Mafia Mask 531

Chapter 531: Intimate Authority

Daniel’s POV

The evening had been pleasant enough, but my thoughts kept circling back to the mounting tensions within our interconnected families. Lila, perceptive as always, noticed my distraction the moment we entered our penthouse sanctuary.

"That scowl isn’t from your police cases, detective. What’s really troubling you?" she asked, closing our bedroom door and guiding me toward the leather armchair.

"It’s about Sybilla and Jude," I admitted with a heavy sigh, knowing how unconvincing I sounded.

Lila settled onto my lap, her caramel eyes searching mine. "Those two are just friends navigating complicated family politics. Besides, that’s definitely not what’s causing that deep furrow between your brows."

"They’ve been inseparable lately. Jude’s divorce from that Thorne family arrangement is getting messy, and the last thing I want is Sybilla caught in the crossfire when the Martinez and Thorne families start pressuring for different alliances," I explained, trying to articulate the complex web of mafia politics weighing on my mind.

"Daniel," she said, her voice gentle but firm, "you need to let your sister chart her own course through these family obligations. Are you planning to control her choices the same way your father controls his business associates?" Her observation cut straight through my protective instincts, hitting uncomfortably close to home.

"You make a valid point," I conceded, tracing my fingers along her delicate jawline as her eyes fluttered closed. "Ready for sleep?"

"Not quite yet," she replied, eyes opening with a mischievous glint. "I have something else planned for tonight."

"What might that be?" I asked, curiosity piqued by the playful tone in her voice.

"Just stay exactly where you are." She slipped off my lap with a tantalizing smile that promised mischief.

She moved to our king-sized bed, switching on the soft glow of the imported Italian bedside lamps before dimming the overhead crystal chandelier. Music began to fill the room from our concealed sound system as she made her way back toward me with deliberate, graceful steps. Her body swayed to the rhythm as she began removing her designer clothing piece by piece, each movement calculated and enticing. Soon she stood before me in nothing but her silk lingerie and Italian leather sandals.

Placing one delicate foot on my thigh, she waited as I unbuckled her sandal with practiced ease, removed it, and set it aside carefully. She offered her other foot, and I repeated the process with the same attention. My hands found her slender waist, pulling her close enough to press my lips against her stomach, inhaling the expensive French perfume that had become intoxicating to me.

"Are you feeling particularly playful tonight, little one?" I asked, noting the dangerous sparkle in her eyes that reminded me why she was perfect for this life.

"Perhaps a little," she replied, bending to give me a deep, lingering kiss that tasted of the vintage wine we'd shared earlier, before resuming her sensual performance.

With deliberate slowness, she unhooked her silk bra, allowing it to slide away and reveal her perfect breasts. She approached again, took my hands in hers, and guided them to the waistband of her matching panties. After helping her remove them, I pulled her closer, inhaling her intoxicating scent while trailing kisses across her hips, stomach, and lower, savoring every inch of her porcelain skin.

She grabbed the velvet cushion behind my back, tossed it to the marble floor, and pushed me to lean back in the chair before gracefully kneeling before me, her caramel eyes darkened with desire and something more possessive.

Her intentions were crystal clear. She unfastened my Italian leather belt with skilled fingers, opened my tailored pants and tugged them down with my assistance, then freed me from my silk underwear. Her fingers wrapped around me, stroking slowly as she moistened her lips in anticipation. Her mouth

descended, pressing a kiss to the tip before her tongue traced patterns that drew an involuntary groan from deep in my chest.

"Careful with the volume, detective," Lila teased, glancing toward the soundproofed walls. "I don’t need Beckett making awkward comments over breakfast." I laughed, knowing full well she was typically the vocal one during our encounters.

Her fist maintained a steady rhythm at the base while her mouth worked magic, her eyes locked with mine in a gaze filled with desire and the kind of possession that came naturally to our world. The combination of her hand and mouth soon pushed me over the edge, my release captured completely by her eager ministrations.

Afterward, she rose and settled back onto my lap, kissing me deeply, our tongues entwining in a passionate dance that allowed me to taste myself on her lips, a reminder of her complete devotion.

"My turn now," I said, lifting her into my arms with the strength that came from years of police training and family enforcement duties, positioning her on her knees in the leather armchair, facing away from me.

I removed the remainder of my clothing and knelt behind her on the imported Persian rug, parting her legs to taste her sweetness. My tongue explored her most sensitive spots, drawing increasingly urgent sounds from her that echoed softly off our penthouse walls.

"Remember to keep quiet, little one," I echoed her earlier warning with amusement. "We wouldn’t want Beckett commenting at breakfast." She laughed softly, covering her mouth with her manicured hand.

I continued my attentions, adding my fingers to the mix until she shuddered with pleasure, her cries muffled behind her palm. Rising, I leaned close to her ear, my breath hot against her skin.

"Did you enjoy that?" She nodded, still catching her breath. "Good, because there’s more to come. You might want to keep that hand ready."

Lila obediently covered her mouth again as I positioned myself behind her. I teased her entrance, sliding along her slickness without entering, a delicious torture that had her pushing back against me impatiently. Her eagerness made me chuckle, and I delivered a quick smack to her perfect backside.

"Stay still. It's my turn to take control," I commanded with the authority that served me well in both my professional and family duties, and she removed her hand from her mouth.

"What if I don't?" she challenged, eyes sparkling with the kind of defiance that had first attracted me to her.

"Then you'll get another," I warned. She immediately rocked her hips provocatively, and I delivered another firm spank that drew a moan from her. "Cover that mouth, you beautiful troublemaker."

She complied but continued to move enticingly against me, earning herself another controlled spank that made her moan louder despite her attempts at silence.

"So eager tonight. Do you need me that badly? Or is it the discipline you're craving?" I asked, continuing to slide against her without entering, maintaining the exquisite torture.

"Both, in equal measure," she confessed with a sly smile that reminded me exactly why this woman was perfect for navigating our dangerous world. Her admission shattered what remained of my restraint.

I entered her in one powerful thrust, my hands gripping her waist with possessive strength. Her head fell back, eyes closed in ecstasy. I established a forceful rhythm that had her calling my name and demanding more with breathless urgency. When her breathing changed and her interior muscles began to pulse around me, I knew she was close. She pushed back against me, taking me deeper as she reached her peak, her inner walls clenching around me and triggering my own powerful release.

We remained there, breathing heavily, as I leaned forward to place a tender kiss on her shoulder. She turned to look at me, our eyes meeting in a gaze that communicated everything words couldn't express about our bond.

"What have you done to me, detective?" she murmured with a contented smile.

"We’re just getting started," I promised, lifting her into my arms and carrying her to our bed, where I intended to continue worshipping every inch of her responsive body until dawn broke over our city.

Chapter 532: Dangerous Revelations

Daniel’s POV

Lila lay wrapped in peaceful sleep, her breathing soft and even against the silk sheets. I chose not to wake her after our passionate night that had stretched until dawn. Sleep remained elusive for me as my mind churned over the territorial threats closing in around us. I slipped quietly from our bedroom and made my way to the kitchen, where hushed voices drew my attention. Beckett and Katarina sat huddled over steaming coffee cups, their conversation carrying the weight of family business.

"Well, look what the famiglia dragged in," Beckett remarked when he spotted me, gesturing toward the dark circles shadowing my eyes.

"What can I say? Your sister has very high standards," I shot back with a knowing smirk. His expression immediately soured.

"Christ, spare me the details," Beckett groaned, making an exaggerated show of disgust. "Though I appreciate you two keeping the volume down last night." I couldn’t help but grin, remembering Lila’s valiant attempts to muffle her responses to my touch.

Katarina slid a ceramic mug across the marble counter toward me. "Where’s Lila now?"

"Still recovering from exhaustion," I replied, shooting Beckett a pointed look that made him huff dramatically.

"Perfect timing. We need to discuss some troubling intelligence," Katarina’s expression shifted to the serious mask she wore during family strategy sessions.

"What’s the situation?" I asked, immediately switching to my inspector’s mindset.

"My mother received some disturbing information through her network. Her housekeeper maintains connections with Connor's domestic staff – Connor being the casino boss whose son Claire keeps pushing toward Lila," Katarina explained as I nodded, piecing together the territorial implications. "The housekeeper overheard Connor bragging to another underboss about his real intentions. He's not planning to marry Lila to his son. He wants her for himself."

"That sick bastard!" I slammed my mug down hard enough to rattle the counter, fury blazing through my veins. Katarina quickly gestured for silence. "Has Claire completely lost her mind?"

"She's nothing but poison, Daniel," Katarina stated coldly. "We debated whether to inform Lila directly or let you decide how to handle this family threat."

"This is absolutely insane," I growled through clenched teeth. "That woman refuses to accept defeat."

"She never has," Beckett agreed with a weary sigh. "And now she's got serious muscle backing her plays. If Connor wants my sister that desperately, he'll throw his entire operation behind Claire's schemes."

"We need to end this permanently," I declared, seeing only one path that would guarantee Lila's safety.

"Any strategic ideas?" Katarina asked, her eyes fixed intently on mine.

"Yes. I'm going to make Lila my wife," I announced.

Beckett shook his head firmly. "She'll refuse if she thinks it's just another arranged marriage to avoid Claire's machinations."

"For God's sake, Beckett, do you seriously think I'd marry your sister just to outmaneuver those vultures?" I snapped, my irritation flaring. My devotion to Lila transcended any political maneuvering or family alliance.

"I understand your motives," Beckett said calmly. "But my sister inherited our family's stubborn streak. If she discovers Connor's true plans beforehand, she'll reject your proposal, convinced it's motivated

purely by strategic necessity. And if she learns about it afterward, she'll torment herself wondering if your feelings were genuine."

"Damn it," I muttered, dragging my hand across my jaw. "I'll find a way to convince her without revealing the immediate threat."

"Actually, we do have some promising news," Katarina interrupted, her expression brightening considerably.

"I could definitely use some," I grumbled.

"That key you recovered from the evidence room – I know exactly what it opens," Katarina said with growing excitement.

"How is that possible? The receipt only showed a street address. Our database searches turned up over a hundred and seventy streets with that name across the country, none in this territory," I reminded her.

"Because I have an identical key," Katarina explained eagerly. "It's for a facility called The Box – a high-security storage complex near our old neighborhood. They rent or sell individual vault compartments in this massive warehouse. I purchased a large unit there for my modeling portfolio and other sensitive materials. Once you buy the space, it can't be resold to another party, but you can return it to the company for a partial refund."

"So this key could access either a purchased or rented vault? If it was just a rental, the contents might already be gone," I worried.

"Fortunately, this is definitely for a purchased unit. You can tell by the black leather keychain – rental keys have red plastic tags," Katarina concluded triumphantly.

"Katarina, I have to admit – Zoe was right about your intelligence," I praised, earning a laugh from her. "You and Beckett should investigate whatever's hidden in that vault."

"Consider it handled. And I'll arrange for the DNA collection this week. Can you secure Lila's sample without raising suspicions?" Katarina asked.

"Yes, I'll have it ready before you head out," I confirmed.

"Actually, we're modifying our approach," Katarina continued. "I'll take the samples to two separate laboratories. Something's been bothering me about our previous test."

"What concerns you?" Beckett asked, echoing my confusion.

"That clinic technician is known for her loose tongue and expensive tastes. I suspect Claire somehow discovered we were running tests," Katarina explained.

"I'm not following your logic," I admitted, noting Beckett's equally puzzled expression.

"Consider the possibilities. If Claire learned about our DNA testing, she could have leveraged her connections to manipulate the results in her favor. That would explain the outcome we're all questioning," Katarina theorized.

"I can't imagine how she'd pull that off, but using two different laboratories is definitely the smart play," I conceded.

"Then we're in agreement," Beckett concluded.

"Agreed on what?" Lila's voice suddenly cut through our conversation as she entered the kitchen, nearly catching us mid-conspiracy.

"That Lucinda and I will stay another day," Beckett recovered smoothly. Lila's face immediately lit up with genuine pleasure at this announcement. Unable to resist the opportunity, Beckett leaned close to his sister with narrowed, teasing eyes. "By the way, Lila, I heard you last night. Every. Single. Sound."

Lila's face flushed deep crimson, her mortification complete as we all burst into laughter.

Chapter 533: Secret Storage

Beckett's POV

Several days had passed since Katarina and I returned to the city from our private estate, and I still hadn't made it to the secure storage facility to examine what Tiffany had left behind. Finding time for this crucial task proved challenging, primarily because my father was consumed with finalizing his separation from Claire through the family's legal channels. The tribunal date had been set within our organization's judicial structure, and Claire had shown up at my corporate headquarters creating quite the spectacle when our security team denied her entry per my strict instructions. I'd convinced Dad to stay at my penthouse temporarily rather than retreating to the family compound, at least until he finalized things with Claire through our internal arbitration system.

Global wasn't getting my full attention either. My mind constantly drifted to our ongoing investigation into the Sullivan family's internal affairs, and worry about Lila gnawed at me relentlessly. The conspiracy involving Claire ran deeper than we initially suspected, and every day of delay could mean crucial evidence disappearing.

"Time to take Lucinda's advice and just make it happen," I muttered, deciding today was the day to check out the mysterious storage facility that operated under our family's protection network.

I called my personal assistant and asked her to clear my schedule, which she handled with the discretion expected in our line of work. After wrapping up the most urgent matters involving our legitimate front companies, I sent an encrypted message to Katarina that we'd be visiting the storage facility. Her response was immediate and enthusiastic. When I arrived at our secured residence, she was already waiting by the reinforced gate, practically bouncing with anticipation.

We reached our destination after a considerable drive, traveling in one of our armored vehicles. I parked in front of an enormous warehouse complex that served as a front for our family's document and asset storage operations. Block letters spelling the facility's legitimate business name stretched across its facade, but those in our circle knew its true purpose.

"Think we'll find answers here?" I asked Katarina, uncertainty creeping into my voice despite my usual confidence in family operations.

"Only one way to know," she replied, placing her hand reassuringly over mine. "But I have a good feeling about this, especially given what Tiffany was involved in before her accident."

At the reception desk, we identified ourselves to the facility manager. The woman requested the access receipt, identification, and the specialized key. I provided everything, and she scrutinized me with the wariness of someone who knew she was dealing with sensitive family business. She consulted her encrypted computer system, then gave me another long, evaluating look.

"How did you acquire this particular access key?" she asked, peering at me over lime-green glasses frames. Her tone suggested she knew exactly who we were and what kind of operation this was.

"Tiffany, the unit's authorized user, gave it to me before her untimely death," I said, keeping my voice steady. Not entirely dishonest – Tiffany had died under suspicious circumstances, and her sister had given us the key along with other materials related to our investigation. The facility manager didn't need every detail about our internal family matters.

"Were you related to the deceased?" She was being particularly cautious, which I actually appreciated given the sensitive nature of what we stored here.

"We were close through family connections," I kept my answer appropriately vague while conveying the gravity of the situation.

"I can't authorize access without proper clearance. The key might be compromised. You need to be the designated user or immediate family with documented authorization," she explained, pushing everything back toward me. I was about to invoke my authority within the organization when Katarina squeezed my arm in warning.

"You're relatively new to this position, aren't you?" Katarina asked with the kind of pleasant authority that came naturally to someone raised in our world.

"Been managing this sector for quite some time, ma'am," the woman replied, her boredom masking what I recognized as professional caution.

"My, has it really been that long since I visited my private holdings here?" Katarina remarked with casual authority, reaching into her designer handbag. She produced a platinum-level access key, encrypted receipt, and identification card that immediately changed the woman's demeanor. "I'd like to access my personal storage area. This is my husband."

The woman's attitude shifted completely as she recognized the significance of Katarina's credentials. She glanced between us, examined the documents that clearly marked Katarina as someone with serious standing in our organization, checked something on her secure computer terminal, then returned everything with newfound respect.

"Do you know your unit's location, Mrs...?"

"Yes, thank you," Katarina replied smoothly as the reinforced security gate opened with a distinctive electronic hum. "Oh, we'll need one of those transport carts."

The woman handed Katarina another specialized key, and we entered the secured zone.

The facility was enormous – corridors of reinforced storage containers stacked from floor to ceiling formed an intricate maze designed to confuse unauthorized visitors. Discrete surveillance cameras monitored every angle, and signs posted throughout provided coded directions that only authorized users could interpret. A row of electric transport vehicles lined the entrance. Katarina led me to the first cart and started it with practiced familiarity.

"Lucinda, is now really the time to revisit your modeling career memorabilia?" I complained, though I was impressed by her quick thinking.

"Don't be ridiculous, Beckett," she said, steering down a surveillance-monitored corridor with confidence. "We're going to check Tiffany's secured unit."

"And how exactly? We don't even know which section contains her storage allocation."

"Yes we do. While that woman was lecturing you about protocols, I noticed her checking the internal tracking system. These units have classified internal numbers different from the public receipt numbers.

I memorized Tiffany’s actual unit designation," she explained with a sly smile that reminded me why she’d been so successful in the fashion world before joining our family.

"My wife, the master strategist," I said, genuinely impressed by her operational skills.

"Indeed. Now we’ll park here and proceed on foot. Her unit is near the maximum security back wall." Katarina pointed to a section lined with small, safety-deposit-box-sized doors some distance ahead.

"Why are we walking the rest of the way?"

"Because this is my legitimate storage area, and if security comes by, they’ll assume we’re conducting authorized business in my section," she explained, gesturing to a pair of large containers that bore her access codes.

"How did I never know about your private storage operations?" I asked, feeling somewhat hurt by this revelation about my wife’s independent resources.

"I secured this space immediately after returning to the city and establishing my new identity, stored everything away, and honestly never returned. The monthly fees are automatically deducted, so it slipped my mind – we weren’t even involved romantically then." She looked at me with complete sincerity. "I didn’t hide it from you, Beckett. I simply forgot to mention what seemed like an obsolete arrangement."

We exited the transport cart and Katarina unlocked her storage area with practiced efficiency. I was astonished by what I discovered – professional clothing racks with plastic-covered designer garments, luxury accessories in climate-controlled cases, secure filing cabinets, a temperature-controlled wardrobe, and neatly labeled archival boxes. Everything was immaculately organized and surprisingly pristine despite the time that had passed.

"How is everything in such perfect condition?" I asked, running my hand along surfaces that looked freshly cleaned.

"I had it professionally sealed with museum-grade environmental controls when I rented it. Once properly sealed, nothing deteriorates. These are memories from my previous life," Katarina said, scanning the room with eyes that held both nostalgia and satisfaction.

"Do you miss that world?" I asked, voicing an old insecurity. She had traveled internationally, graced exclusive runways, lived a life of glamour and independence – she was extraordinary, while I was just a man bound by family obligations in our insular world.

"Not at all. But those were formative experiences that brought valuable skills to my current role. I cherish what they taught me about navigating complex social situations," she smiled, grabbed some reinforced security boxes, and tugged me toward the exit. "Let's go handle our real business!"

We walked to the facility's maximum security rear section and searched for the designation Katarina had memorized. Finally, in a back corner under additional surveillance, we found it. I inserted the specialized key into the small reinforced door and opened it to reveal a compact space packed with carefully organized materials.

"Transfer everything to these secure boxes as quickly as possible," Katarina instructed, keeping watch while monitoring the surveillance feeds on her phone app.

After systematically emptying the unit and ensuring we left no trace of our presence, I locked it securely and we returned to Katarina's storage area. She moved with purpose among her archived possessions, searching for something specific. Finding a particular luxury box, she smiled with genuine warmth.

"I'm sending this to Zo. She visited me in Milan when I wore this piece in an exclusive show." She opened the box to reveal an exquisite evening purse intricately embroidered with genuine gemstones. "Now let's go examine what we've recovered!"

We loaded our acquired materials into the transport cart and headed back to reception. Katarina thanked the facility manager with appropriate authority, and we departed through the secured exit. Though I was desperate to examine our findings immediately, Katarina convinced me to wait until we reached the safety of our home. My anticipation mounted steadily – answers to the conspiracy that had torn our family apart might be waiting in those boxes now secured in our vehicle's reinforced trunk.

Chapter 534: Fistful of Proof

Beckett’s POV

The drama was already unfolding before we even pulled through the gates of our family compound. A small crowd of onlookers had gathered along the street, drawn by the spectacle of my father standing rigidly outside while Claire put on her most theatrical performance yet. Watching her carry on like some wronged mafia widow made my stomach turn. Beside me, Katarina was practically vibrating with anticipation, clapping her hands and bouncing in her seat with an energy I rarely saw from her.

"It’s today!" Katarina chirped with genuine excitement, quickly twisting her long hair into a tight bun and securing it. I turned to study her profile, completely baffled by her sudden enthusiasm.

"What exactly is today, Lucinda?" I asked, but she was already climbing out of the car with the determination of a woman on a mission, leaving me no choice but to follow her lead into whatever chaos awaited us.

Claire’s voice rang across the courtyard, shrill and calculated for maximum dramatic effect. "Come on, Nathaniel, tell me who this woman is! This whore you’re running around with behind my back? You must be completely bewitched to file for divorce so suddenly! What kind of woman has gotten her claws into you?" She alternated between shrieking accusations and fake sobbing, clearly relishing the audience she had attracted for her performance as the betrayed mafia wife.

"Claire, enough of this madness!" My father’s voice was tight with the kind of barely restrained fury that made lesser men in our world disappear permanently.

"I wanted to discuss this privately, Nathaniel, in our own home," Claire continued her calculated tirade, "but you slipped away while I was visiting our daughter. You ran here to hide behind Beckett like some coward - he’s always resented our marriage, always wanted to see our family destroyed. He’s obviously helping you cover up this affair!"

The accusation was beyond outrageous, and Claire was playing to her audience, ensuring every passerby caught every dramatic word of her manufactured betrayal.

"Claire, you don’t need any help destroying families - you’re a natural expert at it!" Katarina called out the moment her feet touched the ground, matching Claire’s volume with surgical precision.

Claire spun toward my wife like a viper ready to strike. "Shut your mouth, you little tramp! You left home playing dress-up as some model, but everyone knows you were just whoring around the city. Then you came crawling back and trapped this fool into marriage. You're poison - I guarantee you filled Lila's head with all these rebellious ideas about defying family obligations."

Claire had always attacked Katarina with vicious personal insults, and my wife typically brushed them off with aristocratic indifference. But something was fundamentally different today.

"You evil witch, you don't speak to me like that!" Katarina lunged forward with lightning speed and seized Claire by her perfectly styled hair, yanking it with the violent intensity of someone shaking out a filthy carpet.

"Help me! Someone get this psychotic woman off me!" Claire screamed, thrashing desperately to free herself while Katarina maintained her iron grip, shaking Claire's head back and forth like a predator with cornered prey.

I rushed forward and wrapped my arms around Katarina's waist, attempting to pull her back from the fray. "Lucinda, let go of her!" She ignored me completely, continuing to shake Claire's head with disturbing vigor. I pulled harder, stepping backward, but Katarina simply dragged Claire along with us across the courtyard stones.

"For God's sake, Lucinda, release her before you actually tear her head from her shoulders!" I pleaded, and finally my wife gave one last, devastatingly powerful yank before opening her clenched fists.

When Katarina uncurled her fingers, they were filled with Claire's torn hair. She stared at her own hands with a smile of pure triumph. Claire, witnessing this trophy collection, transformed into an enraged animal. Her expensive clothes were completely disheveled, her hair resembling a disaster zone. She charged toward Katarina with murderous intent, and I barely managed to position myself between them as a human shield. Claire slammed into me with her full weight as I grabbed her wrists to restrain her.

"You're leaving this property immediately," I said in the low, controlled voice that commanded respect in our circles. "And the next time you encounter my wife anywhere in this city, you'd better cross to the opposite side of the street."

"Get out of my way, Beckett, or I'll claw that handsome face of yours to ribbons," Claire threatened, her eyes wild with rage.

Her words triggered a vivid memory from the past. Claire had once tried to strike Lila over some trivial family matter. When I had stepped in to defend my sister, Claire had raked her nails across my face, leaving deep, bloody scratches. Then she had run to my father claiming I had attempted to assault her and she was merely protecting herself. That incident was the final straw that drove me to move in with my grandparents. Despite my desire to shield Lila from Claire's toxicity, I couldn't remain in that poisonous household any longer.

The memory ignited a white-hot fury in my chest.

"Try it, Claire," I challenged, my voice carrying the deadly calm that made men in our world very nervous. "I'm not a defenseless child anymore. Touch me, and you'll discover exactly how much I've learned about consequences." I stared her down with eyes blazing, and I felt her wrists trembling slightly in my grip.

"Get out of here, Claire," my father commanded with the authority of a man accustomed to absolute obedience. "From this point forward, we communicate exclusively through our attorneys."

Claire gave a contemptuous snort and glanced over her shoulder at my father. "I'm going to take everything you have, Nathaniel," she threatened before turning back to face me directly. "And that includes your precious territory, Beckett. I'll walk into that organization as the rightful owner, and you'll regret the day you banned me and threw me out like some street trash."

Claire wrenched her wrists free from my grasp, bent down to retrieve her fallen designer shoe, and limped toward her car parked carelessly on the sidewalk. Her hair stuck out in chaotic directions as she drove off with screaming tires.

I grasped Katarina's shoulders firmly and looked directly into her eyes; she was smiling with unmistakable satisfaction.

"Katarina, what was that performance really about?" I asked quietly. "You never let Claire provoke you like that. What changed?"

"DNA," Katarina whispered, displaying the hair clutched in her palm. Only then did understanding dawn - she had wanted Claire's hair for the paternity test we had discussed in private.

My father hadn't overheard our exchange; he was staring thoughtfully into the distance, dismissing the remaining spectators with subtle gestures. I guided Katarina inside and moved our car into the secured garage. My father waited by the entrance; I decided the boxes in our trunk could wait until later.

"What happened with Lucinda out there?" my father asked as I approached. "She never pays attention to Claire's theatrical nonsense, but today she fought like a woman possessed."

"Dad, honestly I'm not entirely certain," I lied smoothly. "I think she's finally tired of watching how Claire treats Lila and lost her composure seeing this scene unfold. Or perhaps it's just hormonal changes." I tried to sound convincing, though internally I wanted to laugh at the chaotic but strangely satisfying situation.

"It was quite the spectacle," my father admitted, scratching his head thoughtfully. "I should apologize to Lucinda later."

"Dad, absolutely none of this mess is your fault," I reassured him, placing my hand on his shoulder as we walked inside together.

Katarina came downstairs wearing a serene smile, looking nothing like someone who had just confronted the family's most dangerous enemy and successfully extracted a handful of her hair as evidence.

Chapter 535: Lila in Ruins

Daniel's POV

The days crawled by as I waited for word from Beckett. My patience was wearing dangerously thin, and every instinct honed by years in both the Thorne organization and the police force told me something significant was brewing. According to our intelligence network, Gideon would be visiting Aria soon, and I was desperate for any information that might surface from that meeting within the family's inner circle.

When my encrypted phone finally buzzed with Beckett's contact code, I grabbed it instantly. "Beckett! I was just thinking about you."

"Daniel, what a week it's been," he said, his voice carrying the exhaustion of someone who'd been managing multiple family crises. "I've been dealing with one emergency after another, including breaking up an actual fistfight between two of our people."

"A fistfight?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Violence within the family ranks was serious business.

Beckett chuckled, though there was an edge to it. "I'll forward you the security footage from our surveillance system. The cameras caught everything. Lila might not appreciate me sharing it, but you'll get a kick out of seeing what happened. I should be furious about the breach of family protocol, but honestly, it was too entertaining. But listen, I need to ask for a favor that requires your police connections."

"What do you need?" I asked, my curiosity about the fight mixing with concern about what kind of favor required my law enforcement resources.

"Katarina's heading your way with sensitive materials. She'll be stopping by the precinct with boxes from the deceased maid's storage unit, plus that DNA sample we discussed for our investigation into the family matter. Could you escort her to the laboratory using your official capacity?" The request caught me off guard, but I understood the delicate nature of what we were dealing with.

"Of course I can handle that. She mentioned she'd obtain that sample, but I'm dying to know how she managed to pull it off without arousing suspicion." I couldn't imagine the lengths she'd gone to within the heavily monitored family compound.

Beckett laughed heartily, the sound carrying hints of both admiration and exhaustion. "My friend, all hell broke loose in the family estate, just as I predicted it would. Watch the video I'm sending through our secure channel. You'll understand everything once you see who was involved." His tone suggested that the altercation involved people whose participation would surprise me. "By the way, you'll need a doctor's authorization for the official testing. Can you arrange that through your contacts?"

"Yes, that won't be a problem. I have a trusted physician who handles sensitive cases for the department. Did the storage unit yield anything useful for our investigation?" My investigative instincts were kicking into high gear, sensing we were close to a breakthrough.

"We searched it yesterday afternoon, but the sheer volume of materials made it impossible to examine everything on-site. Security concerns meant we had to bring it all back to the estate, but my father was lurking around suspiciously all evening, almost like his old instincts sensed something was happening. Lucinda didn't want to waste any time or risk discovery, so she loaded everything into her vehicle at dawn and hit the road before anyone else was awake," Beckett explained, his tactical planning evident even in family matters.

"I'm beyond curious now about what we might find," I admitted, and he agreed we both were eager for answers. We arranged to speak later about the contents of the storage boxes once they'd been properly examined, said our goodbyes using our usual coded farewell, and I returned to my case reports while waiting for Katarina's arrival.

Time slipped away as I worked through the endless paperwork that came with maintaining my cover as a legitimate police inspector. A sharp knock at my office door pulled me from my concentration on a money laundering case. "Come in," I called out.

Inspector Adler entered with his characteristic smile, escorting a familiar and elegant figure. "Hey handsome, look who I found in the lobby asking specifically for you," he announced cheerfully, clearly impressed by his distinguished visitor.

"Inspector Adler has been quite the perfect gentleman," Katarina remarked, offering him one of those gracious smiles that made her so effective in high society circles.

"This remarkable lady is my sister-in-law, Adler," I explained to my colleague. "She's married to Lila's brother and part of one of the city's most prominent families."

"Yes, she mentioned her connection to the Sullivan family," Adler nodded respectfully. "She was kind enough to take photographs with my daughters when my wife dropped me off."

"Your daughters were here at the precinct?" I asked, surprised by this breach of our usual security protocols.

"No, my wife was waiting in the car since my vehicle is in the shop for repairs. The girls were with her and recognized Mrs. Barrett from society magazines. You know how teenagers can be when they spot someone from the high-society pages—completely star-struck. Katarina was gracious enough to indulge their excitement," Adler explained with paternal pride.

I laughed, remembering a recent encounter that seemed a lifetime ago now. "You should have seen Zoe fawning over Katarina recently at the family gathering. She was acting like a teenager herself, completely forgetting her usual sophisticated composure." Adler joined my laughter before excusing himself. "Please, have a seat, Katarina. I've been expecting you and everything is arranged."

"I should get moving. I'm already running late for my next appointment," Adler said, politely bidding Katarina farewell with the respect due to someone of her family standing before departing.

"Daniel, I'm eager to examine those storage boxes properly, but I'm also anxious to get to the laboratory immediately," Katarina said, rubbing her hands together in anticipation, her usual composed demeanor showing cracks of excitement about what we might discover.

"That makes two of us. I just need to call the doctor who'll provide the official authorization for the testing, and we'll need to stop by my apartment to collect Lila's comparison samples," I explained, reaching for my secure phone. "Dr. Taylor! How are things in your world?" I greeted warmly when the call connected. After exchanging the usual pleasantries required for maintaining our professional relationship, I carefully laid out our situation in terms that wouldn't compromise anyone involved. Andrew was both discreet and trustworthy—exactly what our delicate investigation required. He offered to meet us at the hospital personally, and I thanked him profusely before ending the call. "We're all set. We have access to a completely trusted laboratory for the testing. Will you be taking a duplicate sample to the other laboratory as well?"

"Absolutely. I'm convinced someone there falsified the previous test results, and I fully intend to find out exactly who was responsible," Katarina replied, her intelligence and perceptiveness impressing me once again with their sharpness.

We left the police station in my official vehicle after transferring the two storage boxes to my trunk with appropriate care for their potential evidentiary value. We stopped by my secure apartment building to collect Lila's carefully preserved samples, then headed to the hospital where Dr. Taylor was waiting. He proved incredibly helpful and professional, promising to expedite the results while maintaining complete confidentiality. He was visibly shocked by our account of Lila's ordeal at the hands of her

adoptive mother, his medical ethics clearly disturbed by the implications. From there, we proceeded to the second laboratory where Katarina had already made contact. The director was waiting for us in the lobby, his anxiety palpable.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice," Katarina greeted him with practiced charm.

"It's absolutely my pleasure, though I sincerely hope your suspicions about our previous results prove to be unfounded," he replied, his professional reputation clearly weighing heavily on his mind. "If that test was indeed tampered with, we're looking at a serious credibility crisis that could destroy everything we've built here. We'd have to rerun every single test from that entire day." He led us to his private office and began preparing the necessary paperwork with meticulous attention to detail.

"How will you ensure absolute integrity this time around?" Katarina questioned with the authority of someone accustomed to managing complex family affairs. "If the samples are identifiable in any way, they could potentially be compromised again." She was taking complete charge of the situation while I observed her natural command.

"We'll use our highest security protocol with registration numbers and complete pseudonyms," he explained professionally. "The results will come directly to me personally, bypassing all normal channels. We use this protocol for clients requiring absolute confidentiality, so it won't raise any red flags among our staff members. Results will be available within a few weeks—I'm afraid I cannot expedite the process any further without compromising accuracy."

"That timeline is perfectly acceptable for our purposes," Katarina agreed, and we proceeded with the testing procedures. After saying goodbye to the director and ensuring all protocols were properly established, we left the laboratory facility.

"Daniel, would you mind taking me somewhere else before we examine those boxes? I brought a special gift for Zoe, and I'd love to give it to her personally," Katarina asked as we settled back into my car, her request surprising me with its thoughtful nature.

"Of course! That girl will be absolutely thrilled by the attention. Let's pick up our little firecracker and grab some lunch together, what do you say?"

"Perfect. I can simply say I was in town handling family business and we ran into each other by coincidence," Katarina suggested, her quick thinking about maintaining proper appearances impressing me once again.

We drove through the city to Lila's workplace, but her desk was conspicuously empty when we arrived at the Thorne Group offices, immediately triggering my protective instincts.

"Ah, so you've heard the news already," Caleb said, emerging from his executive office while running a hand through his hair in obvious distress.

"Heard what exactly?" I asked, alarm bells suddenly ringing loudly in my head as every protective instinct I possessed went into overdrive. "Where's Lila right now?"

"She's in the employee break room. Follow me immediately." Caleb hastily greeted Katarina with appropriate respect before leading us quickly down the hallway, his urgency making my blood run cold.

What I saw when we reached the break room completely crushed me. Lila was huddled in a corner chair, sobbing uncontrollably with a desperation I'd never witnessed from her before. Her arms were covered in angry red scratches, her beautiful hair was a tangled mess, and her professional clothes were dirty and rumpled as if she'd been in some kind of physical altercation. I had absolutely no idea what had happened to reduce my strong, beautiful Lila to this broken state, but in that moment, I knew with absolute certainty that I would systematically destroy whoever had dared to harm her.

Chapter 536: Caught Little Mouse

Lila's POV

An afternoon at Thorne Corporation dragged endlessly. My mind wandered to the artisanal pastries from the exclusive Italian bakery across the plaza that served the city's elite families. I hadn't indulged in their delicate cannoli in quite some time.

"I think I deserve a little afternoon treat," I murmured to myself.

"Talking to yourself again, Lila?" Sybilla appeared in her doorway, espresso cup in hand—a habit she'd picked up recently.

"Old habit," I smiled. "Since you're here, would you mind covering the reception desk for a bit?"

"No problem," she replied, checking her encrypted phone. "I've got it covered."

"Thanks, won't be long." I grabbed my designer purse and headed toward the private elevator that served the upper floors of our building.

"Wait—Lila! Are you leaving the building?" Sybilla's voice carried genuine alarm. "Daniel specifically instructed—"

"Relax, Sybilla. I'm just crossing the plaza to the bakery," I reassured her. "Beckett has his associates monitoring Claire's movements. He'd alert me immediately if she or her Sullivan family allies made any moves toward the city. Since he hasn't, there's nothing to worry about."

As the elevator descended to the marble lobby, I savored this brief taste of independence. "Freedom tastes sweeter than any pastry will," I thought, smiling to myself. How desperately I longed for the day Claire would abandon her twisted scheme of dragging me back into the Sullivan family's money laundering empire to cement an alliance with a gambling syndicate through marriage to their sociopathic heir.

I purchased my cannoli and tiramisu from the bakery, feeling genuinely content as I exited onto the pristine plaza.

"Caught you, little mouse!" The vicious yank on my hair came without warning.

"Claire! Stop! You're hurting me!" I cried out, recognizing my adoptive mother's manicured claws instantly.

"Behave yourself or the pain gets worse." She tightened her grip with practiced cruelty, nearly sending me tumbling as she dragged me toward an unfamiliar black luxury sedan with tinted windows.

When she released my hair to reach for the car door, maintaining her iron grip on my arm, I seized the opportunity. I twisted desperately away, but before I could break free, her razor-sharp acrylic nails—weapons she'd always used to maintain control—dug into my flesh like talons. I struggled frantically as her nails tore through my skin.

"Please, Claire, let me go!" Tears streamed down my face as I fought against her practiced restraint techniques.

"The more you resist, the more severe your punishment will be once we're back at the family estate," she snarled with the cold authority she'd always wielded.

I frantically scanned the plaza, but it remained eerily deserted—unusual for this time of day. Even the bakery staff remained oblivious to the violent struggle happening just outside their elegant storefront.

Claire's nails gouged deeper as I writhed in her grasp. She raised her hand to deliver a punishing slap just as my designer heel caught on the cobblestone and snapped. I tumbled toward the unforgiving pavement, then felt unfamiliar hands steadying me. I thrashed instinctively until a familiar voice cut through my panic.

"Ladies, step back! Police business here." I turned to see the plainclothes detective—one of the officers from Daniel's unit who regularly maintained surveillance around Thorne Corporation.

"Get your filthy hands off me, you government pig!" Claire shrieked as the officer's partner moved to restrain her, attempting to secure the specialized restraints they carried for high-profile arrests.

"No!" I shouted desperately. "Don't arrest her—she's still my legal guardian. Just escort her beyond city limits and help me back to the office."

"Inspector Martinez won't approve of this decision," grumbled the detective as he struggled with Claire, who glared at me with pure, undisguised hatred.

"I'll handle Daniel personally. Please, just get her away from here." My voice cracked with exhaustion and pain.

The officers exchanged concerned glances—they understood the complex politics of dealing with rival family members.

"This decision will create complications," the detective's partner muttered, helping secure Claire. "Are you absolutely certain about this course of action?"

"Yes, please! I'll explain everything to Daniel myself." They reluctantly agreed, following the same protocol they'd implemented with Justin and the other Sullivan family enforcers—placing Claire in their unmarked patrol vehicle while one officer took possession of the sedan she'd arrived in.

I approached the patrol car window, tears flowing freely. "Don't come hunting for me again, Claire. Next time, I'll allow Daniel's people to process you through proper channels." I watched through blurry vision as they drove away, escorting her to the city's edge.

The detective supported me back to Thorne Corporation's executive floor. Sybilla and Jude's faces transformed with shock when they witnessed my condition. Caleb appeared moments later, his expression darkening before he immediately ordered them to escort me to the private medical suite and summon our family physician while he contacted Daniel directly. I couldn't even protest through my uncontrollable sobbing.

The physician arrived shortly and began treating my wounds with professional efficiency. Each antiseptic application felt like fire against the raw scratches.

"Tell me, Lila," Caleb asked gently, his voice carrying the authority of a family patriarch, "what storm hit you today? Daniel will demand blood when he sees these injuries. Have you contacted him?"

I shook my head weakly.

"I'll handle that communication now, sir," the detective volunteered nervously.

Caleb stepped out briefly, returning with both Daniel and, surprisingly, Katarina. They both froze completely at the sight of me. Daniel's expression transformed from shock to murderous rage instantly.

"What the hell happened to her?" he growled at the detective with deadly quiet authority.

"Inspector, we failed to recognize the woman initially—hat and designer sunglasses concealed her identity completely. We were monitoring Ms. Lila, but before we could intervene effectively, the assault was already in progress. By the time we reached her, the damage was done," the detective explained, clearly dreading Daniel's response.

"Daniel," I called between sobs. "Don't blame them for my decision."

He knelt beside me with surprising gentleness. "Tiny one, was it Claire?" I nodded weakly. "What did she do to you?"

"She tried to force me into that car... they protected me," I managed through fresh tears.

Daniel stood abruptly, confronting the detective with barely controlled fury. "I expect that woman is currently secured at headquarters awaiting my personal interrogation."

The detective shifted uncomfortably under his superior's gaze. "Inspector, she specifically requested we not arrest her adoptive mother—just escort her beyond city limits, similar to the protocol we used with those Sullivan family soldiers previously."

Daniel punched the reinforced wall but remained ominously silent.

"Why did you leave alone, little one?" he asked, kneeling beside me again with infinite tenderness.

I explained about the pastries, my misguided confidence that Claire was being properly monitored by his network. "It was supposed to be just a moment of normalcy," I whispered.

As I recounted the attack, the physician finished cleaning the deep lacerations from Claire's weaponized nails, prescribing anti-inflammatory medication and painkillers before departing discretely.

"Lila, you're going home immediately," Caleb stated with absolute finality.

"Come on, little one. I'll retrieve your pastries and take you to safety." Daniel kissed the top of my head with protective gentleness.

Jude appeared, carrying the bakery bag. "Already secured your order, Lila."

"I'll collect Sybilla later," Daniel informed his sister.

"No need—I'll drive Sybilla home and check on Lila's condition while I'm there," Jude offered diplomatically.

We departed—Daniel, Katarina, and I—after I thanked everyone for their unwavering support. Every inch of my body ached from the assault, but nothing compared to the devastating pain in my heart.

How could someone who claimed to be a mother inflict such calculated cruelty on her own child?

Chapter 537: Cold Strategic Proposal

Lila's POV

The scalding shower did nothing to cleanse the rage burning through my veins. When I emerged into the living room with damp hair clinging to my shoulders, Katarina was setting fine china on Daniel's dining table while he spoke in hushed tones into his encrypted phone—the kind used for family business.

"How are you holding up?" Katarina asked, her designer heels clicking against the marble as she moved with the practiced grace of someone born into our world.

Fresh tears threatened to spill. "Honestly? I feel like I'm drowning. I never thought my mother would sink this low, even for family politics."

"She's poison, Lila," Katarina sighed, shaking her perfectly coiffed head. "But try to compose yourself. Your detective ordered from that exclusive Chinatown place—the one that only delivers to certain addresses."

Strong arms wrapped around me from behind. Daniel's expensive cologne mingled with the faint scent of gunpowder that always clung to him—a reminder of the world we both inhabited.

"Did you take your medication, little one?" His voice carried that protective edge that made my chest tighten. When I nodded, he continued, "Your mother's convoy is heading back to Sullivan territory now. But I still think we need to make this official through family channels."

"She's still technically my mother, Daniel..." The words tasted bitter on my tongue.

His frustrated exhale warmed my neck as he pulled me closer. "In name only."

Katarina leaned against the custom Italian counter, her expression grim. "I've briefed Beckett and your father's people. Apparently, your mother outmaneuvered the security detail your family assigned. She used one of her legitimate art gallery connections to create a diversion, then slipped past surveillance using a dealer's vehicle. Your family's men followed the decoy."

"We need tighter security protocols," Daniel muttered, and I could hear the unspoken implications in his tone—there were things he wasn't telling me.

I turned to Katarina, desperation creeping into my voice. "She's never going to stop interfering in family business, is she?"

"There is one way to remove her leverage completely," Daniel said, his jaw set with that determination I'd seen when he was working a case. His dark eyes met mine with unusual intensity.

"What's that?" I braced myself for another lecture about involving the family's enforcement arm.

"Marry me. Once we're bound by family law, she loses all authority over marriage alliances. She'd have no choice but to back down."

I stared at him, certain the stress had affected my hearing. "You can't be serious."

"I’m completely serious, little one." He captured both my hands in his larger ones. "We formalize our bond, and she becomes powerless in family negotiations."

"That’s insane, Daniel!" I pulled away from his grip.

"How is it insane? We’re already bound in everything but name. We share territory, we trust each other with our lives, we love each other. We make it official and the problem disappears." His pragmatic tone stripped away any romance from the moment.

"I refuse to enter a marriage alliance just to outmaneuver my mother’s schemes," I replied, crossing my arms defensively.

"Don’t you love me, Lila?" There was something vulnerable beneath his wounded pride.

"Of course I love you, Daniel. But I don’t want you proposing out of strategic necessity." My heart ached. I’d dreamed of becoming his wife, joining our families through love rather than politics—not like this, not as some calculated move in the endless game of power, delivered like a business merger proposal. I wanted passion, devotion, something that felt real.

"Damn it," Daniel growled. "Katarina, I have to tell her."

Confusion washed over me. "Tell me what?" I looked between them. "And Katarina, while I’m always happy to see you, why exactly are you in the city today?"

"She came for a contract signing. Running into her was pure coincidence," Daniel explained quickly.

Katarina nodded smoothly. "I had gallery business to finalize. Encountering Daniel was unexpected."

"So what do you need to tell me?" I pressed, recognizing the look they shared—the kind of glance exchanged when family secrets were about to surface.

Katarina chose her words carefully. "Lila, our intelligence network uncovered something. Your mother isn't pushing for an alliance with Connor's heir anymore."

"That should be good news, right?" But their grim expressions suggested otherwise.

"Not exactly, little one," Daniel said gently. "She wants to bind you to Connor himself."

The revelation hit me like a physical assault. Nausea clawed at my throat. "To Connor? Why would she...?"

Tears spilled down my cheeks as panic seized me. Connor controlled half the casino operations and smuggling networks on the East Coast. He was older than my grandfather, with a reputation for brutality that made even hardened family soldiers nervous. Stories circulated about rivals who'd crossed him, businesses that had mysteriously burned, people who'd simply vanished. The thought of being trapped in that monster's bed was unbearable.

"It's confirmed," Katarina squeezed my hand. "My connections in the financial sector hear everything. You need protection, and perhaps Daniel's proposal isn't so unreasonable after all."

"Please marry me, Lila. Let's end this nightmare," Daniel pleaded, his voice softer now but still urgent.

I wiped my tears, finding strength despite my terror. "No, Daniel. I won't marry you because of this."

He exhaled harshly. "It's not just because of this, Lila! But it would solve everything. I can't let her deliver you to that animal." His frustration boiled over. "It's just paperwork and ceremony, for God's sake!"

"Don't I deserve more than a marriage of convenience?" I held my ground despite the hurt flashing across his handsome features.

We were locked in tense silence when the doorbell chimed. Daniel went to the security panel, and Zoe's voice crackled through the intercom before she appeared.

"Where is she?" Zoe burst through the reinforced door, rushing to grip my shoulders and examine me for injuries with the efficiency of someone trained in violence. "That woman may have birthed you, but she's not family. Real family doesn't do this." Her voice cracked as she pulled me into a fierce hug. "That said, I'm going to track her down and personally remove each of her manicured claws with pliers."

I laughed despite everything. "I believe you would. But I'd rather you stay for lunch instead."

"Tiny Cipher, please make this official through family justice. Cut her out of your life permanently," Zoe urged.

"I can't, Zoe. I just can't." The truth was simple but devastating.

"What's our next move?" Zoe looked around at everyone. "Oh—Katarina! I didn't notice you there."

"We're having lunch," Daniel intervened, pulling out a chair for Zoe. "That was the plan. Katarina and I collected Lila, and we were going to invite you over."

Zoe's face brightened. "Really? Well then, let's eat. Afterward, we'll have a girls' afternoon. And you, detective, can return to your precinct work, unless you want to end up with painted nails, hair ribbons, and false eyelashes."

"Hard pass," Daniel grimaced, making us all laugh.

"How did you find out what happened?" I asked Zoe.

"I called to schedule something for Dominic, and Sybilla filled me in on everything," she explained.

After our meal, Katarina gifted Zoe the designer handbag she'd modeled in that fashion show Zoe had attended. With Zoe keeping me company, Daniel headed back to his precinct duties, and Katarina departed with him to return to our family's territory.

Alone with my thoughts, I wrestled with Daniel's clumsy proposal, the terrifying news about Connor, and the persistent feeling that Katarina and Daniel were concealing something else from me—something they weren't prepared to reveal.

Chapter 538: Gathering Conspirators

Claire's POV

That little princess had slipped through my fingers once again. I had been certain fortune favored me when I spotted her leaving Thorne Group's corporate tower, but luck sided with her instead. Those patrol officers materialized from thin air, destroying my carefully laid trap. Now I was returning to the Sullivan family estate with empty hands and growing desperation. Connor's ultimatum was approaching fast, and failure would mean losing everything I had fought for years to build within this organization. I needed to devise a new strategy, and quickly.

When I arrived at the estate, Felicia was waiting in the marble foyer. She had proven herself a remarkably useful asset—the detective's wife who would move mountains for me. Her husband danced to her every whim, and she performed the same obedient choreography for me. Despite her devout Catholic facade and constant appearances at Sunday mass, she was as corrupt as any of us—a beautifully useful sinner. Her addiction to gossip made her an invaluable source of intelligence about every family's secrets in this city. Well, nearly every family's. She remained blissfully ignorant about the true extent of my ambitions, believing me to be some kind of charitable benefactor. The entire community viewed me as a devoted mother and philanthropist, which sometimes made me want to burst into laughter.

"Claire, where's Lila? Weren't you able to bring her home?" Felicia's expectant expression signaled it was time to deploy my most convincing performance.

"You simply wouldn't believe what happened, Felicia. That ungrateful child refused to accompany me," I said, allowing genuine frustration to crack my voice. "She caused this absolutely mortifying spectacle right there on Fifth Avenue, screaming hysterically and begging strangers to summon the authorities. She actually accused me—her own mother—of attempting to abduct her. The public humiliation was beyond endurance, Felicia. Absolutely soul-crushing." Right on cue, tears began streaming down my cheeks.

"Oh, my dearest friend! What a horrible daughter you're dealing with. I'm so deeply sorry for your pain." Felicia wrapped her arms around me in a tight embrace. "I've discussed this situation with my husband repeatedly, Claire. I've begged him to use his detective shield to retrieve that girl and bring her back to

you. But he keeps refusing, insisting it could destroy his entire career if anyone discovered his involvement. And now that she's romantically involved with another detective, he claims he absolutely cannot risk any interference."

"How exactly did your husband learn she's dating a detective?" I found this particular detail suspicious since I hadn't shared that intelligence with her.

"Your former husband mentioned it during one of their conversations. According to what my husband has been able to gather through department channels, your daughter's boyfriend possesses significant political influence and maintains extremely close relationships with the Public Safety Commissioner's inner circle. My husband insists it would be professional suicide to antagonize such a well-connected individual," Felicia explained, inadvertently reminding me of something critically important.

"Felicia, here are your car keys. Thank you for absolutely everything today, but I'm completely exhausted and need to rest and strategize." I needed her gone immediately so I could execute my next move.

"Of course, dear friend. If you need anything at all, just call me anytime," Felicia said before making her exit.

Once I was completely alone, I rushed to my private study and frantically searched through my desk drawer until I located the business card I was looking for—it was finally time to activate this particular connection. I dialed the number with trembling fingers.

"Elias Martinez speaking," a gravelly voice answered after ringing.

"Mr. Martinez, this is Claire Sullivan, Lila's mother," I announced, waiting as uncomfortable silence stretched between us.

"What can I do for you today?" His tone carried unnecessary coldness and formality.

"It's time to implement our partnership agreement. I know exactly how to separate those two lovebirds, and I require your immediate assistance," I declared with complete confidence, certain I could finally drag that defiant little princess back under my control.

"Ma’am, circumstances have dramatically changed since our last meeting. I’ve had opportunities to observe the young lady more closely and have completely reconsidered my original position. I no longer have any desire to separate them from each other. In fact, I genuinely hope their relationship continues to flourish and strengthen," he responded, leaving me absolutely bewildered and furious.

"Is this some kind of elaborate joke?" I snapped with barely contained rage.

"Not in the slightest. I’m being entirely serious with you. You no longer have my support in any scheme to separate them. On the contrary, if you attempt to proceed with such plans, you’ll discover me standing firmly in opposition to your efforts." His complete reversal made absolutely no logical sense to me.

"But, Mr. Martinez, during our meeting you specifically said—" He interrupted me mid-sentence with obvious impatience.

"Claire, I believe I’ve made my position crystal clear. My stance has fundamentally changed, and I have zero interest in interfering with our children’s happiness. Lila is truly an exceptional young woman with remarkable character, and my son appears genuinely happy with her—that’s what matters most to me as a father. I’ve come to understand that his authentic happiness directly translates to my own contentment," he stated with unwavering conviction that surprised me.

"Sir, this is absolutely preposterous and completely unacceptable!" I protested desperately.

I heard him tell someone in his vicinity that he was coming shortly, before addressing me one final time.

"Claire, my decision is absolutely final and non-negotiable. And if you’ll accept some friendly advice from someone with experience: let this entire matter go. You’re fighting a battle you simply cannot win against forces much stronger than yourself," he declared before hanging up abruptly.

What had just happened to completely derail my plans? Why had this powerful man suddenly changed his mind so dramatically? During our initial meeting at his private club, he had seemed absolutely determined and committed to our mutual cause.

Something wasn’t adding up properly—he didn’t suddenly decide to support those two because of Lila’s supposedly sterling character. So what had triggered this complete change of heart? I couldn’t afford to dwell on this setback now; I desperately needed to secure another ally.

I left my study and found Justin lounging carelessly on the living room’s expensive Italian leather sofa with his two equally worthless companions.

"What are you doing here instead of earning money? Don’t you have more productive places to be?" I demanded, swatting his muddy boots off my imported coffee table.

"We do have plans, mother, but we’re experiencing a temporary cash flow problem. Help us out with some funding," Justin said with his usual predictable request for money. I couldn’t comprehend where he managed to spend so excessively in this relatively small territory.

"You spend money like water, boy!" I scolded him sharply.

"Aunt Claire, where’s Lila today?" asked the detective’s son, one of Justin’s regular associates and Felicia’s boy.

"I wasn’t able to bring her back home today." Apparently, Felicia couldn’t keep sensitive information confidential; she had already briefed her son about my mission’s failure.

"The police interfered with your plans, didn’t they?" he pressed with knowing eyes.

"Yes, they certainly did. How did you know that would happen?" I looked at him with sudden intense interest and suspicion.

"I specifically warned Justin about potential complications, but he insisted it was just unfortunate coincidence that patrol officers appeared precisely on the day we attempted our operation there," the boy explained carefully, prompting me to look questioningly at Justin. The kid was making an excellent point about timing.

"I'll provide money for whatever you want to purchase, but first you'll need to complete a task for me." I watched as they eagerly extended their hands toward the cash.

"What exactly do you need from us, mother?" Justin asked with obvious skepticism.

"I need two reliable men—completely competent professionals—to bring Lila back to me by any means necessary," I explained while retrieving substantial bills from my purse. I would send trained specialists after that rebellious little princess, and this time, escape would be absolutely impossible.

"Hand over the money first," Justin demanded greedily, and I placed the substantial bills in his palm. "For what you're describing, you need to speak directly with Connor. He knows exactly the right guys perfect for this particular type of job."

He was absolutely right—Connor would definitely assist me, given his obvious romantic interest in my daughter and the business advantages our alliance would provide. After the boys departed, I immediately called Connor's private line.

"What is it now, Claire?" God, this man possessed absolutely no social graces or manners whatsoever.

"Connor, would it physically kill you to display some basic civility toward a lady?" I complained with obvious irritation.

"You've definitely called the wrong person if you're seeking pleasantries and small talk," he replied with typical terseness.

"I need your immediate help bringing Lila back under family control," I stated directly, hearing him chuckle darkly in response.

"I'll visit your estate later this evening. You can absolutely count on my full assistance in this matter," he answered before ending the call abruptly. That had been easier than I had anticipated. Now I simply had to wait patiently for his arrival and the implementation of our final solution.

Chapter 539: Blood Lies Exposed

Daniel’s POV

The drive back to the police station with Katarina was quiet. My mind kept replaying Lila’s reaction to my proposal. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, frustration bubbling inside me. The boxes Katarina had brought would be safer to examine in my secured office rather than at home where Lila might discover them.

"You’re still bothered that Lila didn’t accept your proposal, aren’t you?" Katarina broke the silence, her eyes studying my tense expression.

I exhaled sharply. "Yes. Why can’t she see this would solve everything?"

Katarina shook her head, a knowing smile on her face. "Daniel, your strategy might be logical, but your execution was terrible. Women don’t want practical proposals. We want romance, passion, a declaration of undying love. Not ’Let’s get married to stop your crazy mother from selling you off to another family.’"

"But she knows I love her," I muttered, pulling through the station’s security entrance. "Shouldn’t that be enough?"

"It’s enough for her to share your life and your bed," Katarina replied with brutal honesty. "But marriage in our world? That requires more than solving a problem. It needs to be about wanting to bind your souls together forever, not avoiding her mother’s power plays."

Deep down, I knew she was right. My calculating nature had overshadowed what should have been a moment of romance.

Inside my soundproofed office, I handed one box to Katarina while I started digging through the other. Most items seemed inconsequential at first—random objects, business documents from Lila’s family enterprises, some financial statements with substantial balances from an offshore bank in the town where we’d retrieved these items.

An old photo album caught my attention. Each picture was meticulously labeled with names, locations, and dates. The deceased maid appeared in every photo alongside a heavyset woman—presumably the

friend mentioned by the maid’s sister. Something about this plump woman seemed strangely familiar, though I couldn’t place why.

"Found it!" Katarina’s triumphant voice snapped me from my thoughts. She held up a folder containing what appeared to be torn diary pages. "These must be the missing pages."

We abandoned everything else and started reading. With each paragraph, my stomach knotted tighter. The contents were beyond anything I had anticipated.

When we finished, Katarina’s eyes glistened with tears. "This is monstrous, Daniel. Such cruelty..."

"In my years on the force, I’ve seen humanity’s worst," I replied, running a hand through my hair. "But this? Knowing what this will do to Lila when she learns the truth? That’s what’s killing me."

"The diary clearly states that the daughter your mother-in-law expected died during childbirth," Katarina summarized, her voice trembling. "Claire wasn’t even pregnant. Lila isn’t Beckett’s biological sister."

"Lila must be the baby the nurse mentioned to Gideon, the one whose birth mother claims was stolen." The weight of this realization crashed down on me. "This will destroy her world, Katarina."

"We can’t tell her yet, Daniel. Not until we get DNA confirmation and talk to Nathaniel," Katarina pleaded.

I shook my head firmly. "I almost lost her once for keeping secrets. This is too significant to hide from her."

"Let’s call Beckett," Katarina suggested. "We need his perspective as the family head."

I agreed, and she initiated the encrypted video call.

Beckett answered while clearly distracted with family business paperwork. "Hey, Lucinda. Are you still with my sister?"

"Beckett," Katarina's voice was urgent, "stop what you're doing and focus. Is anyone there with you?"

"No, I'm alone in my private office." He finally looked up, noticing me. "Oh, hi Daniel. How's Lila holding up?"

"She's at home with Zoe, doing as well as can be expected after that confrontation with her mother," I replied.

"Beckett, we found the missing diary pages," Katarina interjected, not wasting time.

He straightened in his chair. "Great! What's in them?"

"Brace yourself," Katarina warned. "I'll give you the short version. According to the maid, your mother's baby died during delivery. And Claire wasn't pregnant at all."

Beckett's face drained of color. "You're saying Lila..." He couldn't finish, tears welling in his eyes. "No. This can't be real."

"I'm sorry, darling. But there's more," Katarina continued gently.

"What could possibly be worse?" Beckett buried his face in his hands.

"Justin isn't Nathaniel's biological son," I stated bluntly.

Beckett's head snapped up. "What did you just say?"

"Beckett," I leaned toward the camera, "there's much more, but I need you and Nathaniel to come to the station today."

"Today?" He looked shellshocked.

"Yes. I can’t keep this from Lila. She’d never forgive me if she discovered I hid something this important. And frankly, I wouldn’t put it past Claire to reveal everything just to hurt her."

"Daniel’s right," Katarina added softly. "We need to handle this as a family."

"Beckett, you—" Nathaniel’s voice interrupted as he entered his son’s office. "Son, what’s wrong? You look pale."

"Dad..." Beckett visibly struggled to compose himself. "We need to go see Lila."

"Is something wrong with your sister?" Worry immediately creased Nathaniel’s features.

"She’s okay, but we need to go," Beckett replied, unable to explain further.

"I don’t understand," Nathaniel frowned.

"Nathaniel," Katarina called out. "Lila is physically fine, but she needs her family right now. Please come today. She needs to feel your support."

Nathaniel’s confusion was evident. "Katarina, I still don’t understand why you’re there or why this is so urgent."

"Nathaniel," I addressed him directly, "after what Lila experienced today with her mother, she needs to be surrounded by people who truly love her. She’s happiest when you’re around."

His expression softened. "Of course, you’re right. We’ll leave immediately."

"Perfect. Beckett, Katarina and I will wait for you at the station," I confirmed before ending the call.

Katarina exhaled deeply beside me. "Everything's about to change, isn't it?"

I nodded grimly, collecting the damning evidence spread across my desk. The truth would soon come to light, and our lives would never be the same.

Chapter 540: Labor Induced Early

Claire's POV

Claire is an absolute mastermind! She swore she'd help me get payback against that old bastard, and she's delivering beyond my wildest expectations.

Ever since that humiliating day when the old don discovered my little "creative accounting" with the family's legitimate dairy operation and had me thrown out like garbage, I've been burning for revenge. I don't feel one ounce of guilt about skimming those funds - the Sullivan family was rolling in money from their underground operations, and I deserved better compensation than what that cheap old crime boss was paying his front business employees. Besides, I wasn't working alone - Claire was helping herself to her share too. Unfortunately, after he kicked me to the curb, he stationed his heir apparent there to oversee everything, completely destroying our sweet arrangement. Before that disaster, his son mostly stayed at the family compound handling enforcement work and rarely showed his face at the legitimate businesses.

Claire didn't waste a single moment after I got the boot. She immediately set her predatory sights on Nathaniel, the old don's precious heir. While he was undeniably handsome in that dangerous mobster way, Claire's real interest was his position - being the sole heir to a powerful crime family made him the ultimate prize. She started her seduction campaign the moment Nathaniel began personally managing the dairy operation, but he showed absolutely zero interest in her advances. Undeterred, our devious Claire began sending anonymous letters to Nathaniel's wife, planting seeds about supposed affairs and other women. Her strategy was to create enough marital friction that she could slide in as his comforting shoulder to lean on.

The beautiful irony! Nathaniel was practically a choir boy who never so much as looked sideways at other women, yet his paranoid wife bought every single fabricated story and they had a nuclear meltdown of a fight. She even packed up and moved out of their fortified family residence!

Claire, brilliant as ever, pounced on this golden opportunity and made another aggressive play for Nathaniel. This time her sweet manipulation worked and they had their little fling, but eventually he came to his senses and ended it, claiming he was still madly in love with his wife. Claire was absolutely livid with rage. Soon after, Nathaniel managed to reconcile with his suspicious wife, discovered she was expecting their second child, and was over the moon about expanding the family dynasty - their first kid was already several years old, a spoiled little monster that made my skin crawl.

Through some truly impressive scheming and information gathering, Claire learned that Nathaniel needed domestic help at the family compound and somehow maneuvered me into getting the housekeeping position. I'm still not entirely sure how she convinced him to hire me, but here I am, embedded deep in enemy territory. I absolutely loathe being reduced to a servant - his wife is completely insufferable, constantly hovering over my every move and barking orders like I'm some common street trash. But I remind myself every single day that I'm not here to scrub floors and clean toilets; I'm here to execute the perfect revenge.

According to Claire's intelligence network, this pregnant woman is the old don's absolute weakness - he completely worships his daughter-in-law, especially now that she's carrying what might be his precious granddaughter. He's constantly fussing over her wellbeing and treating her like spun glass.

I was genuinely concerned the old crime boss would recognize me from my dairy operation days, but Claire had developed a brilliant disguise strategy. I dyed my hair a completely different color and changed the style dramatically, adding these hideous bangs that constantly hang in my eyes but effectively obscure my facial features. I purchased oversized non-prescription glasses and even got a subtle dental prosthetic to alter my smile. The transformation is so thorough that the old don hasn't shown even a flicker of recognition, though whenever he visits the compound, I keep my head down and try to make myself invisible.

Claire completely lost her mind when she discovered Nathaniel's wife was pregnant with their second child. She swore a blood oath to destroy their marriage permanently and orchestrated this infiltration job for me, promising we'd be perfect partners in revenge. She also quit her position at the dairy operation as part of her elaborate long-term scheme, spinning Nathaniel a sob story about being pregnant with his bastard child. She played the victim perfectly, claiming it wasn't fair for him to abandon her to face family shame alone, so she dramatically moved to a distant city to avoid the gossip and scandal.

Nathaniel, being an honorable family man despite his criminal profession, promised to provide financial support for the child and has been faithfully sending her substantial monthly payments. The absolutely hilarious part? Claire isn't actually pregnant at all! She's been wearing an elaborate fake belly prosthetic! When I asked what her exit strategy was for when this nonexistent baby was supposed to arrive, she just

smiled that evil smile and assured me she had every detail planned out and that Nathaniel would deeply regret choosing his boring wife over her dynamic appeal.

Now Claire says the time has finally come for my personal revenge to move into its active phase. She's provided me with some special pharmaceutical pills that I've been systematically dissolving into Nathaniel's wife's daily juice servings. These medications have sent her blood pressure through the roof and keep her feeling constantly ill and weak. I find it rather satisfying to watch the old don panic and scramble whenever his precious daughter-in-law experiences another health scare.

Nathaniel's wife has reached her eighth month of pregnancy and is absolutely thrilled to be having a daughter. Nathaniel treats her like a delicate flower, catering to her every whim and desire. They're disgustingly devoted to each other, but Claire promises we'll shatter that fairy tale permanently, and the old don will suffer watching his beloved son's world crumble.

I initially thought our revenge plan seemed somewhat tame, but Claire guaranteed it would be more devastating than I could possibly imagine, and afterwards we'd execute something even more destructive against the old don himself. I have complete faith in her evil genius - that old bastard will definitely regret what he did to me.

Claire's sources have confirmed that Nathaniel will be traveling to a neighboring territory this week to finalize an important business arrangement with another family.

Yesterday she provided me with special medicine and explicit instructions to administer it to his wife while Nathaniel is away on business. Claire claims it will trigger premature labor. I found this plan somewhat strange, but she insisted I trust her expertise completely. When the woman goes into labor, I'm specifically not supposed to contact any legitimate medical professionals but instead immediately alert Claire, who will dispatch a trusted "midwife" to handle the situation.

I'm not entirely convinced this is such a brilliant strategy, but I gave my word to help execute this revenge, so I'll definitely play my part perfectly.

Claire has always been on the heavier side, which is why some people call her "Pudge" behind her back, though never to her face - she has a vicious temper when provoked. But I've learned to see past her physical appearance to appreciate her brilliant mind and ruthless determination. She's exactly the kind of ally I need for this revenge mission against the Sullivan family.