Mafia Mask 541

Chapter 541: Moment of Truth

Daniel's POV

The weight of our investigation findings pressed against my chest as I closed the last surveillance file on my desk. Lila would be shattered when she learned what we'd uncovered about her true parentage, and every protective instinct in my body screamed to shield her from that devastation. Yet keeping this buried wasn't an option in our world. Sometimes I questioned whether starting this investigation into the Sullivan family's darkest secrets had been wise. Across my office, Katarina sat in the leather chair by the window, staring out at the city skyline with troubled eyes.

"Having doubts about exposing this conspiracy?" I asked, shutting down my encrypted laptop.

She turned toward me, conflict written across her refined features. "I've been wrestling with it since we got the DNA results back. Destroying my husband's peace and dragging his family through this nightmare feels cruel, but allowing Claire to escape justice for what she did all those years ago feels even worse." Her voice carried the exhaustion of someone who'd lived too long in the shadows of family secrets. "Honestly, Daniel, I can't decide which path causes less damage."

"Lila's going to suffer the most when this comes out," I said, voicing the fear that had been eating at me.

"She always bears the brunt of Claire's machinations." Katarina's expression hardened with familiar anger. "But you know what they say about truth setting people free. Once the initial shock passes, maybe Lila will finally find peace without Claire's psychological warfare hanging over her head."

"God, I hope you're right."

The office door swung open as Beckett entered with Nathaniel trailing behind him, both men radiating the kind of tension that preceded either violence or revelations in our circles.

"We're here as requested," Beckett announced, his voice carrying the edge that meant he was prepared for the worst.

Nathaniel’s sharp gaze fixed on me with the intensity of a man who’d survived decades in the underground nobility. "My son refuses to explain why you’ve called this meeting, but his behavior suggests we’re dealing with something that could destabilize the family. What’s this about, Daniel?"

I gestured to the chairs positioned across from my desk. "Please, sit." When they declined my offer of scotch, I drew a steadying breath. "Nathaniel, you remember Beckett mentioning his suspicions that Lila might actually be your late wife’s daughter rather than Claire’s biological child?"

"An absurd theory," Nathaniel replied with the certainty of a man who’d built his empire on controlling information. "Yes, there are similarities, but I witnessed what happened when I returned from that business trip overseas back then."

"I didn’t find the theory absurd," I said carefully. "After extensive discussions with Beckett, we decided to conduct a thorough investigation. I need you to understand my motivation—Lila deserves freedom from Claire’s manipulation, and she can’t break those chains while believing that woman gave her life."

"But Claire is her mother, despite being a poisonous excuse for one," Nathaniel insisted, studying me as if I’d suffered a breakdown.

"Everything we’ve uncovered suggests otherwise," I said quietly.

The color drained from Nathaniel’s weathered face. "What exactly are you telling me?"

For the next hour, I systematically presented our evidence, watching as Nathaniel’s composure disintegrated. He demanded to examine every document, every photograph, every piece of forensic proof we’d gathered through careful investigation of corrupted medical records and bribed hospital staff. His emotional response was brutal to witness—shock transforming into grief, then dawning comprehension of the magnitude of Claire’s deception.

"Are you confirming she truly is my blood?" he finally managed, his voice cracking with years of suppressed doubt.

"That’s exactly what all the evidence confirms," I said gently. "Lila is your and Alice’s biological daughter. Claire stole her from you both and raised her as her own."

"My daughter... my real daughter..." Nathaniel’s voice broke with overwhelming emotion. "Claire took her from me, from Alice’s memory. She’s been living a lie all these years while I mourned the child I thought I’d lost!"

His declaration stirred something profound in my chest. "Lila has always been yours, Nathaniel. Your bond with her has been real from the beginning—your instincts recognized your own blood even when your mind couldn’t." I thought of my own fractured relationship with my biological father. "But we can’t keep this from her. She has the right to know her true history."

"This revelation will destroy her," Nathaniel whispered, echoing my deepest fears.

"We’ll surround her with support," I promised. "We’ll make certain she understands our love is unwavering, and we’ll help her navigate through the aftermath."

Despite believing in truth’s ultimate power to liberate, I couldn’t dismiss the agony that typically preceded that freedom. Was I making the right decision by insisting Lila learn about her origins? I could only hope her suffering would be temporary and that she’d emerge stronger, happier, and finally liberated from Claire’s toxic control.

"You’re right," Nathaniel conceded after a prolonged silence. "We can’t hide this from her anymore."

"Then we should leave. She’s at my place and probably wondering why I’m running late."

When we arrived at my penthouse, the scene greeting us was almost surreal in its normalcy—Lila, Zoe, Jude, and Sybilla were laughing at something Jude had just said. The moment Lila spotted her father, she leaped up and rushed to embrace him.

"Dad! What brings you here tonight? I already told you I’m recovering fine." Her smile faltered as he examined the healing scratches on her arms from the recent kidnapping attempt.

Nathaniel’s voice caught with emotion. "That psychopath had no right to touch you..."

"I’m okay, Dad, truly." She hugged him tighter, then stepped back. "Come meet my friends properly."

After introducing Nathaniel to everyone, Lila noticed Beckett and Katarina entering behind us.

"Of course you’re here too, Beckett." She laughed, embracing her brother warmly. "And Katarina, since when did you become such a worrier?"

"I’ll use any excuse for weekend time with you," Katarina replied with strained lightness.

Within minutes, Zoe’s sharp instincts detected the undercurrent of tension. "I should head out." At the door, she gave me a meaningful look. "Call if you need anything at all. I’ll check in tomorrow, and you can update me then." I nodded gratefully as she departed.

"I’m leaving too," Jude announced, already guiding my sister toward the exit. "Are you staying at my place tonight, babe?"

"Yeah," Sybilla agreed, clearly eager to escape the growing tension. "Maybe we can invite MP over for drinks."

She quickly gathered an overnight bag from the guest bedroom and left with Jude, trailing a chorus of goodbyes.

As the door closed behind them, Lila’s expression shifted to serious concern. She looked at each of us in turn, her intuition clearly detecting that something momentous was about to unfold.

"Alright, what’s really going on?" she asked directly.

The moment of truth had finally arrived.

Chapter 542: Blood Reveals Truth

Lila’s POV

The moment my family walked through the door of Daniel’s penthouse looking like they had just attended a funeral in enemy territory, I knew something was terribly wrong. My father’s weathered face bore the weight of a man who had seen too many family betrayals, Beckett paced the marble floor like a caged wolf ready to tear apart anyone who threatened our bloodline, my sister-in-law wore that practiced smile she reserved for when Sullivan family business went sideways, and Daniel—my protector—looked like a man who had just discovered his worst fears about the underworld were true.

Something was definitely catastrophic.

Zoe had left earlier after spending the afternoon helping me recover from the recent kidnapping ordeal. We had laughed until our sides ached, watched classic crime films, devoured imported chocolates and pastries, and I had even shared secrets I normally kept buried deeper than family enemies. When Jude and Sybilla arrived later with their security detail, they had done their best to distract me from the trauma, making my recent brush with dangerous enemies seem like a distant nightmare. But they too had quietly departed with their bodyguards, leaving just my inner circle and the suffocating silence that filled rooms when mafia families faced existential threats.

"Speak," I commanded, studying their faces with the intensity I had learned from watching my father negotiate with rival families. "What’s happened now?"

"Little one," Daniel began carefully, choosing to position himself in the leather armchair across from me instead of beside me on the Italian sofa. My father and Beckett flanked me like soldiers protecting their don. "We have uncovered something that changes everything about your bloodline."

"I’m listening," I said, meeting his gaze directly. "And if you’re wondering where to begin, I suggest you start with whoever’s blood is really running through my veins."

Beckett retrieved his encrypted phone, the kind we all used for family business. "Lila, examine this photograph carefully."

I studied the image on the screen, my breath catching. It appeared to be a portrait of me, but aged using some sophisticated software. I glanced at Beckett, completely bewildered.

"That woman isn’t you," he explained, his voice tight with controlled emotion. I noticed my father’s eyes glistening with the kind of tears reserved for fallen family members.

"Then who is she?" I pressed.

"She’s my mother," Beckett replied, his words hitting like bullets. "You never saw photographs of her because Claire destroyed everything in the family estate, but our grandparents had secretly preserved several images and entrusted them to me when I took over family operations. I keep a private collection and this one secured on my device."

"Remarkable that I bear such resemblance to her," I murmured, examining the photograph again with new understanding.

"Yes, the likeness is extraordinary," Beckett confirmed. "Especially after your recent transformation—the golden highlights, discarding those conservative glasses and dental work, updating your style. The resemblance only became undeniable after you stopped hiding behind Claire’s preferred image of you."

"So that explains why everyone in the family reacted with such shock when they saw me at your estate that evening. But what are the implications?" I demanded.

"It means," Beckett said slowly, each word carefully measured, "I suspected you weren’t Claire’s biological daughter. I believed you might be my mother’s child." His revelation echoed in my mind, making the room spin like I had been drugged. "I discussed my suspicions with Daniel, and he launched a comprehensive investigation."

"What did you just tell me?" I struggled to process his words, as if they were spoken in some dialect I couldn’t quite comprehend.

My father cleared his throat with the gravity he reserved for the most serious family meetings. "Daughter, my first wife—Beckett’s mother—was carrying a child and died during delivery. She bore a baby girl who also perished. Allow me to explain the entire sequence of events."

As my father recounted the circumstances surrounding my birth, something cold and predatory stirred in my chest. He had to repeat portions of his account because my mind was reeling so violently I couldn't focus on his words.

When he concluded, nausea crashed over me like a tidal wave.

"So what precisely are you telling me?" I asked, my voice steady despite the chaos in my head. "From what I comprehend, I'm not Beckett's mother's biological daughter, despite bearing her exact features. Is that your conclusion?"

"Little one, the situation is far more complex," Daniel interrupted. "My investigation led me to contact a detective contact, my most trusted ally in the force near your hometown. He's an exceptional investigator who uncovered disturbing evidence."

Daniel described his colleague's interview with the corrupted nurse Sonia, the suspicious death of my father's former household staff member's sister, the mysterious sealed documents she had transferred before her death, and finally the discovery of a medical journal with deliberately removed pages. The information flooded over me so rapidly I could barely absorb the implications.

"What does this journal reveal?" I asked, anxiety sharpening my voice. "Daniel, what secrets does it contain?"

"The journal documents that Claire was never pregnant," Daniel stated with brutal directness. "It alleges she wore a prosthetic belly and had the corrupt medical staff administer drugs to Beckett's mother that compromised her blood pressure, and later substances to trigger premature labor."

"Is that what murdered her?" My pulse accelerated dangerously. "Is that what caused your mother's death, Beckett?"

"Most certainly," Beckett replied, tears streaming down his face as he gripped my hand like a lifeline.

"That woman belongs in a federal prison," I said, fury building inside me like molten steel. "I don't care if she gave birth to me or not, she must answer for these crimes." I shifted uncomfortably on the sofa, and my father gently stroked my back.

"The legal situation isn’t straightforward," Daniel explained. "The statute of limitations has expired on these particular charges."

"But if Claire was never pregnant, and you buried your wife and daughter," I turned to my father, "then who gave birth to me?"

My father couldn’t speak through his overwhelming grief.

"We cannot be certain," Daniel replied softly. "It could be the woman nurse Sonia mentioned, who reportedly delivered twins. Claire arranged for nurse Aria to deliver Beckett’s mother’s baby on the same night this other woman went into labor. But the journal entries might contain fabrications, and Claire could genuinely be your biological mother."

"I need absolute certainty," I insisted, desperation bleeding through my controlled facade. Then a terrifying possibility struck me. "Wait—if Claire isn’t my mother, does that mean you’re not my father?"

My father broke down completely, his sobs raw and devastating. I held him fiercely, refusing to accept the possibility that I wasn’t the daughter of this incredible man who had loved me unconditionally and taught me everything valuable about loyalty, honor, and family. His anguish tore through my heart like shattered glass, and in that moment, DNA seemed utterly irrelevant compared to the lifetime of devotion we had shared.

Chapter 543: Bonds Beyond Blood

Lila’s POV

Lost in a whirlwind of doubt and warring emotions, only one certainty remained—my love for the two men beside me ran deeper than any blood tie. It was authentic, unshakeable, and far more meaningful than any laboratory analysis could ever prove.

"I cannot stop being your daughter!" I pressed myself against my father’s chest like he was my lifeline, feeling his powerful arms encircle me as tears cascaded down my cheeks.

I surrendered completely to this moment, sensing Beckett's presence as he joined our embrace. No words were needed when our tears conveyed everything—their anxieties matched mine perfectly. The possibility that our bond might fracture simply because we might not share DNA seemed ludicrous when faced with such deep devotion.

The connection that united us wasn't encoded in genetics but carved into my soul. Every shared experience, every lesson learned, every precious moment had shaped my identity far more than chromosomes ever could.

When what seemed like hours had passed, my father slowly drew back, cupping my face in his calloused hands. He brushed away my tears with gentle thumbs, giving me that same protective smile that had comforted me since childhood.

"Daughter! You will forever be my daughter—flesh of my heart and spirit! Nothing can alter that truth. You are Lila Sullivan, my cherished daughter." He kissed my forehead softly, cementing his vow.

"And don't imagine for one moment you'll stop being my sister," Beckett interjected with surprising lightness. "You'll always be my little princess."

I found myself laughing despite my tears at the pet name he'd dropped when I'd declared myself too mature for such endearments.

"I love you both beyond measure. You are my family." I squared my shoulders, gathering my resolve. "But I must learn the truth. I must discover if that woman truly gave birth to me."

"We're awaiting the DNA analysis," Katarina interrupted, capturing my attention.

My father's demeanor brightened marginally as he regarded her. "So that explains your encounter with Claire yesterday."

"What encounter?" I questioned, puzzled.

"Oh, this is absolutely priceless," Beckett chuckled, offering me his phone. "Just hit play."

The footage revealed Katarina practically attacking Claire, concluding with her victoriously clutching handfuls of hair. I felt torn between shock and admiration.

"I apologize that she targeted you afterwards, but we required her hair samples," Katarina said with regret.

"She didn’t strike because of that incident. Claire always targets me, as you’re well aware. But I’ve ended it today. I warned her never to approach me again, and next time, I’ll have Daniel place her under arrest."

"About time!" Daniel released a dramatic sigh, settling deeper into his chair.

"How did you obtain my sample?" I asked, facing him directly.

"From your brush, tiny one. Hardly complex detective work," he responded with mild amusement.

They described running multiple DNA analyses, refusing to trust preliminary findings. It would require several more days for verification, and we’d have to remain patient. Daniel mentioned they still needed to locate the nurse called Aria.

"There’s another matter, sweetheart," my father said seriously. "My divorce proceedings are scheduled for this week. That woman has lost her sanity. I’m concerned she’ll target you, particularly when she realizes I’ve transferred virtually everything out of my name."

"The family enterprises..." I exhaled, looking toward Beckett. "More than ever, I need to sign everything over to you. None of this rightfully belongs to me. If you refuse, I’ll retain legal counsel."

"Lila, don’t be ridiculous!" Beckett objected. "You’re not transferring anything to me. It’s your birthright—our grandparents bequeathed it to you," he stressed ’our’ deliberately.

"But they wouldn’t have if they’d known—" I started, but my father interrupted.

"If you truly believe that, you've forgotten the depth of their devotion to you."

His statement struck me deeply. "No, I haven't forgotten. Their love still flows through me daily. It's remarkable how my feelings for them remain unchanged—only their physical presence is absent, along with the longing to feel their embrace." I seldom discussed this, but my most treasured memories were at my grandparents' estate, where I'd felt completely welcomed and adored.

"Because love surpasses physical proof—it always resonates stronger. Just as you continue loving your deceased grandparents, I love you as my daughter without requiring tests or genetic confirmation," my father declared, kissing my forehead once more.

"I love all of you, each and every one," I said, surveying these four individuals who had become my anchor. My gaze rested on my detective's tender expression, his eyes radiating such devotion that I felt precious beyond measure. "But there's additional information I should know, isn't there?"

"Yes," Beckett confirmed. "But most critically, you need to understand that we two are the sole Silvers. I'm your only brother, and you're my only sister. Justin isn't Dad's son."

"What?" I stared at him, astounded.

"According to the journal, Justin is another man's child. Which clarifies much—he's as corrupt as his biological father," Beckett mused.

"Who is Justin's real father?" I asked, turning to my father, whose expression twisted with revulsion.

"Little one, you know everything crucial for now," Daniel intervened. "It's growing late, and everyone's drained and famished. Why don't we have dinner and rest? Tomorrow we can reveal everything else and resume this discussion."

Observing my father's exhausted appearance, I agreed. "You're absolutely right. Let's postpone the remainder until tomorrow." I gently smoothed my father's hair, receiving a loving smile in response.

"Perfect timing. I ordered food, and it just arrived." Daniel stood to retrieve our meal from the building's concierge. I hadn't even noticed him placing the order.

"I'll prepare the table," I volunteered, with Katarina following to assist. The mystery surrounding Justin's parentage could wait; my father needed relief from these emotional revelations.

Chapter 544: Unholy Alliances

Claire's POV

The steel doors of St. Dominic's Cathedral had barely sealed shut when Felicia swept toward me, her designer heels clicking against marble like a metronome of gossip. That woman functioned as the Sullivan territory's unofficial intelligence network, collecting whispers from every corner of our shadowy empire like rare diamonds. According to her sources, Beckett and Nathaniel had departed the city recently in their armored convoy—undoubtedly racing to check on that insufferable little princess. I was certain she'd contacted her precious big brother, whimpering about my unexpected social call.

It hardly mattered. As long as the family registry still listed me as her mother, I retained absolute authority over that pampered heiress. My visit had been nothing more than stress relief after that imbecile Katarina dared to cross me in front of the other family matriarchs. When fury reaches its breaking point, one requires a suitable outlet, and mine happened to be conveniently accessible.

Upon further reflection, I needed to expedite my timeline. The inheritance transfer demanded immediate attention, and Connor's patience for his promised bride was wearing dangerously thin.

Who could have predicted Connor's obsession would reach such intensity? Though it possessed a grotesque logic—once she'd abandoned her deliberately crafted plainness, the girl was virtually identical to that deceased saint everyone still worshipped. Connor had been utterly devoted to his late wife, nearly succumbing to madness when cancer claimed her from his casino empire.

The true shock was witnessing her rebellion. I'd invested extensive time meticulously sculpting her psyche, monitoring her every interaction, poisoning her mind with antiquated concepts that pleasure equaled sin and would invite family shame. All designed to keep her properly subjugated beneath my thumb.

I had personally orchestrated her revolting appearance—those deliberately unfashionable clothes, that hideous hairstyle with those juvenile braids and unflattering bangs that concealed her bone structure. Even those thick-rimmed glasses were specifically selected for maximum unattractiveness. Since childhood, I'd taken extraordinary precautions to ensure she resembled no one of consequence, masking her features behind heavy lenses and shapeless garments, encouraging excessive indulgence in sweets to maintain her soft, unremarkable figure. Then she defied every carefully laid foundation, fled our controlled environment, escaped my influence, and in a short time obliterated years of my architectural manipulation.

Beckett had grown increasingly suspicious, even commissioning a private DNA analysis. That explained his unexpected intrusion earlier, desperately searching for hair samples from my bathroom. The fool thought he could uncover family secrets through science.

Fortune had smiled upon me when I spotted him exiting the Thorne family's private medical facility—immediately suspicious since he avoided doctors with religious fervor despite possessing constitution like steel. In our insular criminal society, information flowed like blood through veins. That chattering receptionist at the medical center had been more than eager to share every detail of Beckett's confidential visit. After that intelligence, orchestrating his public humiliation became elementary.

I would have paid handsomely to witness Beckett's devastated expression when those laboratory results confirmed that spoiled little mouse was indeed "my daughter." The mental image alone sent waves of vindictive pleasure through my system.

"You appear unusually satisfied today, Claire. Care to enlighten me about this private joke?" Connor's gravelly voice shattered my reverie as he materialized beside my pew. I'd been so absorbed in savoring my manipulations that his approach had gone unnoticed.

"Nothing that concerns your business interests. You certainly took considerable time arriving," I complained, reminding him that retrieving his precious bride served his ambitions as much as mine.

"Unlike certain individuals who spend their days orchestrating others' misery and plotting fresh cruelties, I maintain legitimate enterprises. My casino operations require actual oversight," Connor replied, settling into the ornate wooden seat with practiced authority.

The man remained thoroughly disagreeable, showing contempt toward everyone unfortunate enough to cross his path. His poor wife had endured systematic abuse; I suspected her death stemmed more from psychological torment than any medical condition. Despite approaching his twilight years, Connor

wasn’t entirely without masculine appeal. Though past his physical prime, he still commanded considerable presence and vitality, perhaps somewhat senior to Nathaniel but retaining that dangerous charisma that had built his smuggling empire.

"I didn’t summon you to this sacred place to endure insults," I snapped, refusing to allow his domineering attitude to intimidate me within God’s house.

"Then state your requirements clearly. What resources do you need to deliver my future wife?" His predatory smile betrayed barely contained eagerness to possess that delicate little dove.

"Tell me honestly, Connor—is this sudden fascination with my daughter purely because of her youth and innocence, or because she’s become the living incarnation of your departed angel?" I offered my most venomous smile, observing his features darken with barely controlled rage.

"Don’t you dare invoke her sacred memory. You lack the moral standing to speak her name. She embodied decency, honor, virtue—while you represent nothing but a—" I severed his tirade before completion.

"Silence yourself immediately, or you can abandon any hope of claiming my daughter as your bride," I threatened, successfully halting his verbal assault.

"Your daughter? Are you absolutely certain of that biological relationship, Claire? I find such claims increasingly difficult to accept, not merely because you’ve consistently treated her with open cruelty, but because she’s become a perfect replica of the other one." His observation contained uncomfortable accuracy, though the sole witness to that ancient truth now resided far beyond earthly reach.

"She remains my daughter, Connor. Let us focus on immediate practical matters." Better to conclude our business arrangement and exile this crude man from my sanctuary.

"Excellent. State your specific demands," he commanded, crossing muscular arms while fixing me with an intense stare.

"I require two experienced operatives to extract Lila from her current protection. She's apparently under police surveillance and Thorne family security. Following her return, you may claim your bride soon after," I proposed with businesslike efficiency.

"I can provide qualified personnel, but when she arrives, we proceed directly to the altar upon her return to our territory," Connor insisted with typical impatience.

"Absolutely impossible. First, she returns here to face me personally. I have unfinished maternal business requiring resolution. Only then will I release her for your wedding," I remained immovable.

"Unacceptable! I refuse to accept a bride covered in visible bruises on our wedding night," he protested with surprising consideration.

"I guarantee she'll remain intact for your pleasure. You'll have the memorable wedding night you've been craving." I would simply ensure my corrections remained carefully concealed beneath clothing.

"A brief period, Claire. That represents my final offer." Connor believed he could dictate terms to a Sullivan family matriarch.

"Why such desperate urgency to claim her? Feeling your mortality approaching?" I laughed with deliberate mockery, immediately regretting the provocation.

"I never experience desperation, particularly considering how frequently you warmed my private chambers, remember, Pudge?" Connor rose to his full intimidating height, towering over my seated form. "You possessed certain charms in your youth, but nothing approaching beautiful Lila's perfection. That girl represents absolute exquisite!"

"You disgusting animal! Never use that degrading name again! And never reference our past arrangements! Once this business concludes, stay permanently away from my presence!" I confronted him with righteous fury, detesting that humiliating nickname from our sordid history.

"Ha-ha-ha!" His booming laughter echoed through the cathedral's sacred spaces. "You'll forever remain Pudge in my memory! I'll dispatch two qualified operatives to coordinate with you. Handle this matter swiftly—I want my prize delivered as soon as humanly possible." He turned and strode from God's

house with confident steps, leaving me seething with impotent rage. At least he would provide necessary assistance—we were all equally motivated to resolve this situation with maximum efficiency.

Chapter 545: Stolen Memories Return

Lila's POV

Sleep had abandoned me completely throughout the night. My mind churned endlessly over the revelations about our family's dark secrets. Despite the blood ties being questioned, these people remained my family in every way that mattered—my heart belonged entirely to the Sullivan dynasty. The kitchen was shrouded in early morning silence as I nursed my coffee, finding solace in the familiar ritual. Everyone else was still asleep, giving me precious time to prepare something special for Dad and Beckett. If I was struggling to process these shocking discoveries about our family's criminal empire, they must be suffering even more—Beckett had lost his mother because of that treacherous woman's machinations.

"I can practically hear those wheels spinning from across the room, little one," Daniel's voice startled me from my troubled thoughts.

He stood silhouetted in the doorway, devastatingly handsome despite the early hour. His black pants and loose white shirt somehow managed to accentuate every powerful muscle without clinging too tightly—the perfect picture of controlled strength that made my pulse quicken.

"There's just so much to digest, Daniel. Everything about our family's business feels like some twisted nightmare."

He approached with that predatory grace I'd grown to love, casually lifting my mug and drinking from it. "Hey! That's mine," I protested playfully, desperate to lighten the oppressive atmosphere weighing down on us.

"You can have it back," he murmured seductively, dropping to his knees between my legs and capturing my lips with his.

The kiss was both tender and demanding, warm and intoxicating, tasting of rich coffee mingled with his natural masculine essence that always drove me wild.

"I think I want all my coffee served this way from now on," I whispered breathlessly when we parted, delighting in the satisfied smile that curved his lips.

"Ahem!" Beckett's voice cut through our intimate moment from the doorway. "Do you mind not consuming my little sister like she's your personal breakfast?"

"Actually, I do mind the interruption," Daniel replied without missing a beat, pulling me closer against his chest and pressing a possessive kiss to the crown of my head.

"At least you two kept the noise down last night," Beckett teased mercilessly, making heat flame across my cheeks.

"Only because Nathaniel's home and I respect the old man," Daniel shot back, continuing their familiar verbal sparring that had become routine.

"Move over and let me properly greet my sister." Beckett nudged Daniel's leg with his foot, grinning.

These two had developed such an easy brotherhood over the months, teasing each other like blood relatives despite their vastly different backgrounds in law enforcement and organized crime. Daniel squeezed me tighter before reluctantly releasing me, while Beckett made an exaggerated show of rolling his eyes at the display. I stood to embrace my brother properly, needing that familial connection.

"Did you manage any sleep at all?" Beckett asked, still holding me close with protective concern.

"Not even a minute," I admitted honestly.

Every time I'd closed my eyes, haunting images of Beckett's mother flooded my mind—that beautiful woman with her gentle features and loving gaze that Beckett had described so often. He'd always painted such vivid pictures of what an incredible mother she'd been, and I'd secretly harbored deep envy over his experience with genuine maternal love.

In my most private moments, I used to fantasize about being her daughter instead, receiving the same tenderness and unconditional affection she'd showered on Beckett. Now, with our family's criminal foundation crumbling so dramatically around us, I found myself mourning a connection that had never truly existed. If I had actually been her biological daughter, I would have known a mother's pure love, even if only briefly. She would have cherished me while carrying me beneath her heart for those precious months. But reality proved far crueler than any childhood fantasy could prepare me for.

"I didn't get much rest either," Beckett confessed, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead before stepping back. "But I'm absolutely starving, and that incredible spread you've prepared reminds me of grandma's Sunday dinners. You even made her famous chocolate carrot cake!"

"Grandma taught me so many of her secret recipes. I miss her wisdom every single day," I said wistfully, remembering the woman who'd raised me with such care despite the family's dark business.

"She's watching over our family now, along with my mother," Beckett smiled softly, though pain flickered in his dark eyes. "Come on, let's eat before I waste away." He headed toward the formal dining room with his characteristic humor.

"Shouldn't we wait for everyone else to join us?" I called after him. Family meals had always been sacred in our household—something I'd learned from my grandmother's teachings about maintaining unity despite our dangerous lifestyle. Yet Beckett, with his bottomless appetite and mysteriously perfect metabolism, was already eyeing the elaborate breakfast spread.

"They're already gathering," he shouted back knowingly.

After we'd finished eating, we reconvened in the living room to continue yesterday's devastating revelations. I could sense they were still withholding crucial information from me, and their obvious reluctance only heightened my anxiety.

"This Tiffany woman embezzled quite a substantial sum from the family's legitimate businesses," I observed, reviewing the damning financial documents spread across the coffee table like evidence in a federal case.

"Yes, and I need an exceptional lawyer to untangle this mess and track down those offshore accounts," Beckett sighed heavily, rubbing his face with obvious exhaustion.

"I know just the person for this kind of work," Daniel offered immediately. "He’s the absolute best at handling organized crime financial cases."

"And what else did this woman document in her private diary?" I pressed insistently, trying to extract the information they were clearly hesitant to share with me.

"Lila, Tiffany was discovered dead—drowned in Crest Lake under suspicious circumstances," Beckett explained with obvious reluctance. "Her diary explicitly mentions Claire making repeated threats against her life. We also found several threatening communications in the storage facility—all typed and printed professionally, nothing handwritten that could be traced. But we discovered something even more damaging: a digital recorder containing audio of their final conversation. Tiffany was actively blackmailing Claire, demanding increasing sums and threatening to expose everything to federal authorities. Claire warned her the extortion would end permanently and that Tiffany would deeply regret crossing our family."

"So Claire actually murdered Tiffany?" I asked, stunned by the brutal implications of our family’s criminal activities.

"It certainly appears that way, but there’s no definitive legal proof that would hold up in court," Daniel replied carefully. "Tiffany’s death was officially ruled accidental by the coroner, though her sister maintains that Tiffany was absolutely terrified of water and never learned to swim."

"We also recovered these photograph albums from the storage unit." Daniel placed two worn leather albums on the coffee table with ceremonial gravity. "Claire appears prominently in every single image."

Dad picked up the albums and began examining the faded photographs with intense concentration. "Yes, that’s definitely Claire in this one," he confirmed grimly, pointing to a woman in one vintage photo. "And this man here is Connor," he added, indicating a figure standing beside her with obvious familiarity.

"There was also jewelry recovered, Nathaniel," Daniel said solemnly, producing an ornate wooden box. "Some pieces looked surprisingly familiar to me from family descriptions."

Dad opened the box with trembling hands and carefully inspected each precious item. He lifted a delicate ring, studying it with intense focus—an exquisite white gold band encircled with diamonds and crowned with a stunning oval topaz that caught the morning light.

"I never thought I'd see this again," he whispered, tears glistening in his weathered eyes. "I searched desperately for this ring after my wife's murder. This is the engagement ring I personally designed for her—the very first piece I ever created specifically for her beautiful hands. It vanished completely after she was killed." He showed us two tiny engraved initials hidden inside the delicate band.

"Do you recognize the other jewelry pieces?" Daniel asked with gentle respect.

"Every single one," Dad confirmed, wiping away tears that spoke of decades of grief. "They all belonged to my beloved wife. Some were gifts I designed and crafted myself—each piece bears my distinctive maker's mark."

"Then they rightfully belong back with you," Daniel said with quiet authority, gesturing toward the precious collection.

"Would you mind if I took a moment alone?" Dad asked, visibly shaken by the emotional weight of recovering these treasured memories. "I need some time to process this."

"Of course, Dad," I reached for his arm, wishing desperately I could absorb some of his profound pain.

"Take all the time you need, Nathaniel. This is your home," Daniel replied with warm understanding.

After Dad left the room with his wife's recovered jewelry, I couldn't contain my burning curiosity any longer. This question had tormented me throughout the sleepless night, and I demanded answers.

"So who exactly is Justin's biological father?" I demanded sharply, looking between Beckett and Daniel with growing frustration. "Why won't either of you tell me the truth?"

"It's not that we're deliberately refusing to tell you..." Beckett began awkwardly, glancing at Daniel for moral support in this delicate conversation.

"Tiny one, this particular revelation will make you absolutely furious," Daniel warned with obvious concern for my emotional state.

"Lila, it makes perfect sense now—I keep wondering how our family never recognized it before," Beckett added with growing certainty. "Justin is his father's exact duplicate in every detail, down to the smallest facial features."

"But shouldn't Dad confirm everything with comprehensive DNA testing?" I pressed urgently. "What if everything documented in this diary is elaborate lies designed to destroy our family?" Part of me desperately wanted it all to be fabricated—not for Claire's sake, but to spare Dad additional heartbreak.

"He'll absolutely take the test for legal certainty," Beckett assured me firmly, "but I honestly don't believe the diary contains lies. You'll understand completely when you know the full truth. Maybe it's better if you read everything yourself and draw your own conclusions."

I nodded with grim determination. I needed to see every piece of evidence they'd uncovered with my own eyes—no matter how devastating the truth might prove to be for our family's future.

Chapter 546: Breaking Glass Silence

Gideon's POV

I glanced at my watch, weighing whether to contact Daniel. The weekend had just begun, and I was impatient for news about that storage facility where we'd discovered the key. Daniel had mentioned his sister-in-law could access its location and would conduct her own investigation. Patience had never been my virtue, particularly with a case this compelling, but waiting seemed my only option.

My phone buzzed unexpectedly in my palm. The screen showed my contact from the police department in Aria's new territory—the officer I'd enlisted to surveil her movements. My pulse quickened as I answered.

"Well, look who it is, my favorite investigator," I said, anticipation building in my chest.

"Gideon, buddy! Think your hotshot detective friend could get me a position at his precinct?" His laughter boomed through the speaker.

"That depends on what information you've brought me," I responded, detecting promising news in his tone.

"That woman you wanted monitored? She's in custody right now. We just dismantled her illegal medical operation. The entire enterprise."

I almost fumbled my phone. "You're not serious!"

"Completely serious. She was posing as a licensed physician, conducting illegal procedures. You essentially delivered me the case of my career, friend. Our department had been pursuing this underground clinic for an extended period. Every time we closed in, she'd disappear into thin air. You understand how it works—this city offers plenty of places to vanish, and she consistently secured properties through private contacts using falsified documentation."

"This woman was genuinely operating such a scheme?" I couldn't conceal my astonishment.

"Without question. Once you provided her details, locating her proved relatively simple, despite her departure from the address you'd given me. I conducted surveillance for several days and observed her entering this dubious residence—windows completely covered, no street visibility. Various women would arrive and leave at irregular hours. Then I witnessed one woman emerge appearing severely ill—she collapsed directly on the pavement. I transported her to the hospital where physicians confirmed she'd undergone a botched procedure. At that moment, I had no alternative but to file a report."

"You handled it perfectly," I confirmed.

"The lead detective mobilized a team immediately. We executed the raid during an active procedure—another woman was on the examination table. It was deeply disturbing, Gideon. The evidence we gathered connected her to multiple cases we'd been investigating for months. Both the fake nurse and her accomplice were arrested on serious felony charges—they're looking at substantial prison sentences."

This exceeded my expectations. "Any possibility I could interrogate her? I require specific information."

"That's precisely why I called. My detective wishes to express his gratitude personally and says you can do whatever you need except arrange her release," he chuckled. "He's euphoric about solving this case."

"I'm heading there immediately," I declared, already reaching for my keys.

The long journey provided ample opportunity to process this revelation. I reached the police station that afternoon, where my contact welcomed me warmly and led me to the detective's office.

The detective, riding high on his successful operation, proudly exhibited everything they'd confiscated from the illegal clinic. Remarkably, Aria had carefully documented all her criminal enterprises—client files, photographs, signed consent forms—as though managing a legitimate medical facility.

He walked me through the evidence with obvious satisfaction, detailing their discoveries thus far. The computer files contained records spanning years.

"But this represents the real treasure," he announced, opening a folder marked "Premium Clients." "These files were encrypted, but a technology expert from Port Harbor broke the security codes. They contain records of affluent clients. Aria's operation functioned through referrals, but when clients ceased bringing new business, she'd initiate blackmail schemes."

"She was simultaneously running extortion operations?" This woman posed greater danger than I'd comprehended.

"Precisely. She'll remain incarcerated for an extended period. Examine this particular case," he indicated a specific folder. "She's been extorting this client for several years."

The family name on the file seized my attention. This couldn't be possible—what were the chances? Yet in my profession, coincidences rarely proved coincidental.

"Could I review this folder more thoroughly?" I requested. The detective granted me mouse control and stepped away to process a recent arrest.

Although I attempted to convince myself it was merely a common surname, my instincts suggested otherwise. Better to verify. I retrieved my phone and contacted Daniel.

"Gideon, how’s everything?" His voice carried strain.

"Overwhelmed with developments. You?"

"Identical situation. My brother-in-law examined that storage facility. The missing diary pages were there, exactly as we anticipated."

My eyebrows rose. "That’s excellent news!"

"Yes and no. The contents are... devastating," he exhaled heavily. "We had to inform Lila of everything."

Now I understood his exhaustion. "I assume that conversation didn’t proceed smoothly?"

"It’s still developing. What about your situation? Any positive updates?"

I detailed Aria’s arrest, the illegal medical operation, and my current position at the police station examining evidence.

"This extends far beyond my initial assessment," Daniel observed.

"Indeed. However, I need to ask something—purely for thoroughness. As my mother frequently advises, to satisfy my curiosity." I hesitated. "Are you acquainted with a Sasha Mendez Martinez?"

His voice sharpened immediately. "Yes, why do you ask?"

My stomach clenched. I'd hoped my suspicions were unfounded. "She appears in Aria's files. Had a procedure years ago and has been blackmailed in recent years."

The unmistakable sound of breaking glass echoed through the phone, followed by complete silence.

Chapter 547: Blood Stained Truth

Lila's POV

The morning hours slipped away while I moved between consoling Beckett about his mother's tragic fate and watching Daniel methodically examine each piece of evidence recovered from Tiffany's hidden safe deposit box. Tiffany had been more than just a household staff member in the Sullivan estate—she'd been Claire's confidante and accomplice, until her sudden death under suspicious circumstances had silenced her forever.

Before delving into the leather-bound diary that might contain the darkest secrets of our family's past, I decided we all needed proper nourishment. I made my way to the sprawling kitchen of Beckett's penthouse to prepare my father's beloved comfort meal: traditional beef ragu with creamy polenta. Katarina joined me, taking charge of preparing his favorite tiramisu. We were both determined to provide some warmth and normalcy for my father during these harrowing revelations about the Sullivan family's blood-soaked history.

"My dear daughter, your grandmother would be so proud. You've inherited her gift for making a meal feel like a loving embrace," my father said with genuine warmth after we'd finished our lunch. He turned to Katarina with equal affection. "And your tiramisu rivals anything served in the finest restaurants of Little Italy."

Katarina glowed with pride while we shared a moment of much-needed laughter. It was a precious island of peace in the storm that had engulfed our lives since we'd begun uncovering the truth about Claire's machinations. The tranquil atmosphere shattered when Daniel's encrypted phone buzzed urgently. He excused himself with a terse nod, carrying his espresso cup as he stepped into the secure communication room.

The crash of shattering porcelain sent me rushing toward the sound. I found Daniel standing motionless among the broken fragments, his face ashen and his hands trembling almost imperceptibly.

"Forward me that encrypted file immediately, and contact me the moment you finish interrogating that witness," he spoke into the phone, his voice carrying the cold authority of a man accustomed to commanding both respect and fear. The call ended with a sharp click.

When I studied his expression, I saw something I'd rarely witnessed—tears threatening to spill from the steel-gray eyes that had intimidated countless criminals. I approached carefully, placing my hand gently on his tensed forearm. He startled as if he'd forgotten anyone else existed.

"What kind of news could shake you like this?" I asked softly.

"I need some time to process this." He started to crouch down to gather the broken ceramic, but I intercepted him.

"Leave it. I'll handle the cleanup." He nodded wordlessly before walking away, his usual commanding presence replaced by something far more vulnerable. Whatever intelligence he'd received had clearly struck at the very core of his composure.

After disposing of the broken cup, I noticed Beckett and Katarina had established an efficient rhythm in the kitchen—Beckett scrubbing dishes while Katarina dried and organized everything with military precision, their conversation occasionally punctuated by shared memories and gentle laughter. My father had settled into the leather armchair in the main living area, and Katarina suggested I join him for what we all knew would be a difficult conversation. I positioned myself beside him and finally opened Tiffany's diary with trembling fingers.

Each page I turned revealed new depths of horror. The woman described in these meticulously detailed entries—who might or might not be my biological mother—was nothing short of a monster. If I'm being completely honest, my only motivation for wanting to be Claire's daughter was the desperate desire to share the Sullivan bloodline. Without that connection to my father and Beckett, I would have felt nothing but relief at having no genetic ties to such a creature.

I reached the entry documenting the day of Beckett's mother's murder. Reading it made bile rise in my throat—the calculated malice, the cold satisfaction she took in orchestrating suffering was beyond human comprehension.

According to the diary, Tiffany had waited until my father departed with young Beckett for their scheduled meeting with the family's weapons suppliers, knowing they'd be occupied until sunset. She seized this opportunity to slip a carefully measured dose of black market abortifacients into Beckett's mother's morning juice. She described with chilling detachment how the pregnant woman began experiencing excruciating contractions several hours after consuming the poisoned drink. Tiffany even had the callousness to complain about having to clean blood stains from the imported marble floors when the woman went into violent premature labor.

The diary revealed how Tiffany immediately contacted Claire, who took considerable time to arrive with her so-called medical expert. This supposed midwife looked anything but professional—she was a rough woman with prison tattoos visible on her arms, carrying a suspicious medical bag and emanating the arrogance of someone who believed herself untouchable. She commandeered the master bedroom and ordered Tiffany to remain outside. Tiffany documented how the screams grew increasingly desperate and primal until, after a final, soul-piercing cry, she heard a baby's brief wail that was quickly silenced.

After considerable time had passed, the fake midwife emerged with blood-stained hands, coldly instructed Tiffany to allow the woman to rest peacefully, and departed without another word. Tiffany, showing no concern for checking on them until my father's imminent return forced her hand, eventually entered the bedroom. She described approaching the bed where the woman appeared to be sleeping peacefully beside her newborn, but something about the infant's bluish complexion alarmed her. Upon closer inspection, she discovered both mother and child were completely lifeless. When she pulled back the blood-soaked sheets, she found the mattress saturated with evidence of hemorrhaging.

In absolute panic, she contacted Claire, who according to Tiffany's own written words—erupted in maniacal laughter at the news, declaring it the perfect revenge against the Sullivan family's legitimate bloodline. Tiffany documented her desperation to flee the estate immediately, but Claire manipulated her into staying, warning that she'd be hunted down as a murderess if she attempted to run. Claire coached her on how to convince my father that the death was natural, the tragic result of unforeseen complications during childbirth.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I absorbed every horrifying detail. The level of premeditated cruelty was incomprehensible to any decent human being. I set the diary aside and looked at my father, who was absently stroking my hair while staring into the distance with haunted eyes.

"Dad?" He turned toward me with visible effort. "Have you read through all of this?"

"It was among the most difficult experiences I've ever endured," he replied, drawing a shuddering breath.

"You never suspected foul play? Wasn't there any official investigation?" I needed to understand how such an atrocity had gone undetected for decades.

"Daughter, when I returned home and Tiffany explained that my wife had gone into unexpected labor and couldn't reach our family physician but had contacted a midwife through underground channels, I found it unusual but not alarming. But then she delivered the news that both my wife and newborn daughter were gone." His voice cracked with years of suppressed grief. "My entire world disintegrated. Your brother Beckett was devastated beyond consolation, and suddenly he was all I had left in this world."

"I cannot imagine surviving such devastating loss," I whispered.

"I consulted with our family doctor, a trusted ally who'd served the Sullivan organization for decades, and requested his professional examination of everything. I wanted to avoid an official autopsy because I couldn't bear the thought of desecrating the body of the woman I'd cherished above all else. The doctor concluded it was death from natural hemorrhaging that could have occurred after the midwife's departure. He determined the baby had suffered sudden infant death syndrome, which unfortunately isn't uncommon in premature births," my father explained with visible pain. "I attempted to locate this mysterious midwife, but nobody in our network had any knowledge of her identity, and Tiffany herself was found dead shortly after."

"I keep questioning whether there are any limits to human cruelty. Daniel always says there aren't any boundaries," I said, still reeling from everything I'd discovered.

"I completely agree with his assessment. But I've spent years drowning in self-blame. My first wife had significant challenges conceiving children. We had Beckett through what seemed like divine intervention, but we always dreamed of expanding our family. When Beckett was still a child, we seriously pursued that dream. She sought treatment from specialists and began extensive medical intervention. She had some condition affecting her reproductive system—what was the specific terminology?" My father frowned, struggling to recall the medical details.

"Polycystic ovary syndrome?" I suggested, my pulse suddenly accelerating.

"Precisely. She underwent months of treatment and successfully became pregnant. Learning we were expecting a daughter filled us with indescribable joy. But I couldn't understand why she was

experiencing such severe complications when her pregnancy with Beckett had proceeded smoothly. After everything happened, I blamed myself for pushing for a second child. Now I finally understand what truly occurred, but I still carry guilt for ever becoming entangled with Claire." His voice was heavy with decades of undeserved self-recrimination.

"None of this was your responsibility," I said, embracing him tightly.

My mind was racing with implications. When I'd been diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome, my doctor had specifically asked about family medical history, explaining the condition often had genetic components. I hadn't been able to provide any relevant information then. Now, discovering that Beckett's mother had battled the identical condition, combined with my apparent physical resemblance to her—it seemed far too significant to be mere coincidence. I needed definitive answers, and I needed them soon.

Chapter 548: Buried Secrets Surface

Daniel's POV

I thought Lila's situation had pushed us to the breaking point, but fate wasn't finished with its cruel games. Sasha was supposed to be buried in the past, a sealed vault I'd locked away forever. When Gideon mentioned her name during our call, confusion hit me like a sledgehammer. He had no connection to her world, no reason to know she even existed in my life. Then he explained the discovery, and my entire foundation crumbled beneath me. It felt like taking a direct hit from an armored truck at full throttle. The crystal tumbler slipped from my numb fingers, and I didn't register Lila's approach. The room spun violently, my vision blurring in and out of clarity.

Operating on pure instinct, I asked Gideon to send the files immediately. I needed concrete evidence, needed to witness this horror with my own eyes. Lila's tender touch on my shoulder barely penetrated my consciousness. When I turned toward her, everything remained an indistinct haze. Eventually, I became aware of the shattered crystal scattered across the hardwood. As I moved to collect the pieces, Lila intervened, worry carved deep into her features. She asked if I was alright. How could I respond when my world had just imploded? I muttered something about needing space and retreated to our bedroom.

The instant I secured the door, my phone buzzed with Gideon's encrypted message containing the damning evidence. My hands shook uncontrollably as I accessed the files. There was Sasha's photograph, her elegant signature on countless documents, wire transfer records, medical procedure receipts, laboratory results. She had been well into her pregnancy when she visited that underground

medical facility years ago. But the revelations didn’t end there—she’d made multiple previous visits: twice during our marriage and once as a teenager. I read and reread every document, my mind refusing to accept the devastating truth. Three pregnancies terminated while we were husband and wife. Three potential heirs I never knew existed.

How could she commit such betrayal? I’d always been transparent about wanting children. She claimed to share that dream.

The records showed her initial visit as a teenager, accompanied by her mother to a facility recommended by someone in our extended network. The subsequent appointments, she attended alone.

Her most recent procedure had triggered severe complications requiring emergency hospitalization. Her mother was summoned to provide support. Medical notes indicated that due to the complications, Sasha required emergency surgery that would prevent future pregnancies. Since she hadn’t brought other clients to the facility, her name was transferred to what they called the "insurance" file.

Gideon clarified through additional texts that the "insurance" file contained women being extorted by someone named Aria who ran the operation. He attached supplementary documentation showing years of blackmail payments from Sasha—dates, threatening communications, payment amounts, transfer methods. The sums were astronomical, paid regularly through cash drops or untraceable cryptocurrency transfers.

Sasha had bled money to protect this secret from our families.

After processing the complete picture, I called my father immediately. He couldn’t have known about this deception. He’d pressured us relentlessly for grandchildren throughout our entire marriage.

"Daniel! What a pleasant surprise," he answered, his voice relaxed and content.

"Where are you right now?" I asked, abandoning any pretense of casual conversation.

"Just returned to the estate. What’s happened?" His tone shifted instantly to alert concern.

"I just discovered Sasha terminated a pregnancy," I stated without cushioning the blow.

"When did this happen? Who was the father?"

"That pregnancy during our divorce proceedings. She didn't miscarry—she had it terminated at an illegal clinic."

"What are you telling me, Daniel? That's inconceivable! I refuse to believe she would deceive our family so completely." His denial was predictable, and I understood his shock completely.

"I assumed you were unaware. But it wasn't an isolated incident," I drew a sharp breath. "Authorities shut down an underground medical operation and discovered documentation proving Sasha had multiple procedures there."

"This has to be fabricated evidence," he protested vehemently.

"It's legitimate. The operation that exposed this clinic was conducted by a detective with no knowledge of our family. The facility operated in another territory. The contact who provided me this intelligence never knew about Sasha," I explained with forced patience.

"How did this information reach you?" His skepticism remained strong.

"A police contact discovered the files, noticed the surname connection since she used our family name during the marriage, and contacted me. I verified the details and requested the complete documentation."

"I cannot accept she was capable of such deception."

"This wasn't her first experience with them. And she's been paying extortion money for years to the woman who operated the facility."

"Can you provide me copies of this evidence?" Classic behavior from my father, always requiring physical proof.

"Yes, but this information is highly confidential. You cannot share it with anyone outside our immediate circle," I warned sternly.

"I won't, but I will ensure they pay for this betrayal." I knew my father's methods well enough to understand his promise. He would be merciless in his pursuit of justice, and frankly, I felt no sympathy for what was coming.

As our conversation neared its end, he asked, "Daniel, how are you handling this revelation?" Genuine paternal concern colored his voice.

"I'm not handling it well, but I will recover."

"I owe you an apology, son, for insisting that woman was suitable for our family." For the first time in memory, my father offered a completely sincere apology.

"I hope this teaches you something valuable. Never impose your preferences on our personal lives again; you and Mother share responsibility for this disaster." I ended the call, transmitted the files, and threw my phone onto the bed. Once Lila's crisis was resolved, I would confront Sasha and demand complete answers.

I sat there staring into emptiness for what seemed like endless hours. After grieving three potential children I never knew existed, it was time to return to the present reality. Somehow, my buried past had collided directly with Lila's current nightmare.

When I finally emerged from the bedroom, Lila was curled beside her father, engaged in light conversation with her brother and sister-in-law. Her diary rested on the nearby table; I couldn't determine if she'd begun reading it yet. The moment she noticed me, she rose quickly and wrapped me in her arms.

"Are you alright?" she whispered softly against my ear.

Chapter 549: Hidden Truths Revealed

Lila’s POV

When Daniel walked through the door of our penthouse apartment, his shoulders carried the weight of whatever news that encrypted call had delivered. The hard lines around his eyes spoke of exhaustion and distress that went beyond his usual police work. Whatever his contact in the underground network had discovered had clearly shaken him to his core. Without hesitation, I rushed into his arms, wrapping myself around his solid frame as worry flooded through me.

"Are you okay?" I whispered against his chest, inhaling the familiar scent of his cologne mixed with the stress of his day.

"More or less, little one," he replied, his voice strained in a way that made my heart clench. "Let’s sit down. I need to share something with everyone."

Daniel guided me to the leather sofa in our living room, his calloused hand never leaving mine as he addressed the room with the gravity of a man delivering verdict. "My contact in the precinct just called with an update on our investigation. They’ve apprehended Aria. All evidence points to her being the black market midwife who delivered your first wife’s child, Nathaniel."

"That sounds like progress, doesn’t it?" Beckett asked from his position near the window, though uncertainty colored his voice as he studied Daniel’s expression.

"It is progress," Daniel confirmed, but the smile that touched his lips never reached his dark eyes.

My father leaned forward from his armchair, his weathered brow furrowing with the instincts of a man who had navigated decades in the criminal underworld. "How can we be certain this woman is the same one the household staff contacted all those years ago?"

"My contact is currently at the holding facility where they’re keeping her," Daniel explained, his detective training evident in his methodical delivery. "He’s planning to question her directly about the Sullivan family connections."

"There’s something else bothering you, Daniel. What is it?" my father pressed, his sharp gaze reading the unspoken tension in Daniel’s posture.

Daniel’s gaze dropped to the marble floor, his jaw working silently for several moments. "This woman was arrested for operating an illegal medical facility that served the criminal families. Underground abortions, off-the-books births, falsified medical records. And I just discovered that my ex-wife—I’ve been divorced for years now—had multiple procedures with this same Aria during our marriage. Learning this..." his voice faltered, cracking with raw emotion, "it hit me harder than I expected."

"I’m truly sorry," my father responded with the simple dignity of a man who understood loss. "Beckett mentioned your divorce situation. What that woman did to you was cruel beyond measure. I understand the pain of losing children you never got the chance to meet." My eyes widened at my father’s unexpected vulnerability, emotion catching in my throat at this rare glimpse into his private grief.

"Thank you for understanding," Daniel said quietly. "My contact will reach out after speaking with Aria. Until then, we wait."

"Since waiting is all we can do right now," Katarina suggested from her place beside Beckett, "perhaps a walk around the estate would help clear everyone’s minds?"

My father quickly agreed to the suggestion, and soon Katarina departed with him and my brother, leaving them to discuss family business in the privacy of the gardens. Daniel and I decided to remain behind—I wanted to finish reading through the diary we’d discovered, and Daniel clearly needed time to process the emotional bombshell that had been dropped on him.

Once we were alone in the spacious apartment, I turned to face him fully. "Big guy," I called softly, using the pet name that never failed to soften his expression.

He moved from the armchair to join me on the couch, his strong arms pulling me onto his lap with the gentle care he always showed me, as if I were made of precious glass.

"You’re not really okay, are you?" I asked, searching his tired eyes for the truth he might try to hide.

"No, I’m not," he admitted, anguish etched across his handsome features. "I’ve always dreamed of being a father, little one. She kept saying she wanted children with me, claimed she couldn’t understand why conception wasn’t happening naturally. All while secretly ending multiple pregnancies behind my back. I just can’t wrap my head around that level of deception."

"Do you still want to be a father?" I asked, my heart racing as I feared his answer yet needed to know where we stood.

"Yes, little one. It’s always been important to me," he said, his thumb tracing gentle circles on my cheek. "What about you? Do you want children someday?"

"It’s complicated," I sighed, leaning into his touch. "Remember my polycystic ovary condition? The family doctor warned it might cause fertility complications down the line. What if I can’t give you children?"

"If that happens, we could explore other options, including adoption, if you’re comfortable with that path." Daniel’s voice was tender as he cupped my face. "Listen, Lila, I know your mind is racing with worry right now, but it doesn’t need to be. Yes, I’ve always wanted to be a father, but now I only want that future if you’re the mother of my children. What hurts about Sasha’s actions wasn’t just the terminated pregnancies—it was that she never gave me a choice or even included me in the conversation. In any relationship, that level of dishonesty is devastating to the foundation of trust."

"I understand," I nodded, though my thoughts continued swirling with possibilities and fears.

"You’re distracted," he observed with the perceptiveness that made him such an effective investigator. "Forget about children for now. My past is complicated and messy, and I’ll never forgive Sasha for her deception. When the right time comes—which isn’t now—we’ll discuss expanding our family. But I know you’d be honest with me about something that important." He studied my face carefully. "Something else is troubling you."

"I feel selfish focusing on my family’s mystery while you’re dealing with this revelation about your ex-wife," I confessed, guilt weighing on my conscience.

"Don’t apologize for that," he said firmly. "Your family situation is serious—it’s natural for it to consume your thoughts. How far did you get with the diary?"

"I stopped reading at the part where his first wife died in childbirth," I explained, my voice wavering slightly. "Daniel, is there any real possibility I could be her daughter?"

"Would you want to be?" he asked gently, his detective instincts recognizing the deeper need behind my question.

"If I were, I'd have my father's blood running through my veins. I know that shouldn't matter in the grand scheme of things, but part of me desperately wants that biological connection to him. Is that wrong of me?"

"Not at all," he assured me with conviction. "Understanding where you come from gives you a sense of belonging and identity. It's perfectly natural to want that connection, to see yourself reflected in someone else's features or mannerisms."

"Beckett always described his mother as this wonderful, loving person," I continued, the words spilling out. "When I was little, especially during Claire's worst episodes of cruelty, I'd fantasize that Beckett's mother was mine too, that Claire and Justin weren't my real family. I've never told anyone that before."

"I'm honored you'd share something so personal with me." He brought my palm to his lips, pressing a tender kiss there.

"There's more," I added, my voice gaining strength. "I look remarkably similar to her according to the old photographs. And my father mentioned she suffered from polycystic ovaries too—which is often hereditary. She needed fertility treatments for her second pregnancy because they wanted another child so desperately..."

"Slow down, Lila," Daniel smiled, gently interrupting my rapid stream of thoughts. "Take a breath. We could arrange for discrete DNA testing between you and Beckett, and potentially ask your father about exhuming her remains for comparison if it comes to that. Considering everything we've learned about the criminal medical network and falsified records, it's entirely possible she could be your biological mother. That diary might not contain the complete truth about what happened."

"Do you really think there's a chance?" I asked, hope flickering dangerously in my chest.

"Absolutely. And we'll discover the truth together, no matter what it takes." His expression softened into a playful smile that chased away some of the darkness from earlier. "But for now, since we have this rare moment of privacy, how about giving me a kiss? I'm feeling a little needy after today's emotional revelations."

His exaggerated whine made me laugh despite everything, and all my worries momentarily faded as his lips found mine in the sanctuary of our shared space.

Chapter 550: Federal Questions

Aria's POV

How the hell did I end up rotting in this godforsaken holding cell?

None of my usual clients from the families would have ratted me out. And where was that corrupt detective I'd been paying monthly bribes to for insider information on any investigations into our operations? He wasn't among the cops who slapped the cuffs on me. Something had gone catastrophically wrong with my network, but what exactly? Either way, I needed to figure out an escape route from this nightmare, and fast.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back," a uniformed officer barked as he approached my cell.

I obeyed without protest. I hadn't uttered a single word since they dragged me in here and intended to keep my mouth shut. No point stirring up more trouble than necessary. He clicked the handcuffs into place and marched me down a sterile corridor to an interrogation room where two men sat waiting. One was the detective who'd busted me, wearing that smug expression like he'd just taken down a major crime boss. The other guy was a stranger—but who the hell was he?

"Aria! Such a privilege to have you grace our modest precinct with your presence. I trust you're finding your temporary quarters satisfactory, but don't get too comfortable. By tomorrow evening at the latest, you'll be trading this place for a nice federal penitentiary cell," the detective sneered, clearly savoring every moment of my downfall.

"Federal prison?" I asked, the full weight of my predicament finally sinking in.

"Oh absolutely, this is just a brief layover, you might say," the detective taunted. "Meet Special Investigator Gideon. He's got some very interesting questions about your side business, and frankly, I'm dying to hear what kind of story you'll spin for us."

The detective gestured toward his companion, another fed by the look of him. I maintained my silence and studied him carefully. My situation was looking increasingly dire, especially since they'd caught me in the middle of an operation, but I'd keep my damn mouth shut until I could devise some kind of exit strategy.

"Aria, the matters I need to discuss with you concern certain activities you engaged in many years ago."

I couldn't mask my shock when I heard those words.

I had a pretty clear idea what he was fishing for, but why dig up ancient history now, after all these years?

"Whatever you think you know about the past, that was decades ago. Ancient history that wouldn't concern federal investigators today," I said, maintaining steady eye contact.

"That's where you're completely mistaken. Your past activities are of tremendous interest to federal law enforcement." Gideon's smile was predatory. "Let's begin with this: were you acquainted with Mrs. Claire Ward Sullivan, wife of the Sullivan family patriarch?"

"Everyone in the territory knew about Mrs. Sullivan. She married into the Sullivan operation, one of the most powerful families in the region controlling high-end real estate and art acquisition. That family name carries serious weight," I replied confidently, since this was widely known information throughout the underworld.

"Interesting perspective. How exactly do you know these details?" He studied me intently. "When you disappeared from the territory, Mrs. Sullivan hadn't yet married into the Sullivan dynasty. In fact, Nathaniel Sullivan had only recently lost his first wife."

"Well, somebody must have filled me in over the years through the grapevine, I can't remember specifics..."

Damn it to hell. I'd made a critical error. I needed to watch my words much more carefully with these federal questions.

"Who exactly have you maintained contact with from that territory over the years?" The investigator was systematically backing me into a corner.

"No one in particular, but you run into people from the old neighborhood occasionally over the years." That was the best deflection I could manage.

"Tell me, Aria, you delivered Nathaniel Sullivan's first wife's child. What went so catastrophically wrong? Why did both the mother and infant die during what should have been a routine delivery?" He didn't ask whether I'd handled that birth—he stated it as an established fact. How the hell did he know I was the one who managed that delivery? What had surfaced back in that territory that I wasn't aware of?

Had they finally gotten to Claire?

"Women die during childbirth in our line of work more often than people want to admit," I shrugged, attempting to project indifference. "She drew the short straw, that's all. I was providing a professional service to the family. The infant arrived prematurely, and the woman developed dangerously high blood pressure."

"And why exactly did you handle this high-risk delivery instead of getting her proper medical attention at a legitimate hospital? Why wasn't she transported to a real medical facility? From what I understand about obstetrics, her elevated blood pressure made this an extremely dangerous situation requiring specialized care." This investigator knew far too many specific details for comfort.

"Couldn't tell you the family's reasoning. All I know is they summoned me, I performed the necessary procedures, and when I left that night both mother and child were breathing and stable. If they died sometime after my departure, that tragedy has nothing to do with my professional services," I said, feeling my anxiety climbing despite my best efforts to stay composed.

"That very same evening, before Mrs. Sullivan's delivery, you attended another birth on the outskirts of the territory. What transpired there? That woman was rushed to a legitimate hospital in critical condition, and to this day she maintains she delivered twins, even though her husband discovered only one infant in the room when he returned." How the hell did he know about her? She lived far from the main territory, rarely ventured into town—practically nobody knew she even existed.

"That woman's clearly suffering from some kind of trauma-induced delusion. If her husband found only one child in that room, it's because there was only one child born," I replied, my anxiety spiking noticeably.

"Are you absolutely certain about that assessment, Aria?" The investigator pressed harder. He obviously knew much more than he was revealing. I needed to figure out exactly what intelligence they'd gathered. I needed to contact someone with connections immediately.

"Investigator, I'm invoking my right to legal counsel. I want to make a phone call to my attorney." I turned toward the detective, who was still wearing that insufferable smirk.

"Oh Aria, we were having such a productive conversation!"

The detective's sarcasm was becoming increasingly intolerable. Arrogant bastard.

"It's my constitutional right, detective. I won't be answering another single question until I make that call and get proper legal representation in this room." I insisted firmly. The two men exchanged meaningful glances.

"Fine by me," the detective conceded. "Here, you can use my personal cell phone."

"Absolutely not. I want to use the station's official landline. I'm not using your personal device so you can monitor or harass whoever I contact for legal assistance," I replied without hesitation.

"My, aren't we the paranoid one!" The detective's sarcasm was grating on my last nerve. "Fine, have it your way."

He escorted me to an old-fashioned desk phone across the room. I'd observed earlier that it was an older model without caller identification display, which made it perfect for my immediate needs.

"Move her restraints to the front, and when she finishes the call, escort her back to the holding cell," I overheard the detective instructing the uniformed officer who'd brought me from my cell.

With my hands cuffed in front of my body, I grabbed the handset and quickly dialed the number, positioning myself strategically to block their view of the keypad.

"What." That familiar, ice-cold voice answered. At least she wasn't sitting in a federal holding cell somewhere and could still potentially help me out of this mess.

"Darling, how have you been?" I asked with forced cheerfulness, as though speaking to a cherished old friend.

"What do you want from me?" Her irritation was crystal clear—completely understandable, since throughout our long association I only reached out when I needed financial assistance or favors.

"I need high-quality legal representation. The feds have arrested me," I stated directly.

"And exactly why should that be my concern? I warned you repeatedly that your little side operations would eventually land you in serious federal trouble." That woman had always been completely self-serving.

"Yes, but would you believe they're asking detailed questions about events that occurred long ago?" I spoke with deliberate calm.

"What exactly did you tell them?" Her tone instantly became hostile and threatening. I knew she'd do precisely what I needed her to do now.

"That I require immediate legal counsel. For the moment," I replied evenly and heard her cursing viciously on the other end. "One of the top-tier attorneys, darling!" I emphasized that last word with particular meaning. "Oh, and it absolutely must be today, within the next few hours, because I have no

intention of being transferred to federal prison." I lowered my voice to barely above a whisper. "Or I might just decide to make a comprehensive deal with these federal investigators." I hung up immediately without giving her any opportunity to respond and was promptly escorted back to my holding cell.