Mafia Mask 601

Chapter 601: Truth Sets Free

Daniel's POV

I opened my mouth to interrupt, but Mom silenced me with a raised hand before I could utter a word.

"Wait, Daniel." She turned toward my sister with the commanding presence that had made her feared in Martinez family circles for years. "Sybilla, I acknowledge my failures, but I'm nothing like that manipulative Claire woman! Yes, I pushed for your alliance with Grant, but I would never have resorted to her extremes."

"Really, Mom?" Sybilla's voice carried the hurt of someone who had witnessed too much family political maneuvering. "Dad told me you were planning to confine me to the family compound."

"I considered it, yes," Mom admitted, her tone carrying the weight of someone accustomed to making hard decisions in our world. "But I didn't act on it, and I won't. I need you to understand something crucial. Before I came here today, I'd already reached a decision. After speaking with Lila at the hospital—even before learning about her true Sullivan family heritage—I knew exactly what needed to be done. So, before your brother reveals what his investigation has uncovered, I want you to know that I'm abandoning all expectations about your marriage alliance with Grant. I won't interfere with your personal choices anymore. If you want to return to the family estate, you're welcome, but if you feel your place is here with the Thorne organization, I'll respect that decision."

We all stared at Mom as if she'd announced her retirement from the family business. Sybilla, Gregory and I couldn't process what we were hearing. In our world, family matriarchs didn't simply abandon strategic marriages without catastrophic reasons.

"Are you being sincere?" Sybilla asked cautiously, her experience with family politics making her wary of sudden policy changes.

"I give you my word, and you know that in our family, once given, it's never retracted." This was true—both our parents had built their reputations on honor and commitment. In the Martinez organization, your word was your bond, and breaking it meant losing everything. "Besides, I think Jude is exceptional, such a capable young man and—"

"Mom, Jude is just a colleague!" Sybilla protested. "We work together at Thorne's legal division, that's all. Don't start planning another alliance! And please don't begin searching for another marriage candidate. I'm perfectly satisfied with my current situation."

Mom gave Sybilla a knowing look, clearly not convinced by the "just colleagues" explanation. I couldn't blame her—working closely within family organizations often led to deeper connections.

"Fine, Sybilla, whatever you say," Mom sighed with the resignation of someone who had spent years orchestrating family strategies. "I've fulfilled my duty raising all of you for this life. It's time I trust that you can navigate our world independently."

"So you're telling me I can make my own choices without family interference, and you'll respect my decisions? Dad too?" Sybilla's face lit up with hope that hadn't been there in months.

"Yes, though that doesn't mean I won't offer my opinion when I believe you're making strategic errors." Classic Mom—she would never stop being the family strategist.

"Lila, I love you!" Sybilla rushed over to embrace Lila with genuine affection.

"I thought I'd be receiving that embrace," Mom said with a hint of wounded pride.

"You're next," Sybilla replied, "but Lila gets the first one because I know she's the reason you're suddenly being reasonable."

"Does this mean you'll speak with me again?" Mom asked hopefully, the vulnerability showing through her usual commanding facade.

"Mom, you were the one who created the distance between us. I love you—you're my mother and always will be—but I can't allow you to treat me like I lack intelligence anymore." Sybilla had transformed since leaving the family compound. She'd evolved into the person she was always meant to be. She embraced our mother, who held her as if she never wanted to release her.

"Well, it’s fortunate you’ve changed your perspective on this marriage business," I interjected, "because my investigation has revealed that Grant has been Sasha’s secret lover for years."

Everyone’s expressions registered pure shock as I revealed everything my detective work had uncovered, including Sasha’s full confession. My parents appeared stunned while Lila remained composed, only showing discomfort whenever Sasha’s name was mentioned.

"How could we have been so blind to this deception?" Mom seemed to be questioning herself and years of family intelligence failures.

"I’ve asked myself that same question countless times," I admitted, reflecting on how Sasha had manipulated everyone in our circle.

"At least now you know I didn’t assist in forging those legal documents," Dad said, looking directly at me with something approaching relief.

"But you exploited the situation to try binding me to her permanently," I countered, unwilling to let him off completely.

"Yes, and I deeply regret that decision." He looked genuinely remorseful, but my trust had been severely damaged by months of family manipulation. "I hope someday you can forgive both of us."

"As far as I’m concerned, it’s water under the bridge, Mr. Martinez," Lila spoke first with the diplomatic grace I’d come to admire. "Let’s leave the past behind us. And Beatrice, I truly enjoyed getting to know you today."

"The feeling is absolutely mutual, Lila!" Mom beamed with genuine warmth.

"Hold up," Gregory interrupted with typical directness. "Sybilla got her freedom, Daniel and Lila got apologies, but what about Sloane and me? You’ve been making our lives miserable with your expectations lately."

"I promise to stop pressuring you about grandchildren. And Sloane, I won't criticize your career choices anymore. I understand that modern women in our world can do more than just manage family social obligations." Mom raised her hand as if taking a solemn oath, and I heard Sloane exhale with obvious relief.

"But you're staying with the family business, Gregory!" Dad quickly established his non-negotiable terms.

"I can accept that arrangement," Gregory agreed, then glanced my way with a smirk. "I'll keep supporting your modest detective salary, since law enforcement pays so poorly compared to family enterprises."

I couldn't help laughing at his familiar jab. Dad had been making similar comments since I joined the police force, as though I needed family financial support.

"What about you, Daniel? You're the only one who hasn't forgiven us yet." Dad looked genuinely anxious about my response.

"I think we all need some rest. Today has been overwhelming, and I need time to process everything." I needed space to think, and more importantly, I needed to talk with Lila privately first.

"You're absolutely right. I am exhausted." Mom picked up on my hint. She understood my tendency to thoroughly consider matters before making decisions, never acting on impulse.

I kept Lila close while everyone said their goodnights and departed. After they all left the living room, I pulled her onto my lap—our preferred position for serious conversations, connected and intimate.

"Thank you for today—for helping my mother and welcoming my family here," I said, holding her tightly. I craved her touch, needed that physical connection after the emotional intensity. "Please don't be angry with me, little one."

"I'm not angry. Now I understand why you confronted that woman." She sighed against me. "But you should have told me before going. I don't like you being around her."

"My jealous girl," I smiled. "You were at college. I needed answers from her to finally close this Chapter. And when I returned, the precinct was chaotic. By the time I could call you, your phone was dead. I was terrified something had happened."

"I didn’t realize my battery died," she explained. "I really like your mother."

"And from what I observed, she really likes you too."

"Will you reconcile with your parents?" she asked, though I wasn’t certain yet.

"Are you really letting go of everything? Can you truly forget what they did?" I needed to know her feelings before answering.

"I already have!" Lila was incredibly forgiving—sometimes I wondered if I deserved her, if I was worthy of someone so good. But I didn’t dwell on it, because I refused to lose her for anything in this world.

Chapter 602: Sacred Daughter Bond

Daniel’s POV

I held my little one close against my chest in the pre-dawn stillness of our fortified penthouse, savoring these stolen moments of peace. The warmth radiating from her delicate frame felt like sanctuary in a world where violence and betrayal lurked around every corner. After the emotional turbulence we had weathered with the Thorne family crisis, we both desperately needed rest.

"Time for bed, little one. Tomorrow you’ll have a houseful of Martinez family members to charm, holiday or not," I murmured against her silky hair. She tilted her face upward, blessing me with that radiant smile that could make even the most hardened mafia enforcer forget his purpose.

"I think we need a bigger place," Lila suggested, her amber eyes sparkling with dreams she was finally brave enough to voice.

I studied her delicate features intently, recognizing the deeper meaning behind her casual words. She wanted our families integrated, wanted to construct a life where the boundaries between the Thorne and Martinez territories could blur into something beautiful and lasting.

"You want a bigger house?" I asked carefully, not daring to sound too eager. When she nodded, my heart hammered against my ribs like gunfire.

"Consider the logistics. There's your parents, your siblings, my father and Gregory. Picture what happens when both families converge for business or pleasure. I'd love to host Sunday family gatherings like Nadia does at the Thorne compound. Have allies over like Ivy and Caleb. And eventually..." she paused, her voice growing tender, "have children, like Gemma and Dominic."

"Children? You mean like Gemma and Dominic, or like Ivy and Caleb?" Hope surged through my veins at her confession.

She rolled those magnificent eyes in the most enchanting way. "I said like Gemma and Dominic, not Ivy and Caleb! Those two have practically established their own private army with kids running around the estate!"

"Whatever you desire, little one. However you envision it. Just swear you'll remain by my side," I said, unable to mask the vulnerability that crept into my voice despite years of training to never show weakness.

"Forever, big guy. That's my sacred vow." She sealed her promise with a kiss that tasted like shared tomorrows and whispered secrets. "Now let's sleep. I have two sisters-in-law eagerly waiting to extract every detail from me."

I chuckled, knowing the women in our circle were probably plotting their interrogation strategy.

Dawn broke with the intoxicating fragrance of imported coffee beans. I entered our dining room to discover a feast worthy of visiting dignitaries from rival families. Lila's legendary carrot cake commanded the center of the table like a golden crown jewel—a culinary masterpiece that could broker peace treaties between warring factions. Following the aromatic trail to our state-of-the-art kitchen, I found my little one barefoot on the marble floors, orchestrating her morning ritual while humming a melody I

couldn’t identify. I encircled her waist from behind, pressing my lips to the sensitive curve where her neck met her shoulder.

"Did you manage any sleep at all?" I breathed against her skin, inhaling her unique scent.

"No. I was missing you," she replied, completing her coffee preparation before rotating to melt into my embrace.

"I missed you too. We should expedite finding that new house." I felt her lips curve into a smile against my chest at my admission.

"Does that mean...?" She left her question unfinished, but I nodded, understanding her unspoken inquiry perfectly.

Her face illuminated with pure joy as she wound her arms around my neck. I claimed her mouth in a deep kiss, lifting her until her legs wrapped around my waist. The granite kitchen counter seemed increasingly inviting, but I remembered the collection of family members occupying every guest room throughout our home.

"Good Lord! Find some privacy!" Gregory’s amused voice shattered our intimate bubble.

"All the rooms are occupied," I replied smoothly, watching my little one’s cheeks flush pink as I reluctantly lowered her to the floor. "Morning, brother."

"Good morning!" Gregory shouldered past me to address Lila directly. "How many supernatural assistants do you employ, Lila?" When confusion flickered across her features, he gestured toward our dining room. "That five-star hotel breakfast spread in there, plus this heavenly cake aroma—how did you accomplish it all before sunrise?"

Lila laughed, the sound like silver bells in a cathedral.

"A master chef never divulges her methods," she replied with an enigmatic shrug, resembling some ethereal being capable of manifesting miracles through pure will.

"Please confirm that’s carrot cake?" Gregory asked with desperate hope, and Lila nodded graciously. "I worship carrot cake! Come on, let’s feast."

"Lila insists everyone gather at the table together," I reminded him, assuming my position against the doorframe like a sentinel.

"And she’s absolutely correct—shared meals are sacred family traditions." My mother swept into the kitchen, gently displacing my brother to embrace Lila warmly. My little one was rapidly ascending to favorite daughter-in-law status. "Good morning, darling. I’m dying to understand how you created that magnificent banquet in our dining room."

"Every accomplished chef protects her trade secrets, Beatrice," Lila responded, returning my mother’s affection with genuine warmth.

"Good morning, my children!" My mother addressed us with a rejuvenated smile. "Everyone’s assembled and waiting at the table."

When we entered the dining room, Sloane, Sybilla, and my father occupied chairs around the exquisitely arranged table. Fresh orchids complemented the artful display of exotic fruits, European breads, imported cheeses, premium cold cuts, decadent pastries, and freshly squeezed juices. My father immediately rose, placing a respectful kiss on Lila’s cheek—a gesture reserved for family.

"Lila, at what ungodly hour did you rise to orchestrate all this?" Sloane inquired, gesturing at the elaborate spread.

"I’m naturally an early riser, Sloane. It’s simply ingrained habit. Besides, I find tremendous joy in preparing the table for family," Lila explained thoughtfully. "My grandmother instilled in me that nourishing people represents one of life’s most profound expressions of love. When we prepare sustenance for someone, we’re declaring their significance to us."

She paused, her gaze growing distant with cherished memory. "She would reference a mother nursing her infant—providing nourishment from her own essence—as the ultimate demonstration of devotion and care."

"That’s profoundly beautiful, Lila," Sloane whispered, visibly moved.

"This represents the first meal I’m offering to this family," Lila continued, meeting my parents’ eyes with earnest sincerity. "You matter deeply to us, and you’re welcome in our territory. This breakfast serves as my gesture of goodwill, respect, and genuine affection."

My mother’s eyes glistened with unshed tears. My father, seated beside her, took Lila’s hands in his weathered ones and placed reverential kisses on each palm.

"You are now our daughter," he declared with quiet authority.

I observed this sacred moment, my heart swelling with pride and gratitude. My father had performed this ritual only once before—when Gregory had announced his engagement to Sloane. This ceremonial gesture carried more weight than outsiders could comprehend, officially inducting the woman I loved into our family’s inner circle and protection.

Chapter 603: Family Bonds Restored

Daniel’s POV

I couldn’t help but notice how skillfully Lila was navigating the treacherous waters of my family’s complex dynamics. My mother, despite her usual calculating nature as the matriarch of our organization, had fallen completely under Lila’s spell. Even my father, the ruthless patriarch who had built our political-commercial empire through decades of strategic manipulation, was regarding her with genuine respect rather than his typical assessment of potential assets or liabilities. Despite my earlier fury over their interference in my personal affairs, I had to acknowledge that securing my family’s approval was infinitely preferable to maintaining the cold war that had fractured our alliance.

I had made my position absolutely clear that I would not tolerate any further meddling or shows of disrespect toward Lila, and they seemed to have finally grasped the seriousness of my threat. In our world, family unity wasn’t just about blood bonds, it was about survival and maintaining our grip on power.

"I've been reflecting on everything we discussed yesterday," I announced, commanding the attention of everyone seated around the mahogany table in our private dining room. Beside me, Lila's lips curved into that encouraging smile that never failed to steady my resolve. "I'm putting our past conflicts behind us and dismantling the barriers I've erected between us, Dad. You now understand that Lila is the center of my universe, and I will annihilate anyone who dares to harm her or attempt to drive a wedge between us. I trust you comprehend that she represents my salvation, the woman who owns my heart, and that you'll honor my decisions without question."

"Does this mean we've earned your forgiveness?" My mother's eyes glittered with hope, though I detected the shrewd calculation that never fully disappeared from her gaze. In our family business, even maternal affection was a strategic consideration.

"You were absolved the moment I walked through the hospital doors. Lila had already determined that I would pardon your transgressions," I admitted with complete honesty. That's precisely how it unfolded, she made the executive decision, and if she could extend mercy to them and broker peace, then I could follow her lead.

"You've undoubtedly secured the perfect partner," my father declared, his smile carrying the weight of decades spent orchestrating alliances and acquisitions. "I once encountered a quote stating that the right woman enters a man's life and repairs everything that's fractured. I couldn't find myself in stronger agreement."

After considering his words, I recognized their truth. Lila was indeed mending every damaged aspect of my existence, from my strained family relationships to the hollow spaces in my soul that police work alone could never fill. My father rose from his chair and approached with open arms, a gesture that in our world carried significance beyond mere affection. I embraced him wholeheartedly, because despite their ruthless methods and the countless times they had ignited my rage, these people remained my blood, my foundation in a world where loyalty meant the difference between life and death.

"Thank you, son," he murmured against my ear, his voice thick with emotion that I rarely heard from the man who commanded respect from politicians and judges alike.

"You'll need to come here for your mother's embrace," my mother called out, delicately dabbing at her eyes with a silk handkerchief. "I'm feeling somewhat lightheaded to stand." I crossed the room and gathered her into my arms. "Oh, darling, I've been tormented by your absence."

"I have several additional matters to address," my father announced with the authoritative tone that had silenced boardrooms and intimidated adversaries for decades. We all exchanged weary glances, anticipating one of his legendary pronouncements that could reshape our entire operation. "Relax, I'm not delivering a corporate manifesto," he chuckled, observing our reactions. "First, Sybilla, I want you to understand how immensely proud I am of the independent life you're constructing and your professional achievements at Thorne's organization. Whenever you're ready, there's a position waiting for you within the Martinez Collective. That enterprise belongs to you and your siblings, it represents the legitimate legacy I'll bequeath to the next generation. I'll restore everything I confiscated when you fled our compound, your personal effects, your shares in our various holdings, a new vehicle to replace the one abandoned in Greenleaf. I'll assist you in securing your own secure residence so you're not imposing on your brother's hospitality. And incidentally, I believe Wright shows considerable promise as a potential ally."

"Dad!" Sybilla protested, though I caught the flush creeping up her neck. "He's merely a business associate. But I appreciate your offers. I'll remain here temporarily, and I don't require assistance finding accommodations, but I'm grateful for the remainder of your proposal." I observed the emotional impact in her expression at finally earning our father's acknowledgment, something that in our family structure carried weight beyond mere parental pride.

"Daniel, my pride in you runs equally deep. You possess determination, courage, and unwavering principles that have served you well both in law enforcement and in protecting what matters most. I won't continue pressuring you regarding joining our primary operations. I understand your fulfillment lies elsewhere, and your happiness is paramount to me. The door remains permanently open should you reconsider, but I won't persist with my expectations." His declaration left me momentarily speechless. This represented the ultimate proof of his willingness to transform, to prioritize family bonds over business expansion.

"Finally," he continued, "I'm formally announcing my retirement from active leadership. I discussed this decision with your mother last evening, and she's expressed a desire to explore the world beyond our territory. You're all aware that I exist to fulfill my wife's wishes above all else. I'll maintain my presence at the Collective for several more months to ensure a smooth transition to Gregory, then step back to enjoy life with your mother."

Gregory nearly choked on the piece of cake he'd been discretely consuming while we resolved our family drama. Sloane had to strike his back forcefully as he coughed with bulging eyes, clearly unprepared for this sudden elevation in responsibility.

We all stared at my father in stunned silence, processing the magnitude of this announcement.

My mother smiled with deep satisfaction, and I recognized that this decision ultimately originated from her desires. As my father stated, he lived to grant her every wish. In that fundamental way, we shared remarkable similarities. I existed to provide whatever my little one wanted.

"Are you completely serious, sir?" Gregory finally managed to ask between recovered breaths.

"Absolutely! Prepare yourself thoroughly. Soon, you'll assume the presidency of Martinez Collective. Meanwhile, I'll dedicate myself to becoming the world's most formidable grandfather. With two daughters-in-law in our family, I might soon be fortunate enough to welcome a grandchild or two into our legacy." My father's joke caused Sloane to choke on her juice while Lila merely smiled with knowing amusement.

"Dad, you made promises!" Gregory complained while assisting his wife's recovery.

"We promised to avoid interference, not to ignore the subject entirely," my father replied with a charming wink directed at my mother. "Now, let's enjoy some coffee. Everything appears delicious. Are these artisanal cheeses from your family's operation, Lila?"

"Yes, my brother ensures weekly shipments. And I won't feign modesty, they're the finest you'll ever experience," Lila replied, her pride in her family's legitimate business enterprises evident in her tone.

"I'm well aware of their quality. They're essential items in our household inventory. I'm a devoted customer," my father said, helping himself to cheese, toast, and a generous portion of coffee. "But you must share your coffee preparation secret, it's truly exceptional."

"Another treasured recipe from my grandmother!" Lila smiled warmly, her genuine affection for family traditions touching something deep in my chest.

I felt profound contentment observing how events were developing. When I returned from Greenleaf yesterday, I never anticipated everything would resolve so organically. I shouldn't have been surprised that my mother and Lila connected so effortlessly. Lila possessed an irresistible magnetism that could charm even the most hardened personalities in our dangerous world.

Surveying the table where everyone laughed and conversed happily reminded me of joyful gatherings from my youth, when we'd share meals and stories, creating precious memories before the weight of our family's true business became my burden. I realized my heart had found peace, the consuming anger that had driven me for so long finally dissipated.

They were correct about forgiveness, it benefited the one who granted it more than the recipient. I felt lighter and more content after resolving these longstanding issues with my family. As Lila had wisely counseled, we were beginning anew. Though young, she possessed remarkable intelligence and wisdom that surpassed her years.

All of this confirmed something crucial I needed to accomplish, and in a very special way that honored both our backgrounds. I would require assistance, but I knew many people would eagerly help me create something unforgettable.

While sipping my coffee, I was already formulating a detailed plan in my mind, one that would solidify our future in a manner worthy of our combined legacies.

Chapter 604: The Grand Reveal

Lila's POV

As evening descended over the city, the Martinez family finally departed from our penthouse. We had spent a pleasant, albeit tense day together. After our morning meal, we had decided to visit the Thorne family's private club downtown, with Sybilla insisting that Jude accompany us. However, something felt distinctly off throughout the entire day.

I noticed Daniel repeatedly slipping away to engage in hushed conversations with his brothers, sister-in-law, and Jude. Their behavior seemed suspicious, as if they were harboring some collective secret about family territory or business dealings. This pattern of covert discussions continued all day long.

I patiently waited for Daniel to reveal what was happening, but he remained frustratingly tight-lipped. When I finally questioned him directly, he claimed they were merely discussing his parents' potential relocation and how his father Gregory had observed concerning changes in rival family movements recently.

His explanation didn’t quite ring true, but Daniel expertly diverted my attention. He showered me with the kind of possessive affection that made my knees weak—a gentle kiss along my neck here, a commanding touch at my lower back there—until I completely forgot my concerns as he kept me thoroughly distracted well into the night.

Thankfully, work at Thorne’s legal department moved at a manageable pace the following day, as exhaustion had settled deep into my bones. To my delight, I only needed to make a brief appearance at law school before officially beginning my vacation from both my studies and my cover position.

"Ready to go, Sybilla?" I called out, already prepared to leave as Sybilla emerged from her corner office at Thorne headquarters.

"Yes, let’s get out of here. Today was absolutely brutal. You and my brother kept me awake half the night with your activities, and then Xavier decided to dump a mountain of contract reviews on me. Apparently, he’s planning extended negotiations with our European partners." Sybilla looked exhausted, her usually perfect posture betraying the stress of managing both legitimate business and our more delicate family arrangements.

"Wait for me, ladies!" Jude appeared from the adjoining office, adjusting his custom-tailored jacket. As one of Thorne’s top financial advisors, he handled the intricate web of investments that kept our operations running smoothly. "Where are we headed?"

"I’m stopping by the law school for my semester’s final meeting. Just need a quick discussion with my professor about my internship requirements, and then I’m officially on vacation," I replied cheerfully.

"I’m going straight to bed. These two," Sybilla jabbed a finger in my direction, "made sleep absolutely impossible last night. Listen, Lila, I adore you and my overprotective brother, but living in that penthouse has become unbearable. Those reinforced walls might as well be paper when it comes to your nighttime activities." Sybilla repeated her usual complaint, making heat rise to my cheeks. But what could I possibly do when her brother made me lose all self-control with his expert touch? His hands, his mouth, everything about Daniel was designed to make me surrender completely.

"Earth to Lila!" Jude called out, laughing at my obvious distraction. "Just mention the inspector and she drifts into complete fantasy. Sybilla, I’ve already offered multiple times—come stay at my secure apartment."

"Jude, everyone in the families already suspects something between us. If I move in with you, we'll never hear the end of the gossip!" Sybilla protested.

"So what? Let them talk," Jude replied with that dangerous smile that reminded everyone he wasn't just a financial advisor. "Satisfaction guaranteed in all arrangements." He winked suggestively, causing me to burst into laughter despite myself.

"Jude!" Sybilla exclaimed, horrified. "We're supposed to be business associates!" Jude and I continued laughing at her flustered reaction.

"Relax, I'm mostly joking. Though I wouldn't object if you were genuinely interested." Jude was clearly enjoying watching her squirm. Sybilla playfully slapped his arm, making him laugh harder. "But the offer to relocate is completely genuine. We work well together, and I enjoy your company. Plus, my place doesn't feature midnight performances or furniture percussion concerts."

"Behave yourselves!" I feigned annoyance, though I couldn't deny the truth—Daniel did make me exceptionally vocal, and our specially reinforced bed had indeed been creating quite the symphony against the wall.

"Come over tonight, Sybilla. We'll watch old movies, devour ridiculously expensive imported snacks, and fall asleep sprawled across my Italian leather furniture," Jude suggested.

"You know what? Let's do exactly that!" Sybilla handed me her car keys. "Just take me home to grab a few things first, then drop me at Jude's building."

After saying goodbye to them at Jude's secure high-rise, I headed to campus. I completed my meeting with the professor, said farewell to my study group with plans to reconnect next week, and returned to the penthouse. Upon arrival, I found Daniel pacing anxiously across our spacious living room, repeatedly checking his expensive watch.

"Well, where is my devastatingly handsome inspector heading looking so incredibly dangerous?" I asked as I entered. He wore black jeans that hugged his powerful thighs perfectly and a black dress shirt tucked in precisely. The shirt emphasized his impressive biceps, with rolled-up sleeves and several strategically open buttons revealing just enough of his chest to make my mouth water.

"There you are!" Daniel embraced and kissed me with the intensity that always left me breathless. "I thought you were just having a brief word with your professor."

"I was, but my study partner and I got caught up discussing some interesting case law. Is something wrong?" His restless energy concerned me, especially after the mysterious conversations from yesterday.

"Not at all. We're going out for dinner tonight," Daniel explained, seeming simultaneously excited and nervous in a way that was entirely unlike his usual composed demeanor.

"Any particular reason for the celebration?" I inquired carefully.

"Yes—celebrating my beautiful girlfriend officially starting her vacation and having the next few months to come home early to me."

"That's definitely worth celebrating," I agreed warmly.

"Absolutely. I would have asked Sybilla to give us complete privacy tonight, but I actually find it amusing seeing her irritated in the mornings because you kept her awake with your responses to my attention."

"My fault? Are you completely certain about that assessment? I think your particularly intense rhythm is the real culprit here."

"I'm not the one calling out my own name," he teased with that predatory smirk that made my knees weak.

"But you're definitely the reason I do," I countered breathlessly.

"And you love every single moment of it." He kissed my neck with deliberate precision, sending electricity down my spine. He wasn't wrong—I absolutely loved every second. "Tonight when we return, I promise to make you call out my name several times over."

"Let me shower quickly then."

A short while later, I rejoined him in the living room, dressed in something I hoped would meet his approval.

He took my hand, told me I looked absolutely stunning, and led me outside to his car. Our conversation during the drive distracted me so completely that I only realized our destination when he stopped the vehicle.

"Are we visiting someone from the families?" I asked, noticing we had arrived at the exclusive condominium complex where several Thorne associates lived, including Ivy and Caleb, Gemma and Dominic, and Xavier.

"No," he replied simply, proceeding forward after the security gate recognized his clearance. "We're here for something entirely different."

"And what exactly might that be?" He just glanced at me with that mysterious expression as we continued along the winding private road.

"This," he finally said as he parked the car, pointing toward an elegant house standing before us in the gathering twilight.

Chapter 605: Territory Unclaimed

Lila's POV

The moment our armored SUV pulled through the gates, I caught my breath. The estate before us was absolutely breathtaking—a stunning fortress-like mansion with elegant stone pillars and bulletproof glass windows. Its colonial architecture complemented the rich limestone exterior, and strategic floodlights illuminated every corner of the compound, making it glow like a beacon of power against the evening sky.

"Ready to go in?" Daniel had already stepped out and opened my door, his hand instinctively checking the concealed weapon beneath his jacket. I'd been so captivated by the sight that I hadn't noticed him moving.

"Whose territory is this?" I asked, stepping out. The compound was located just behind Xavier's Thorne estate—I'd never seen it during my previous visits to the family grounds.

Daniel's lips curved into that dangerous smile I'd grown to love. "Nobody's yet. But someone could claim it—depending on what you decide." When confusion crossed my face, he added, "You mentioned needing more security than my downtown penthouse."

"More security, yes, but this..." I gestured toward the magnificent stronghold, unable to hide my awe. "This is a fortress fit for a crime family."

"Don't you want to explore it?" His expression held a hint of disappointment, the same look he got when rival families questioned his authority.

"Of course I do," I replied quickly. "I just wasn't prepared for something this grand." The truth was, I feared falling in love with a place that represented the kind of permanence I shouldn't allow myself to dream of in our world.

We wandered through the mansion, each room more impressive than the last. Spacious bedrooms with reinforced walls led to bathrooms equipped with panic rooms. The living areas were designed for both elegant entertaining and quick defensive positioning. When we reached the kitchen, I nearly gasped—it was enormous, with commercial-grade appliances surrounding a gorgeous marble island that could double as a command center.

"I saved the best for last," Daniel announced, guiding me through reinforced doors into what felt like an impenetrable sanctuary. "The master suite. It's completely soundproofed and bulletproofed." His voice dropped to a suggestive tone. "I could make you scream my name all night, and even with famiglia business meetings downstairs, no one would hear a thing." He chuckled, his eyes darkening with that predatory desire that made my knees weak.

I barely registered his words. The bedroom was spectacular—three bulletproof glass walls showcasing the secured gardens outside, two walk-in closets that could fit my entire wardrobe several times over, a bathroom with hidden weapons compartments, and a sitting area complete with fireplace and surveillance monitors. The renovation had brilliantly merged old-world famiglia elegance with cutting-edge security technology.

We continued our tour through so many rooms I lost count—safe rooms, meeting chambers, even a private office equipped with encrypted communication systems. Finally, we stepped outside to the pool area—an enormous expanse of blue water surrounded by meticulously maintained grounds that could host famiglia gatherings. The mansion wrapped around the pool in a U-shape, creating a secure courtyard that felt both luxurious and strategically sound.

"Xavier's estate is just down there," Daniel pointed toward the neighboring Thorne compound visible from our elevated position. "What do you think, little one?" He wrapped his arms around me from behind, turning us to face the illuminated mansion, his body automatically positioning to shield me from any potential threats.

"It's incredible, Daniel. Perfect in every detail." I leaned back against his chest as he pressed soft kisses along my neck, his touch gentle despite the deadly strength in his hands. "We could host famiglia gatherings, alliance meetings, and still have room for our own privacy." I felt his lips curve into a smile against my skin. "But it's enormous. Maybe we should look at reinforced penthouses instead."

This mansion represented something more than just safety—it was a declaration of permanence in a world where loyalties shifted like sand. Despite our deepening relationship, we were still navigating the dangerous waters between our families. A persistent fear lingered in my heart that he might grow tired of me and walk away, especially with Sasha's legal claim still hanging over us like a death sentence.

"What are you afraid of?" he asked softly, his instincts reading my thoughts the way he read potential threats.

"That you'll leave me." The truth escaped before I could filter it, vulnerable as a confession in enemy territory.

Daniel sighed and gently turned me to face him. His eyes held the same unwavering determination I'd seen when he faced down rival crime bosses, one hand caressing my cheek while his other arm secured me against him like he was protecting his most valuable asset.

"That's impossible," he declared before claiming my mouth in a kiss so intense my knees weakened. He held me firmly, preventing me from collapsing as his lips demanded everything from me while giving everything in return. The message was clear—I was his territory now, permanently marked and defended.

"Understand?" he asked when we finally separated, both breathless. I could only nod, feeling branded by his possession. "You never need to fear that, little one. Nothing in this world—not rival families, not legal complications, not even death—could make me abandon what's mine."

"Really?" I whispered, uncertainty still clinging to me like shadows. From the beginning, I'd dived headfirst into loving him, knowing the risks. But this mansion triggered a different fear—before, I thought if he left, I could gather the pieces of my heart and treasure our memories. Looking at this beautiful fortress, I knew if he abandoned me here, I'd never recover.

"Really, Lila. It's only been you. From the first moment I saw you in that Thorne office, you became the only thing that gives meaning to this dangerous life. Why doubt that now?"

He pressed another kiss to my lips—gentle, sweet, and brief, like sealing a blood oath.

"Because losing you would destroy me completely. Because Sasha will always exist, and legally she still has a claim on you. And—"

"There she is—my jealous little queen," he interrupted with a tender smile that transformed his dangerous features. "Sasha belongs to the past, and that's where she'll stay. I needed to handle her legal manipulations to protect our future, which I've done. She's finished now. I can't erase the political marriage my father arranged, but that was before you became my everything. I don't need to acknowledge her anymore. Every legal complication has been resolved. I'm yours alone, little one. Trust me." He pulled me into a fierce embrace.

"I do trust you," I whispered, fighting back the burn of tears. My heart remained unconvinced.

"Come on. Let's have dinner, and we can discuss claiming this territory afterward."

But we never returned to the subject. After dinner, he took me back to our secured penthouse where he claimed every inch of me with passionate devotion, marking me as thoroughly as any famiglia would mark their territory. The mansion wasn't mentioned again—not that night, nor in the days that followed.

Chapter 606: Into the Den

Claire’s POV

How far I have fallen! After spending decades clawing my way to the top of the Sullivan family empire, look at me now—trapped in this revolting cell, forced to wear this hideous orange uniform and these disgusting plastic sandals. I absolutely despise cheap footwear! My once perfectly styled auburn hair now shows several inches of gray roots, and my previously immaculate manicured nails are chipped and broken. What a complete disaster!

"Prisoner, face the wall and put your hands through the slot behind you." A heavyset woman in a guard uniform appeared at my cell door. Whoever claimed that dark colors are slimming clearly never saw this woman—she looked like an overstuffed cushion wrapped in that black uniform.

"Why? Do I have a visitor?" I asked, keeping my chin raised. I never bowed to anyone, not even in this hellhole.

I had been expecting Justin to visit. It had been some time since my ungrateful son seized control of my legal affairs and vanished without a trace, never bothering to inform me whether he had liquidated the estate. That incompetent public defender came with some ridiculous story about Justin selling my mansion and luxury vehicles before fleeing the city, but I refused to believe such nonsense.

Justin would never betray me like that.

"This ain’t a hotel, lady! Today isn’t visiting hours. You’re being transferred to general population," the guard said with a cruel smirk.

"What population? What are you talking about?" These people spoke in some crude dialect I could barely comprehend.

"You’re going to bunk with three other inmates. Now do what I ordered, and make it snappy."

"Share quarters with others? Dear God, things just keep deteriorating! It’s not sufficient that I’ve been trapped in this filthy cage, now you want to throw me in with three complete strangers? Absolutely unacceptable!"

The guard released a harsh cackle that only aggravated me further.

"Lady, the cell is what we call a ’house’ around here. That’s prison terminology."

"Lord preserve me, what crude language you people employ."

"Well, you better start learning it fast. Everything has a different title in here. Now turn around—I’ve wasted enough time on your royal highness already."

"Why do I need to—" The guard interrupted me mid-sentence.

"TURN AROUND RIGHT NOW, DAMMIT! I’M NOT YOUR PERSONAL ASSISTANT!" She bellowed so forcefully I decided to comply. I didn’t understand the hierarchy here yet. I had only arrived at this correctional facility recently when they shoved me into that disgusting solitary cell. Better to observe and determine how to manipulate the system later.

The guard dragged me from the cell and shoved me down the corridor. Two additional guards trailed behind us, examining me from head to toe before beginning their vulgar commentary.

"This one thinks she’s aristocracy—look at that disgusted expression while she inspects everything," one guard remarked.

"Wait until she gives that attitude to the Slasher. She’ll get her face rearranged real quick!" the other responded. They erupted in laughter, leaving me wondering who this "Slasher" character might be.

After navigating through multiple corridors and entering another wing, I observed rows of cells. The guard transferred me to another officer who escorted me to a small chamber and commanded me to disrobe.

"What kind of asylum is this?" I protested immediately. I wasn’t about to strip naked before this stranger.

"Don’t test me, princess. Remove the uniform now. I need to conduct a full body search," she barked while pulling on a latex glove.

Reluctantly, I removed my clothing and endured the most humiliating ordeal of my existence. It was more degrading than any medical examination I had ever experienced.

Afterward, the woman instructed me to redress and pushed me out the door.

"She’s all yours. Cell twelve," she informed two waiting guards.

They marched me to a cell at the end of a hallway and thrust me inside, securing the bars before removing my restraints.

"There you go! The princess will be calling this house home for quite some time. Your cellmates will return soon—they’re at yard time, but you’re staying inside today," one guard explained.

"Yard time? Is there recreational facilities here? Do we sunbathe?" I asked, horrified at the thought. My complexion would be destroyed without proper sun protection.

"This one’s completely clueless. Listen, princess, yard time is your brief time outside the cell each day. A pathetic amount of time in the courtyard to mingle," the guard replied, adding a warning before departing. "Take whichever bunk is available, and don’t touch anyone else’s property unless you want serious trouble. The Slasher is your cellmate, and she’s dangerous news."

"Dangerous news? What does that mean?" I shouted, but the guard had already departed.

I remained alone, leaning against the concrete wall. The bed had a paper-thin mattress without linens. When I had arrived, besides this uniform and sandals, they had provided me one roll of toilet paper, a bar of soap, a toothbrush, and toothpaste—all terrible quality. The toilet paper felt like sandpaper against delicate skin. I needed to contact Justin; he was my only salvation.

Examining this cramped space designed for four people, I noticed the concrete bunks arranged like two sets on opposite walls. At the rear of the cell was an opening in the floor. No, it couldn't be what I suspected. I noticed a pipe extending from the wall and only a partial barrier separating these fixtures from the rest of the cell.

What was this place?

Suddenly the cell door opened. Three women entered, and to my shock, I recognized one of them. Finally, something favorable—surely she would assist me.

"Well, look who's checking into our luxury resort, ladies!" Aria displayed a smile.

"Aria! Thank heavens—someone I know. I need your assistance," I said, stepping toward her.

"Funny thing, Claire. I needed assistance too, and what did you do? You disappeared! The attorney said you never paid him and vanished." Aria's expression hardened. Perhaps she wouldn't be so accommodating after all.

"Slasher, is this the woman who left you hanging?" one of the others inquired.

"Slasher? That's your nickname? And what's this about abandoning you?" I asked, bewildered.

"God help me, this one's going to be problematic!" Aria pressed her palms against her face in frustration. "Pay attention to how we communicate in here. 'Leaving someone hanging' means making promises and disappearing—exactly what you did to me. And yes, I'm the Slasher. Earned that name because of what I accomplished outside and because I'm always cutting someone down in here."

"Cutting someone down?" I began to worry that being near Aria might be perilous.

"If someone disrespects me or crosses me, Claire, I leave their pretty face looking like a shredded puzzle. Comprehend?" Aria stepped closer, intimidating me with her glare. "Let me introduce my companions. This is Mocha—poisoned her spouse with contaminated chocolate milk. He was victim number six. And this is Guts-ripper. I don't think I need to explain her specialty."

I examined Guts-ripper with her bulging eyes and nearly toothless grin, the few remaining teeth ranging from yellow to black.

"They call me Guts-ripper ’cause I like openin’ up stomachs and pullin’ out what’s inside... got nine while I was free... heh heh heh..." The terrifying woman cackled, her speech as broken as her dental work.

"Mocha, show our new roommate around the estate," Aria commanded, clearly the leader of this bizarre group. Mocha was an enormous woman with disproportionately large chest and surprisingly narrow hips, resembling a top-heavy bowling pin.

"Here, Madam, is your sleeping quarters, with this lovely view of the cell across the corridor." She indicated the bottom bunk. "The top one belongs to Slasher. On the other side, the top is mine and the bottom is Guts-ripper’s. Here is our spa—a shower with three temperature options: cold, freezing, and no water whatsoever." She pointed to the pipe on the wall.

"No water?" I asked, and she laughed.

"When the plumbing breaks down, Madam! And here’s the throne." She pointed to the opening in the floor.

"Throne? What throne? I don’t see any furniture. It’s just a hole. What is that for? And please tell me where the restroom is—I desperately need to use it. In my previous cell, there was no restroom, and at the police station, an officer would escort me when necessary."

"Well then, Madam, make yourself comfortable. See the throne?" I stared blankly, and she chuckled while shaking her head. "That hole in the floor. That’s our beautiful toilet. No seat, just squat and do your business, Madam. That’s all we have."

She walked away as I stood frozen, staring at the opening and wondering how I would use such a primitive facility.

Actually, how was I going to survive in this nightmarish place at all?

Chapter 607: Stains of Doubt

Lila’s POV

The anxiety had been eating at me ever since Daniel rushed back to his family’s territory to deal with Sasha and her forged marriage documents. Something felt wrong, and I couldn’t shake the dread settling in my chest. If their divorce was legitimate in the first place, why did her lies through corrupted judges matter so much to the Martinez family hierarchy? What troubled me more was how Daniel had been behaving lately—hushed conversations with Sybilla about family business, returning to our penthouse later than usual, and stepping away to take encrypted calls that seemed far too urgent for routine police work. The pattern felt disturbingly familiar, like the calm before a storm in our world.

Sure, he still wrapped me in his arms every night and whispered those three words that made my heart race, but something fundamental had shifted. That stunning estate we’d toured together in the Thorne family’s protected district? He hadn’t mentioned it since, nor had he brought up expanding our living arrangements. The more I analyzed his recent behavior through the lens of mafia protocol, the more convinced I became that perhaps the Martinez family was pressuring him to distance himself from the Sullivan bloodline complications.

"Lila! Stop destroying your nails!" Sybilla swatted my hand away from my mouth with the authority of someone raised in the same ruthless environment.

We were alone in the fortified living room, watching that tactical operations show she obsessed over, waiting for Daniel to return from whatever Thorne family meeting had kept him occupied. I gave her a blank look, not realizing I’d been unconsciously biting my nails again—a nervous habit I’d developed recently.

"You haven’t absorbed any of this episode, and you definitely didn’t process what I just told you about the new security protocols." She paused the screen and pivoted toward me with the sharp focus that ran in the Martinez bloodline. "Come on, what’s really bothering you?"

"Something’s wrong," I blurted out, deciding to confide in her. After everything we’d been through with the kidnapping and the revelation about my true parentage, we’d moved beyond mere friendship into something resembling sister territory.

"Wrong? What exactly do you mean?" Her expression shifted between genuine confusion and something that looked suspiciously like the guilt I'd seen on faces during family interrogations.

"Your brother. He's acting strange—returning home after midnight, walking away to take calls that sound like they involve more than police business, and sharing all these confidential family matters with you that he won't discuss with me."

I narrowed my eyes, pointing accusingly at her with the instinct for reading deception that came from growing up in the Sullivan family's web of lies. "I know something significant is happening."

"Se-secrets? With m-me?" Her voice pitched higher as she stammered in a way that would never survive a real family tribunal. "You're imagining things, Lila. Just because we handle Martinez family logistics together doesn't mean—"

"Aha!" I exclaimed, rising to my knees on the Italian leather sofa and leaning toward her like a prosecutor closing in on a witness. "There IS something you're both hiding from me!"

Sybilla's eyes widened as she jumped up from the couch with the defensive posture of someone caught in a compromising position. "Stop it, Lila! There's nothing secretive happening!" She stood with her hands planted on her hips in a stance that screamed guilt. "Do you seriously think I'd cover for my brother if he was conducting family business behind your back? Come on!"

"I think that's exactly what you're doing," I challenged, standing to face her with the confrontational skills I'd learned for navigating our world. Her nervous energy radiated the unmistakable signature of someone who'd been caught red-handed in a family conspiracy.

The doorbell's distinctive chime broke our standoff, and Sybilla practically sprinted toward the entrance with relief that was far too obvious. I didn't miss her audible exhale of gratitude for the interruption.

"Jay!" she greeted with enthusiasm that seemed forced even by Thorne family standards of hospitality.

"Well, someone's unusually happy to see me tonight," Jude responded, pulling her into an embrace that lingered longer than the casual friendship they typically maintained. "I came by to see if you want to

catch that new crime thriller downtown, Sybilla. Hey there, Tiny Cipher! Where's our favorite detective hiding himself?"

"Not back from his meetings yet," I answered with the glumness that came from too many evenings spent wondering about the Martinez family's latest power plays. "You two better not abandon me here alone with all this security system paranoia!"

Jude laughed, exchanging a meaningful glance with Sybilla before they both offered synchronized shrugs that looked rehearsed. They had barely settled into the conversation area when Daniel walked through the reinforced door, his presence immediately commanding the room's attention.

"Wright, are you planning to establish permanent residence in my building or something?" Daniel teased with the easy confidence that came from controlling territory.

"Not the worst idea I've heard, detective. Been wanting to escape my current arrangement anyway," Jude replied with the casual tone that masked deeper Thorne family politics.

"You can't even finalize the divorce paperwork Nora submitted through her family's legal channels months ago. As if you could actually relocate from your current obligations," Sybilla scoffed, turning away with theatrical drama that didn't quite hide her genuine frustration.

"And why exactly does Jude's marital situation concern you so intensely?" Daniel needled his sister with the pointed precision of someone trained in interrogation techniques.

"He's my friend," she defended with passion that suggested their relationship had evolved beyond simple alliance. "I care about his wellbeing, and he's suffering unnecessarily because of family politics."

"By his own choice," Daniel pointed out, moving to sit beside me with the fluid grace of a predator claiming his territory. He pulled me against his chest, wrapping his strong arms around my waist with possessive gentleness. "And what about you, my little one? Worried about Jude's domestic complications too?" He kissed me lightly, his playful mood masking whatever stress he'd been carrying from his family obligations.

"No, I’m too busy worrying about you," I retorted, pulling away slightly to study his face for tells. "Especially when you return home with lipstick on your collar—lipstick that definitely doesn’t belong to me."

Daniel froze with the stillness of someone who’d just realized they’d been caught in a tactical error.

I extracted myself from his embrace and walked toward our bedroom, fighting the burning sensation behind my eyes as tears threatened to spill. So this explained his recent behavioral changes. I headed for the master bathroom, desperate to lock myself away before the emotional dam burst completely. He caught up with me before I could escape, moving with the swift precision that made him legendary in both law enforcement and family circles.

"Hold it right there!" Daniel trapped me between his powerful body and the marble bathroom wall, his presence overwhelming in the confined space. "You cannot jump to conclusions without gathering all the available intelligence first. You need to ask direct questions and listen carefully to my complete explanation."

"Listen? There’s lipstick evidence on your collar, Daniel!" My anger flared with the intensity that came from too many betrayals in my past. "Don’t treat me like I’m some naive outsider who can’t read the obvious signs."

"There’s a logical explanation for that mark, and it has nothing to do with what you’re assuming." His gaze held mine with the steady intensity of someone telling the absolute truth. "Come on, Lila. This defensive reaction isn’t characteristic of your usual behavior. You’re not typically prone to jealousy or insecurity. What’s really driving this fear?"

"You tell me, Daniel. For days I’ve watched you conducting whispered conferences in corners with Sybilla, returning home after midnight from mysterious meetings, stepping away to take encrypted calls that sound like high-level family business. The last time I witnessed this exact pattern of behavior, I discovered a naked woman in our bedroom." My voice cracked with more profound sadness than pure anger, revealing the deep wounds that past manipulations had left behind.

"Alright," he said, his tone shifting to the calm but unshakeable authority he used during the most serious family negotiations. "Look directly into my eyes and listen carefully to what I’m about to tell you, because I need you to remember these words permanently." He maintained his protective hold on me, his composure striking even in this charged moment. "I am not a man who betrays trust or manipulates emotions for personal gain. I thought you understood that fundamental truth about my character by

now. I acknowledge that my recent conduct might appear suspicious from your perspective, so I'll accept this jealousy as a reasonable response to not having complete information about my current obligations. But I don't believe I've given you any substantial reason to doubt the depth and exclusivity of my love. Or have I?" His dark eyes searched mine with an intensity that seemed to peer directly into my soul.

"No, Daniel," I sighed, feeling my resistance crumble under the weight of his sincerity and the undeniable connection that had survived every test our world had thrown at us. "I don't doubt your love for me."

Chapter 608: Trust and Surrender

Lila's POV

Daniel and I stood facing each other in the marble-floored bathroom of his penthouse, the weight of unspoken truths hanging between us like smoke from his father's Cuban cigars. His dark eyes searched mine with that penetrating intensity that made me feel like he could see straight through to my soul, the same look that had first captivated me when we first met. He gave me space to process his words before speaking again, his voice carrying the authority that commanded respect in both the underground and legitimate worlds.

"Now that we've cleared that up, will you tell me why you're so consumed with insecurities? I know you, little one. You're rational and level-headed. This jealousy isn't like you—something's triggered it."

My voice emerged as barely a whisper, cracking under the weight of my deepest fears. "I'm just... I'm terrified."

"Terrified? Of what exactly?" His calloused thumbs brushed against my cheekbones with surprising gentleness, erasing the tear tracks that betrayed my vulnerability. These were the same hands that could dismantle criminal enterprises and command fear from seasoned mobsters, yet they treated me like precious porcelain.

"That you'll wake up one day and realize I'm not enough. That someone more captivating, more beautiful, more interesting will come along and—"

His mouth crashed against mine, silencing my fears with the kind of kiss that reminded me why the Martinez heir had chosen me over every socialite and mafia princess who had ever thrown themselves at his feet. The kiss was deep and consuming, his powerful arms enveloping me completely against his chest. The tenderness in his touch melted every defense I'd built around my heart, illuminating every dark corner of doubt that had taken root there. It felt as if he was drawing the fear directly from my soul, replacing it with the certainty of his devotion. When he finally pulled away, he lifted me effortlessly in his arms, carrying me from the bathroom to his bedroom where he settled into the leather armchair with me cradled in his lap like a treasured possession. He released a heavy sigh before meeting my gaze, his eyes brimming with an emotion so raw it took my breath away.

"Lila, how can I make you understand that you're everything I never knew I needed? You exceed every expectation, every desire, every dream I've ever had. You're far more than I deserve. You are my only certainty in this chaotic world where loyalty is bought and trust is a luxury. I've never wanted anyone or anything the way I want you. Sometimes this love feels too vast to contain within me, like it might tear me apart from the inside. If anyone should be insecure, it's me. You're breathtaking, brilliant, perfect—and I'm just a flawed, battle-scarred man significantly older than you, carrying the weight of a family name stained with blood and corruption. I live in terror that someone your age will appear and make you realize what you're missing by binding yourself to the Martinez legacy. I have no guarantees, little one. I was your first in so many ways, and someday you might want..." He paused, seeming unable to complete the thought that clearly tormented him.

A short, bitter laugh escaped him. "I'm completely at your mercy, and I always have been."

"No one could ever take me from you," I insisted, my fingers tracing the strong line of his jaw where tension had gathered. "I don't see anyone else. You are my everything, Daniel—the beginning and end of my world. I'm just petrified I won't be enough to keep you satisfied when you could have any woman in New York's high society."

"My beautiful Lila, where is this coming from? You've been distant for days, pulling away from me, and I couldn't figure out why. I thought perhaps the reality of being involved with someone from my world had finally sunk in."

"It's because you sought out Sasha for explanations," I admitted, finally voicing the fear that had been eating me alive from the inside. "If she truly meant nothing to you anymore, why would you need her explanations? I've tried to understand, tried to be rational about it, but I can't help thinking that maybe you haven't fully let her go. Maybe part of you still wonders what might have been."

To my complete surprise, Daniel burst into rich laughter that rumbled through his chest.

"Tiny one, Sasha is no threat to you. She never could be. I pursued those explanations precisely to close that Chapter definitively, to burn every bridge that connected me to that manipulative woman. I'm a detective—investigating and satisfying curiosity is second nature to me, especially when it involves threats to what I hold dear. I didn't want unanswered questions about her betrayal lingering in my mind like poison. I needed to understand what went wrong, whether I was at fault in some way, so I don't make those same mistakes with you. I couldn't bear losing you to my own stupidity. Getting closure allowed me to remove her from my thoughts completely and focus entirely on our future."

His expression sobered, the playful amusement replaced by something darker. "And honestly, the abortion revelation devastated me in ways I didn't expect. The knowledge that she terminated three pregnancies that could have been my children, my legacy, without even consulting me... That affected me profoundly—I needed to understand her reasoning, needed to know if I'd driven her to such desperate measures."

"And do you now? Understand her motives?" I asked, beginning to comprehend his actions through a clearer lens.

"Yes. I discovered that Sasha is nothing more than an empty vessel who acted purely out of selfishness and financial interest. She saw pregnancy as an inconvenience to her social climbing, nothing more. How could you believe such a hollow, soulless person could lure me away from you? It's inconceivable, little one. She lacks everything that makes you extraordinary."

"What about the lipstick, Daniel? The one I found in your car—it's still not mine."

He smiled with genuine amusement, reached for his phone with practiced ease, and sent a message to someone in his network.

"Give me a moment," he requested. While we waited for a response, his fingers traced lazy patterns along my arm, his lips pressing tender kisses against my hair in that possessive way that always made me feel cherished. His phone chimed shortly after with an incoming message. "Here, watch this."

I viewed the security footage with audio, absolutely astonished by what I witnessed—a clear recording of his secretary attempting to seduce him in his office, leaving behind evidence of her desperate advances.

"Does this happen often?" I asked with righteous indignation.

"Never before, and I've already arranged for her immediate reassignment to our Seattle operations. She won't be bothering us again. Tiny one, you're the only woman in my life, the only one who matters."

Relief washed over me like a cleansing wave, but one persistent concern remained lodged in my mind. "Then why all the secrecy lately? What aren't you telling me about your family's business?"

I felt him tense beneath me, his muscles coiling with barely contained stress, confirming my suspicions that dangerous waters lay ahead.

"For that, you'll need to trust me completely. Can you do that, little one?" He asked, brushing his nose against mine in that intimate gesture that always made my heart skip.

"Alright, I trust you," I conceded, knowing that loving a man like Daniel Martinez meant accepting that some secrets were too dangerous to share.

His lips claimed mine possessively as he stood with me in his powerful arms, carrying me toward the bed with predatory grace.

"That's what I like to hear," he murmured against my mouth, his fingers already working at the buttons of my clothing with skilled precision.

Chapter 609: Banished to Wasteland

Daniel's POV

I was putting the finishing touches on my surprise for my little one, reviewing the final details of a legitimate business acquisition that would serve as my wedding gift to Lila. As the day approached, my nerves were getting the better of me. I clicked through the modified contracts, hoping this surprise would bring joy to my partner's face.

The sound of several knocks interrupted my concentration. I called out permission to enter, knowing it couldn't be Lila who never bothered with formalities in our police station. Someone stepped inside, but I remained focused on finalizing the paperwork. The distinct click of the lock turning caught my attention, and I immediately looked up.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I growled, feeling my temper flare.

"Hello, handsome! Surprised to see me? I'm the newest addition to Adler's police team." The irritating woman from our affiliated security unit – the same one who had previously cornered me during a department gathering – stood before me with a smug expression.

Her appearance was entirely inappropriate for our police force's professional standards. She wore jeans so tight they seemed painted on and a uniform blazer stretched to its limits across her chest. Her makeup was excessive for legitimate police work, with bright red lipstick and dangling earrings that would become hazardous during any law enforcement activities.

"First of all, address me with proper respect. Second, if you're assigned to Adler's team, you have no business in my private office. Get out."

"Why don't you make me leave, handsome?" Her voice grated on my nerves. I glanced at the door, noticing the key was gone. When I reached for my desk phone, she yanked the cord, disconnecting it. Before I could grab my cell phone, she snatched it and tucked it into the back of her pants. "It's just you and me now, pretty boy."

"I'm wondering how a woman of your caliber made it into our police force. Actually, I apologize to actual professionals of the night! You're just a vulgar, classless woman who wouldn't even succeed in that profession!" I stood, towering over her.

She laughed, stepping closer. "That's it, detective, call me names. I enjoy it."

"Lord help me. You're absolutely tasteless," I said, shaking my head in disbelief.

"Stop pretending you're not interested. I know you find me attractive. Everyone does, because I truly am." Her predatory gaze made my skin crawl. "Getting assigned to this police station wasn't easy, but I

performed a small favor for the academy administration, and they pulled some strings. I needed to see you again because we have unfinished business."

"For heaven's sake! Don't delude yourself, woman!" I ran my hands over my face in frustration.

"Don't act coy. I'm offering myself to you, and I know you want me. Everyone does! Look at me – a real woman! Beautiful, sexy, fragrant, and I can do things that will drive you wild!"

"You couldn't be more mistaken! I despise vulgar, easy women like you! You're repulsive! Now return my phone and the key and leave my office immediately."

"That's not happening. I always get what I want, and I want you. I won't leave unsatisfied." I snorted in disbelief at her audacity. "You're so tense, Martinez." She ran her fingers along my arm, making my skin crawl. "I'll help you relax. When I'm riding you, you'll forget all your worries."

She lunged at me so suddenly I barely had time to react. I turned my face away to avoid her kiss, feeling her lips brush against my cheek. Though she was tall, I managed to restrain her without causing injury, quickly securing restraints around her wrists and attaching them to the wall fixture specifically installed for interrogating uncooperative suspects.

I examined the phone cord and found she'd damaged it beyond repair. Left with no choice, I approached the door and delivered a powerful kick, splintering the reinforced wood on the first try.

Bella and Gideon were passing by and stopped to observe the commotion.

"Need assistance, Daniel?" Gideon asked as I continued dismantling what remained of the door.

"Actually, yes. Gideon, please find Adler and bring him here. And Bella, I need your help." They looked at me curiously. "There's a trashy woman in my office who's hidden my phone in an inappropriate place, and I don't even want to imagine where she's put the door key."

Bella smirked and exchanged glances with Gideon. I sighed heavily.

"Bella, could you please conduct a thorough search on this woman and retrieve my phone? She can keep the key since I've already destroyed the door." I pleaded.

"Is this woman by chance the new security recruit on Adler's team?" Bella asked, grinning.

"The very same!" I confirmed.

"Oh, I'll take great pleasure in this search!" Bella laughed and turned to Gideon. "I told you I'd teach that woman a lesson if she tried anything with you again." She walked past me. "Got gloves, Martinez? I'm concerned about hygiene issues."

"Second drawer of my desk, Bella!" I chuckled and looked at Gideon. "Possessive partner?"

"Extremely! But I wouldn't have it any other way!" Gideon laughed. "I'll get Adler. Looks like we're losing our new officer before she even starts."

"Good riddance!" I leaned against the wall outside my office, listening to the woman's protests and Bella's firm commands to stay still during the search.

"All done, Martinez. Phone recovered!" Bella called out, and I reentered my office. "Fair warning – it needs sanitizing!"

"I'm not touching that until it's clean. Could you ask the cleaning crew to disinfect it thoroughly? Please?" I asked Bella, who laughed.

"Only because you gave me the satisfaction of searching that woman!" Bella departed laughing just as Adler arrived.

"I knew you'd be trouble the moment you set foot in my police station!" Adler looked at the restrained woman with disgust.

"Adler, I was harassed!" She put on a tearful expression, but Adler just laughed.

"Look at this, Daniel. Now she’s playing innocent!" Adler chuckled and I realized he’d already reviewed the security footage. "Listen carefully," he said, pointing to a small black dot in the ceiling corner. "Smile for the camera!"

The woman composed herself, snorting before fixing me with a challenging stare.

"Are you gay, Martinez?" She asked mockingly.

"I would have no issue admitting it if I were, but that’s not the case. I’m simply faithful, and I don’t find shallow, easy, classless women appealing." I responded. She spat in my direction, but I dodged.

"Well then. You’ll be escorted from my police station and banned from returning. Tomorrow morning, report to the academy administration. You’ll be dismissed. Our police force doesn’t need officers who tarnish its reputation."

"Dismissed? That’s absurd! But—" Adler silenced her with a gesture.

"I’ve already sent the incident report and footage to the academy head. Your choices are dismissal or reassignment to what we affectionately call ’the wasteland’ – a delightful little territory across the state where absolutely nothing happens. You’d be stationed there for many years, possibly until retirement. Your choice." Adler was masterful at delivering punishments.

"Please, Adler, I’ll take the remote posting, but don’t let them dismiss me. I need this position." She looked terrified at the prospect of losing her standing.

"Very well!" Adler clapped his hands together. "Only because I’m feeling generous! You’re going to ’the wasteland.’" He laughed and summoned a security officer. "Please escort our former officer off the premises."

As the woman was being removed, Bella returned with my phone.

"Sanitized, Martinez! What’s happening to her, Adler?"

"She’s going to ’the wasteland,’" he replied.

"Why not the northern territories?" Bella asked indignantly, referring to our most isolated and dangerous outpost – a true punishment assignment.

"Because the lieutenant currently stationed there is my friend, and I’m quite fond of his wife. They don’t need this burden." Adler laughed and headed for the door. "We’ll fix your door tomorrow, Martinez!"

Chapter 610: Dreams Exposed

Lila’s POV

Katarina’s early morning call pulled me from sleep. She was practically vibrating with excitement about the upcoming year-end celebration at the Thorne family estate. Daniel’s parents from the Martinez family had confirmed their attendance, along with his brother and sister-in-law from the East Coast operations. Jude would be joining us for the entire holiday break, while Gemma, Dominic, Ivy, Caleb, Zoe, Finn, and MP would arrive for the New Year’s Eve gathering. Xavier was extending his Paris assignment at Caleb’s request, meeting with European associates and key clients in their overseas money laundering operations. Sybilla was pretending to be fine with this arrangement, but I could tell she was disappointed about not seeing the Thorne family’s consigliere sooner.

After helping Katarina coordinate some security details for the gathering, I was fully awake. I completed my morning routine and headed toward the kitchen for coffee. Walking through the hallway of Daniel’s fortified penthouse, I heard Sybilla’s voice, which seemed odd given the early hour. I quietly approached her partially open door and peered inside.

"Xavier, that feels incredible... mmm..." Sybilla was talking in her sleep, clearly having vivid dreams about the Thorne family’s brilliant strategist.

This was too perfect to ignore. I slipped into her room and started recording with my phone. Evidence was essential when dealing with someone as stubborn as Martinez family princess Sybilla.

"Yes, right there, Xavier... oh, that’s perfect..." She wore a blissful smile that would make any mafia daughter jealous. "Xavier, kiss me..."

"Tiny one!" Daniel's voice boomed from somewhere in the apartment, his cop instincts making him project his voice like he was commanding a crime scene.

"AAAAHHH!" Sybilla screamed as she jolted awake, tumbling off the bed with a thunderous crash that probably woke half the building. "Lila, have you lost your mind? You nearly stopped my heart!"

The commotion brought Daniel bursting through the door with the force of a SWAT raid, making it slam against the wall hard enough to rattle the expensive artwork.

"What happened? Is everyone safe?" His expression was pure tactical alertness, like he was ready to eliminate any threat to his territory.

I couldn't contain myself. Laughter exploded from me so violently that I slid down the wall until I was sitting on the marble floor, clutching my stomach. Both Martinez siblings stared at me like I'd completely lost my sanity.

"Your girlfriend has gone completely insane!" Sybilla complained, rubbing her hip where she'd landed. "Damn it, I landed right on my tailbone."

"Why all the screaming?" Daniel demanded, his detective instincts scanning between us for answers.

"Because I woke up with this lunatic hovering over me with her phone pointed at my face." Sybilla glanced at my device, realization dawning on her face as I met her gaze with a knowing smirk.

"Sybilla talks in her sleep," I explained once my laughter subsided. "I thought it was entertaining, so I recorded it for future reference."

Sybilla's face went completely white, like she'd just been caught in a federal wiretap.

"She's done that since childhood," Daniel said with a casual shrug. "Whenever she's obsessing over something she wants desperately or when she's under pressure, she talks in her sleep. Comes with the Martinez family paranoia."

"Is that so? How fascinating..." I grinned wickedly. "Come on, I'll make coffee. Good morning, Inspector."

"Good morning, beautiful little one." Daniel swept me into his arms with the confidence of a man who owned half the city, and I wrapped my legs around his waist as he claimed my lips.

"Hey! Take that back to your own territory. Not in my bedroom," Sybilla protested as I giggled against Daniel's mouth.

"You know what? Coffee can wait. What do you say we return to our private quarters, Inspector? The morning is still young." The suggestion clearly pleased my powerful detective.

We retreated to our bedroom, and when I finally made it to the kitchen later, Sybilla was already dressed in her sharp business attire, coffee in hand, looking every inch the Martinez family princess.

"Why didn't you go back to sleep? It's incredibly early," I asked, noticing her exhausted yawn.

"Impossible to rest with you two making the bed frame hit the wall like machine gun fire," she replied with a mischievous half-smile. "Is my brother really that skilled in all areas?"

"Your brother is absolutely extraordinary, Sybilla," I laughed. That detective was pure perfection in every way.

"Sometimes I wish I had a man that extraordinary," she sighed, absently stirring her coffee with the melancholy of a mafia princess denied her heart's desire.

"Like the one starring in your dreams?" I teased mercilessly.

"I have no idea what you're referring to." Her attempt to deflect was completely predictable.

"I'm referring to this masterpiece!" I played the video for her, watching her face drain of all color like she'd just been threatened by a rival family.

"Morning, ladies." Daniel walked in just as Sybilla nearly dropped my phone trying to stop the playback.

"You're particularly jumpy today," he observed, taking my coffee mug with the casual authority of a man who commanded respect from both sides of the law.

"I'm exhausted. It's impossible to get proper rest in this fortress," Sybilla complained, making Daniel laugh with genuine amusement.

"Get soundproofing, because my little one is beautifully vocal!" he said with pride.

I swatted his muscled arm playfully, and he kissed me behind my ear with tender possession. "I need to leave for the precinct. Have a productive day and stay protected." He gave me a quick but thorough kiss and paused at the doorway. "Tiny one, don't forget I love you!"

My heart melted completely at his public declaration. I ran to him and delivered a kiss worthy of a classic film.

"Show-off," Sybilla muttered after he left for his police duties.

"Absolutely! But now, let's discuss Xavier. We've been dancing around this conversation for too long."

"What's there to discuss when you already possess all the evidence?" She rested her chin in her hand, staring miserably at her empty mug.

"I can make educated guesses, but I want to hear the truth directly from you."

She released a deep, defeated sigh. "I didn't want this complication, Lila, but I'm completely captivated by him. I've always been drawn to him. But he doesn't reciprocate these feelings. He barely tolerates my presence because of Daniel. Please keep this information confidential."

"Of course I would never betray your trust. But Sybilla, he just ended his relationship with Ruby recently, and he was genuinely serious about her. You'll only end up devastated. You need to find strategies to move forward."

"Don't you think I've attempted that? I've watched him with countless women over the years. I've had casual encounters, even a serious boyfriend, but I cannot shake these feelings."

"Maybe it's simply infatuation? He's your brother's closest associate, you grew up with him around the family business, and he's undeniably gorgeous."

"Lila, my ex-boyfriend ended our relationship because I called him 'Xavier' during intimacy. And you want to know what's worse? I only dated him to try forgetting Xavier. We were together for a long time, and absolutely nothing changed. Do you understand how hopeless this situation is?"

"Damn, you're really in deep," I squeezed her shoulder, realizing the situation was far more serious than I'd initially thought.

"Even when he's completely cold to me, I still want him. I don't understand the psychology behind it."

"My grandmother always said the heart follows its own mysterious and often destructive path."

"I've considered leaving Thorne Group, but I genuinely love working in the legal division. Plus, you and Jude are there," Sybilla admitted with the vulnerability rarely shown by Martinez family members.

"Let's head to the office and see how things develop today. If it becomes truly unbearable, I'll speak with Dominic about finding you another position within our network."

"You would actually do that for me?"

"Absolutely, but I believe you'll manage just fine."

Sybilla hugged me tightly, her pain radiating through her composed exterior. Her suffering was genuine, and all I could offer was my unwavering support and friendship while she navigated these dangerous emotional waters in our complicated world.