffee in the living room. The atmosphere felt deceptively peaceful until Daniel abruptly broached the subject everyone had been avoiding.

"So, Dad, Lila thinks I should hear your version. I'm listening. Are you going to explain why you tried making a deal with Claire Sullivan, that treacherous snake?" All eyes turned to Daniel. He couldn't wait even one more day for this confrontation. Surprisingly, the only person who didn't seem shocked was Mr. Martinez himself.

Chapter 599: Confronting Reality

Daniel’s POV

I couldn’t fathom Lila’s decision to invite my entire family to our penthouse. The Martinez family patriarch and matriarch dining at our table felt like inviting wolves into our sanctuary. To make matters worse, she’d surrendered our master suite to my parents, relegating me to share the guest room with my youngest brother Gregory. The thought of sleeping without Lila beside me, especially with my family’s presence poisoning our home, made my blood simmer. Still, I’d endure this charade for her sake, since reconciliation seemed to matter to her.

As the evening dragged on, watching my parents conduct themselves as if they’d never conspired against my relationship with Lila made my skin crawl. They sat at our dining table like benevolent family heads, as if they hadn’t allied themselves with that Sullivan family witch to destroy the woman I loved. If listening to their political theater would appease Lila, fine—I’d play along. But their presence here wouldn’t erase the damage they’d caused or change the cold war between us once they returned to their estate.

"Daniel!" Lila’s sharp warning glance cut through my hostility, clearly reading the murderous intent in my expression.

"Little one, they’re here because you insisted. I’ll listen as promised, but we’re settling this tonight. I won’t drag this out until tomorrow." My tone brooked no negotiation, carrying the authority that made both street thugs and corrupt politicians tremble.

"Very well, that’s reasonable!" My father nodded with the measured dignity of a man accustomed to commanding respect in boardrooms and back alleys alike. "Lila, Daniel has every right to harbor resentment toward us. You must understand, I opposed your union because I believed you weren’t suitable for my son—a young woman from an unknown background with no established family connections..." He addressed Lila directly, his political instincts warning him against meeting my predatory stare.

"Mr. Martinez," Lila replied with unexpected steel in her voice, the kind of composure that marked true nobility in our world, "I understand family concern, but forcing your will upon your children through manipulation and conspiracy crosses every line. That applies to you as well, Mrs. Martinez."

Her direct challenge caught me off guard. I hadn't expected her to confront the Martinez family matriarch and patriarch so boldly, especially given their reputation for crushing those who dared oppose them.

"I'm beginning to recognize that truth, Lila." My father offered her a genuine smile—not the calculated expression he wore during family business meetings or political negotiations. "But understand, my controlling nature and territorial instincts don't negate my love for both of you. In our world, weakness invites destruction."

"I understand that philosophy," Lila said quietly, her voice carrying the wisdom of someone who'd survived her own family's treacherous politics. "It's because I believe you're fundamentally protective parents that I convinced Daniel to hear your explanation. And only because I believe your intentions stemmed from misguided loyalty rather than malice that I'm willing to consider moving beyond what happened."

It was clear Lila had already chosen the path of strategic reconciliation—I should have anticipated she'd find a diplomatic solution, given how deeply she valued family unity, even in our corrupt world.

"I want to know exactly what you discussed with Claire Sullivan." My anger flared, remembering how that psychopathic matriarch had orchestrated Lila's kidnapping and brutal treatment. "Every detail of your alliance with that monster."

"Not extensively. We simply agreed your relationship posed problems for both families' interests. She mentioned finding a way to separate you two permanently, and I offered support for whatever measures she deemed necessary. I provided her with my private contact information and left her to handle the details. Lila, I swear on the Martinez family honor that I had no knowledge of her methods or her true intentions." The room fell silent, everyone present understanding the gravity of invoking family honor in such a declaration.

Lila sighed, lowering her gaze to her hands. "You didn't know she'd hire professional kidnappers to snatch me off the street? Didn't know she would have me beaten and tortured? Didn't know she planned to force me into marriage with a much older man—a degenerate who profits from human trafficking?"

"She only mentioned taking you back to the Sullivan estate and arranging a suitable marriage alliance. I assumed it would be with someone from an established family, not some aging criminal with a reputation for brutality." My father kept his voice steady, his politician's training evident. "Lila," he

called until she met his eyes. "I never imagined Claire Sullivan was capable of such savagery. Had I known her true nature, I would never have provided assistance. Despite my belief in controlling my children's choices for family advantage, I never condoned violence against innocents—such methods are beneath the Martinez family standards."

This much held truth. The Martinez family maintained strict codes about civilian casualties and unnecessary brutality, preferring manipulation and financial pressure to physical violence.

"You couldn't imagine? What exactly did you think she would accomplish?" My voice rose dangerously, the rage I'd suppressed for weeks finally erupting.

"Something similar to what your mother attempted with Sybilla—a confrontation, perhaps forcible transportation to family property, maybe confinement until you lost interest. That represented the worst scenario I could envision." My father answered without hesitation, his confession carrying the weight of genuine remorse.

"Let me enlighten you about your ally's true methods." I retrieved my phone, accessing the encrypted files, and placed it before him. "This is the man Claire selected as Lila's husband—a human trafficker and loan shark who's brutalized dozens of women." I watched disgust register on his face before swiping to the next image. "And this is what your partner Claire Sullivan did to Lila. The damage would have been far worse if we hadn't reached her compound in time."

The weight of his choices hung heavy in our dining room, my father's complexion paling as he confronted the photographic evidence. Behind his eyes, I could see shock warring with genuine shame, perhaps the first step toward comprehending the magnitude of his miscalculation. Lila placed her hand on mine, her touch both grounding and compassionate, reminding me why her capacity for forgiveness made her extraordinary in our ruthless world.

Chapter 600: A Father's Regret

Daniel's POV

My father studied the photographs of Lila's injuries from the kidnapping, his weathered face growing paler with each image. The Don of the Martinez family, a man who had ordered executions without flinching, now trembled as he witnessed what his choices had cost. Beside him, my mother pressed a silk handkerchief to her lips, tears streaming down her cheeks. I felt Lila tense against me, her head bowed as if the shame belonged to her rather than the people who had failed to protect her.

"You have nothing to be ashamed of," I whispered into her hair, my arm tightening around her shoulders. "You survived Connor's warehouse. That's what matters."

"This is beyond comprehension," my father said, his voice lacking its usual commanding authority. "Lila, no words can express my regret. I am deeply ashamed of any role I played in allowing this to happen to you."

"I need to know exactly what transpired after your meeting with Claire at the Meridian Hotel," I demanded, unwilling to accept just an apology. The Meridian was neutral territory where family business was conducted away from prying eyes. "Every conversation, every decision you made."

My father straightened his shoulders, falling back into his Don persona. "After our hotel meeting, Claire went silent. I assumed she had abandoned whatever territorial grab she was planning. During this period, I became interested in expanding into legitimate tech investments. A promising company caught my attention with impressive growth potential. As standard protocol dictates, I ordered complete background investigations on the business and its partners. That's when I discovered Lila was one of the primary stakeholders."

He looked directly at Lila, his expression softening. "Learning about your financial independence changed everything. You weren't some opportunist pursuing my son for access to our operations. You were his equal in every sense. That's when I ceased my interference."

"So it was my money that earned your approval, not who I am as a person," Lila stated flatly, still avoiding eye contact. "It always comes back to the family accounts and territory."

"Yes, initially that was precisely my motivation," my father admitted without hesitation. "I won't insult your intelligence by claiming otherwise. I've spent decades protecting my children from those who would exploit our name and resources. But today," his voice gained warmth, "today I see your true character. The way you helped that woman at the hospital, offered assistance without expecting anything in return—that reveals who you really are. You demonstrated compassion and selflessness during a vulnerable moment. And the woman you helped holds significant importance to me personally. You've earned not just my gratitude, Lila, but my genuine respect. Despite everything you've endured, you haven't allowed bitterness or thoughts of revenge to poison your heart."

His honesty impressed me. No deflection, no political maneuvering—just raw acknowledgment of his failures and motivations.

Though I appreciated his candor, fury still burned in my chest. This was my father—the man who had taught me to shoot, who had attended every school function despite his dangerous lifestyle, yet who had also made decisions that nearly cost me the woman I loved. The complexity of these emotions made forgiveness feel impossible.

"When Claire contacted you saying she knew how to handle the Lila situation," he continued, "I told her I was no longer interested in that alliance and warned her that any interference would make her an enemy of this family."

My head snapped toward him. "You knew she was planning something against Lila and didn't warn me? How could you make that choice?"

"I didn't know specifics," he defended. "She merely indicated she had a plan. I believed without our backing, she lacked the resources to act. I didn't press for details because I didn't want that knowledge."

"From your position of power, you assumed she couldn't move against us without your blessing?" I laughed bitterly. "You underestimated what a desperate woman with Sullivan family connections could accomplish."

"Yes," he admitted. "I was arrogant, presumptuous, and dangerously overconfident. That's the truth of it."

"Dad, you really screwed up," Sybilla interjected from across the room where she'd been silently observing. "If I were Lila, I'd have both of you thrown out of here."

My father winced at Sybilla's blunt assessment but remained silent, perhaps finally recognizing the gravity of his mistakes. He turned back to Lila with uncharacteristic humility.

"Lila, we'll leave immediately if that's what you want. I hope someday you might find it in your heart to forgive an old man's arrogance so we can begin again."

"Running away accomplishes nothing," Lila replied firmly, finally lifting her head to meet his gaze. "I'm sure you want to repair your relationship with your son. I don't hold grudges or act from wounded pride. I'm willing to start fresh if your intentions are genuine. I love Daniel, and though I can't speak for his feelings, I'm not going anywhere. It would benefit all of us if we could forgive each other and move forward as a united family."

Her response left me speechless. After surviving Connor's brutality, after learning about the web of lies that had endangered her, her capacity for forgiveness seemed almost otherworldly.

"I won't run from this," my father vowed. "I want forgiveness. I want to be part of this family, and I want you to feel truly welcomed by us."

"Why didn't you tell me anything after learning about Lila's kidnapping?" I needed this answer.

"Because I was a coward," he admitted, genuine pain flickering in his eyes. "I feared exactly what's happening now—that my actions would cost me my son."

Heavy silence settled over the room until I finally addressed my mother.

"And you, Mom? What did you know about Claire's plans?"

"Only about the hotel meeting, nothing more." She dabbed at her tears with the handkerchief. "I don't know what to say except that I desperately hope you can both forgive us. I came here today because I heard you were in the city but didn't visit. Sybilla won't take my calls. I'm your mother—I can't bear this separation from my children."

"Then why can't you accept who we are and respect our choices?" Sybilla demanded.

"Because I was too slow to accept that you've grown up. I'm too proud to admit when I'm wrong. It's difficult for any mother to trust in the job she's done raising her children and allow them to forge their own paths in this life."

"Yeah, you're proud alright. And you're still trying to force me into that arrangement with Grant," Sybilla scoffed.

"That arrangement is absolutely not happening," I exploded, my voice echoing through the room and causing both my mother and Lila to startle. Even Sybilla looked surprised by my vehemence. "I was against it before, but after what I've discovered about that bastard, he's not getting anywhere near you!"

"What do you mean?" My father leaned forward intently. "What have you discovered about Grant?"

I hesitated, having wanted to discuss this revelation with Lila privately first. But events were spiraling beyond my control, and I had no choice but to reveal what I knew. Perhaps this would finally convince my parents to abandon their political machinations involving my sister.