Mafia Mask 551

Chapter 551: The Connection

Gideon’s POV

I watched Aria carefully as she spoke into that ancient rotary phone. Every gesture, every inflection in her voice screamed seasoned criminal - the kind who had spent extensive time navigating the dangerous waters between legitimate business and underground operations. My curiosity burned. Who was receiving that call? My gut told me she was alerting this Claire person that a federal investigator was suddenly digging into old family business. But I couldn’t be certain, especially since she’d deliberately chosen that vintage telephone that left no digital trail. I was genuinely surprised the relic still functioned in this modern precinct.

The moment she stepped out of the interrogation room, I turned to the detective, whose own connections made him invaluable for cases like this.

"I need to know who she contacted," I said, my eyes fixed on the door she’d just exited.

"My friend, this woman is a master manipulator." The detective’s weathered face split into a knowing grin. "She thinks she’s outsmarted us, but she forgot something crucial - this building belongs to people with very long memories and very sophisticated equipment. I’m equally curious whether she reached out to any of her old associates."

He approached the desk with the confidence of a man who’d spent decades navigating both sides of the law. Opening the top drawer, he gestured for me to come closer. Inside sat a caller identification device connected to the phone line, meticulously recording every number that passed through. The technology was as antiquated as the telephone itself, but in this business, sometimes the old ways proved most reliable. It might not pass federal evidence standards, but considering Aria’s flexible relationship with legal boundaries, I felt justified. I simply had to know who she’d contacted.

The detective manipulated the device with practiced ease and scratched the number onto a notepad. I committed it to memory before entering it into my phone’s secure notes application.

"This area code traces back to her hometown territory," I observed. "I believe I know exactly who received that call."

The detective pulled a disposable cell phone from the drawer and powered it up. "Let's test your theory," he said, dialing the number and activating the speaker function.

"Hello?" A woman's voice cut through the static, commanding and distinctly irritated.

"Who's calling?" the detective asked with deceptive gentleness.

"Claire. Who wants to know?" Her tone carried the razor-sharp hostility typical of family women who'd learned to guard their words carefully.

"Claire? Aren't you related to Maia?" the detective couldn't suppress his amusement at the obvious lie.

"Never heard of them. Don't waste my time." She was clearly preparing to disconnect.

"Isn't this the Citadel residence?" the detective pressed, referencing another name.

"This is the Sullivan residence," she snapped back with increasing agitation.

"Do you happen to have contact information for the Knightleys family?" the detective's smile widened with each sign of Claire's mounting frustration.

"Listen, kid, I don't know any of these people you're babbling about. Now leave me alone - I've got legitimate business to handle." The line went dead with a sharp click.

"Was your instinct accurate?" the detective asked, clearly entertained by his encounter with the sharp-tongued matriarch.

"Absolutely correct!" I confirmed with a matching smile.

"So our target contacted an old associate and requested legal protection," he mused, spinning a ballpoint pen between his weathered fingers. "Could this Claire be documented in that client database?"

"Already searched extensively. Claire's name doesn't appear anywhere," I responded.

"That file only contains records of 'clients,' as Aria euphemistically calls the women who sought her underground medical services. Claire was never a client herself. We're more likely to find our deceased person's information in those records."

His reasoning made perfect sense given the intricate web of connections and obligations.

"You're absolutely right. I hadn't approached it from that angle." I moved toward the computer terminal.

I had initially searched only for Claire's name, reviewing the "Priority Clients" folders in chronological order until locating Sasha Mendez's comprehensive file. Then Aria's arrest had interrupted my investigation, forcing me to abandon the search.

I resumed scanning through the digital records systematically, but discovered nothing relevant.

The woman whose mysterious death I'd been investigating for an extended period remained completely absent from any documentation.

Disappointment crashed over me like freezing water. We desperately needed Aria to cooperate more extensively, but how could we apply the necessary pressure? My frustration intensified with each passing moment.

"Peculiar how this Claire appears to be treated as a special exception," the detective remarked thoughtfully. "Why would Aria maintain detailed files on everyone except her?"

"That's precisely what I intend to discover."

"Gideon, are you planning to return home tonight?" he inquired. "I ask because we'll need to wait for her family lawyer before we can continue questioning Aria formally, and that process might consume considerable time."

"I can extend my stay another day," I sighed with resignation.

"Don't let this discourage you. I'm preparing the formal arrest documentation now and submitting requests for search warrants covering Aria's residence and business locations. We might uncover significantly more evidence there," he assured me with professional confidence.

"Excellent strategy. Would it be possible for me to speak with her privately in the holding area? Unofficially, of course?"

"You can, but exercise extreme caution not to compromise my arrest by crossing any procedural boundaries," he warned sternly. I nodded my complete understanding.

He arranged for a uniformed officer to escort me to the detention cells.

I found Aria positioned on the concrete bench, feet elevated, back pressed against the cold wall in a posture of calculated defiance.

"I'm not discussing anything until my family attorney arrives," she declared upon recognizing me.

"Come on, Aria, let's be completely honest with each other. You understand that what I'm investigating won't alter your current legal situation," I said, leaning casually against the reinforced bars. "Any activities you might have been involved in back then are beyond the reach of current prosecution."

"I'm well aware of that fact. What I don't comprehend is your motivation. If everything's legally expired, why does federal law enforcement maintain active interest?" She shifted her position, lowering her feet to the concrete floor.

"Let's call it professional curiosity about family history."

"Curiosity killed the cat, and satisfaction brought it back," she replied with a thin, knowing smile.

Chapter 552: Blood Reveals Truth

Lila’s POV

Sunday afternoon had slipped away, and I still hadn’t returned to reading Alice’s private journal. Yesterday, Daniel had convinced me to set aside my search for answers about my true parentage while my Sullivan family associates visited, knowing they’d be departing for their respective territories by evening. He’d secured all the evidence—surveillance photos, intercepted communications, the journal—and locked them in his personal safe, promising we’d have a peaceful Sunday away from family politics.

But peace wasn’t in the cards for us in this world of underground nobility.

Zoe had contacted me yesterday after I’d assured her I was managing the shock of possibly being switched at birth reasonably well. She’d insisted on visiting today, partly to check on me and partly to assess Katarina’s condition. Jude and Sybilla joined us for lunch, with Sybilla quickly charming my father with her sharp wit and ability to navigate family diplomatic conversations. By mid-afternoon, Zoe and Finn arrived, and just as we settled into the secured living room, the encrypted intercom chimed. Daniel excused himself to answer it.

"Everyone, I’d like you to meet Detective Gideon, the investigator who’s been helping us navigate the corruption in our case," Daniel announced, returning with a tall, visibly exhausted man in his early adulthood. He methodically introduced each of us, careful not to reveal too much about our family connections.

"I apologize for intruding on your Sunday gathering," Gideon said, settling into the offered armchair with the wariness of someone who’d spent years dealing with powerful families. "I was heading back to the precinct and wanted to update you on what transpired during Aria’s interrogation."

Gideon detailed his interaction with the corrupt private nurse, painting a picture of a truly despicable woman who’d been selling her services to the highest bidders for many years. When he mentioned her financial connection to Claire and displayed the offshore account number she’d reluctantly provided, my father sank back against the leather sofa cushions.

"Dear God," he whispered, his face pale with the realization of what his second wife might have done. "What kind of monster did I bring into our family?"

His devastation was justified. None of us had words of comfort that could ease the weight of potentially being deceived for so many years.

"I always said that woman had the soul of a federal informant!" Katarina proclaimed with such dramatic conviction that nervous laughter rippled through the tension-filled room.

"What else did you uncover during the interrogation, Detective?" Daniel steered us back to the investigation at hand.

"She confirmed the other woman whose delivery she attended that same night did indeed give birth to twins," Gideon said, consulting his encrypted notes. "But that's where her cooperation ended. She claimed she left that woman's estate and proceeded directly to your family's private medical facility."

"So she departed the first location with one of the infants," Daniel concluded, his voice carrying the grim certainty of someone who'd seen too many family betrayals.

"That appears most likely, but she refused to confirm the switch or reveal what happened to that child. She was equally uncooperative about the events at your family's compound. Once her high-priced attorney arrived—clearly funded by someone with serious money—she shut down completely. I attempted to extract information from her legal counsel, but he's a familiar face in our circles. The detective mentioned he's a local attorney who specializes in making problems disappear for wealthy clients," Gideon explained carefully. "Aria did hint that speaking the truth would cost her a current income stream from someone who still pays for her silence."

"Then I could be the daughter of the woman who delivered twins that night," I said quietly, my heart heavy with the implications for another grieving mother.

"That's entirely possible, Lila, but I've been considering another scenario during my hours at the station," Gideon leaned forward, his expression thoughtful in the way of someone who'd solved complex family conspiracies before.

I moved to the edge of the sofa, desperate to hear his professional assessment.

"Always another layer to peel back in these family matters," Daniel observed with dark humor.

"This theory is actually more straightforward," Gideon insisted. "If Claire wasn't actually pregnant, she needed an infant to secure her position in your family. Perhaps Aria took the first woman's child to deliver to Claire."

"That would align perfectly with our evidence," Daniel nodded, his investigator's mind already connecting the pieces.

"But consider this complication—what if your father had requested DNA verification? A negative result would have destroyed Claire's entire scheme," Gideon raised a compelling point. "Sir, did you ever discuss paternity testing?"

"Actually, yes," my father's eyes widened with sudden understanding. "During my final visit to Claire before Lila's birth, when I delivered the monthly payments and checked on the pregnancy's progress. She was particularly manipulative that day—demanding I leave my first wife for her, even suggesting Alice had been unfaithful and any child might not be mine..." His voice trailed off as the implications hit him. "It can't be possible."

"My theory fits every piece of evidence we have," Gideon said with satisfaction. "With her medical bag and credentials, she could have easily concealed an infant. The private medical staff wasn't present during the actual delivery. Aria could have performed the switch—the child who died might have been the other woman's daughter, while you raised her surviving twin."

Hope bloomed within me like sunrise after the longest night. This explanation made perfect sense and would mean another mother hadn't lost both her children. I looked at my father, who squeezed my hand with the protective strength I'd always known.

"This has to be the truth!" Beckett exclaimed, beginning to pace with the contained energy of someone accustomed to taking action.

"You could arrange DNA testing," Finn suggested suddenly. "Lila and Beckett—it would definitively show whether you share the same mother."

"We need to do this immediately, Lila," Beckett turned to Daniel with the urgency of someone who'd spent years wondering about family secrets. "How quickly can we arrange secure testing?"

"Is this type of testing reliable, Finn? I've heard sibling analysis can be inconclusive," Daniel questioned with professional caution.

"That's accurate for standard sibling tests that analyze various genetic markers including X and Y chromosomes," Finn explained with the precision of someone raised in a medical family. "But mitochondrial DNA testing is exceptionally reliable because it's inherited exclusively from the mother and remains identical in all her children."

"Your medical knowledge continues to impress me," Jude shook his head in admiration.

"When your family dinners revolve around forensic discussions and medical mysteries, you absorb considerable knowledge," Finn replied. "I can contact my uncle to collect samples today if you'd prefer not to wait."

"Yes, please!" Beckett and I responded simultaneously, our voices carrying identical hope.

"We should have pursued this approach from the beginning," Daniel reflected. "But if Lila proves to be Alice's daughter, we owe the complete truth to that poor woman who's suffered for years believing no one would believe her story."

"You're absolutely right," my father agreed solemnly. "Perhaps it's finally time to bring buried family secrets into the light."

Later that evening, Dr. Taylor arrived with a discrete medical technician to collect our samples in the privacy of Daniel's secure apartment. My father insisted on being tested as well, determined to provide me with absolute certainty about my paternity. As my blood filled the sterile vial, hope and determination surged through my veins.

"When will we have results, doctor?" I asked, trying to contain my anxiety.

"The paternity test between you and your father will yield results in approximately two weeks," Dr. Taylor explained with professional calm. "However, the sibling test will require roughly a month and a half. Each analysis demands different laboratory procedures and timeframes that unfortunately cannot be expedited."

My spirits sank at the prospect of such extended waiting.

"But darling," my father reassured me with gentle conviction, "if you are my daughter, there are only two possible mothers—either Claire, which seems increasingly unlikely, or my beloved first wife, Alice."

"Two weeks," I repeated to myself, already counting each hour until truth would finally emerge.

As evening descended over the city, our guests departed, leaving just Daniel, Sybilla, and me in the secure sanctuary of his apartment. Despite my physical exhaustion from the emotional revelations, restlessness consumed me—I needed to finish reading Alice's journal and discover Justin's paternity. After Sybilla retired to her guest room, I asked Daniel to retrieve the journal from his safe.

"Wouldn't you prefer to rest and continue tomorrow, little one?" he suggested gently, concern evident in his dark eyes.

"I can't wait another day to discover who Justin's father really was!" I insisted, bringing that familiar protective smile to his face as he moved toward his private office to retrieve the journal that held our family's final secrets.

Chapter 553: Secrets in Storage

Claire's POV

Claire was absolutely right—Nathaniel's parents are completely shattered by the loss of their daughter-in-law and granddaughter. Those old folks from the Sullivan family treated her like their own blood. Now they wander around their mansion with puffy eyes and tear-stained faces, drowning in grief. Perfect revenge against that ruthless don. He stripped me of my position in the family operations, so I took away what he cherished most. The satisfaction I feel watching the Sullivan elders mourn is indescribable.

And that spoiled prince Beckett is finally getting what he deserves now that Claire has moved into the family compound. His days of being treated like the heir apparent are finished.

His grandmother always coddled that boy something terrible, but these days, one wrong move and Claire has him running errands like a low-level associate. Serves him right for thinking his bloodline made him untouchable.

Despite my satisfaction with how everything played out, I'm growing nervous they might discover my involvement in that woman's demise. Federal prison isn't in my future plans. Claire paid that so-called midwife handsomely to disappear overseas, and she should do the same for me. But she's giving me the runaround, claiming she needs time to extract more money from Nathaniel's legitimate businesses. I'm not a patient woman, especially when it comes to collecting what I'm owed. *freewebnovel.com*

Thankfully, I was clever enough to take precautions. The day that woman died, I helped myself to several pieces of her jewelry collection. She was careless, leaving valuable family heirlooms in little boxes inside her dresser instead of securing them in the family vault. I was selective, taking just enough pieces that their absence wouldn't be immediately noticed among her extensive collection. Even Claire doesn't know about my little insurance policy—she asked if I knew anything about the missing pieces when Nathaniel started asking questions about his late wife's jewelry. I simply suggested the midwife must have pilfered them while attending to the birth. Meanwhile, those precious gems and antique pieces are tucked away in my storage facility across town.

I originally rented that unit to store incriminating documents about my activities skimming from the family's money laundering operations and records of the offshore account where I deposited my stolen funds. Insurance, in case the old don decided to hand me over to federal authorities. Now it's proving even more useful. Soon, I'll transfer everything I have against Claire there as well. That serpent would have no qualms about breaking into my apartment to destroy evidence of our partnership. Better to keep it all hidden where she'd never think to look. I've even devised the perfect hiding spot for the key among my late mother's belongings.

Caution is essential when dealing with Claire. She's as cunning as she is wicked, a true daughter of this underworld. I know she's unhappy about my financial demands, which explains her stalling tactics. But I'm no fool either. I've purchased a high-quality recorder for our upcoming meeting at the docks. I'll capture her confession, make her admit to orchestrating the entire scheme, and keep that recording in multiple secure locations. With that leverage, she'll have no choice but to pay what I'm owed or risk exposure to both the family and federal investigators.

I've been monitoring Claire's activities ever since she returned to claim her place in the Sullivan hierarchy. The more dirt I collect on her movements, the stronger my negotiating position becomes. Nathaniel spends his days locked away managing the family's legitimate business fronts until late evening, often returning to the compound intoxicated, completely blind to his new wife's treacherous activities. Meanwhile, she parades around the social circles, playing the role of a virtuous widow turned devoted wife, preaching family values to the other mob wives who hang on her every word. What a masterful performance!

During my surveillance, the new house manager mentioned Claire's supposed charity work with an impoverished Italian community in the outer boroughs. I nearly burst out laughing! Claire helps no one but herself—I learned that bitter lesson when she pretended to assist with my revenge against Nathaniel while merely advancing her own climb up the family ladder. Being naturally suspicious after years in this business, I followed her during these supposed charitable missions. What did I discover? There is no struggling community she's helping. The shameless woman leaves the Sullivan compound under the guise of distributing aid to the needy, only to rendezvous with her lover for passionate encounters in a rented apartment downtown.

The depths of Claire's depravity continue to astound me! Nathaniel had barely buried his wife and infant daughter when Claire maneuvered her way into a marriage alliance and returned from her supposed retreat with a healthy baby, claiming they were the parents. But she was never pregnant during her absence—I have photographic evidence organized meticulously in my files. In every surveillance photo from that period, that deceitful woman maintained her slender figure with a completely flat stomach. I'm still puzzling over where she acquired that infant, but she definitely didn't give birth to it. Perhaps she purchased the child from one of the family's human trafficking contacts.

Yet her deception doesn't end with the stolen baby. Now she's legitimately pregnant—this time carrying an actual child. I confirmed this through my contacts at the private medical clinic where Sullivan family members receive treatment. The abundance of gossiping nurses in this city has served my information-gathering needs exceptionally well.

I overheard her telling her lover the baby was his while crouched beneath their secret apartment window during one of my surveillance sessions. She wouldn't have made such a damning admission if there was any possibility the child belonged to Nathaniel. She'd previously complained to me that Nathaniel hadn't touched her since their wedding ceremony, still mourning his first wife. During this recorded conversation, she swore to her lover that the Sullivan don remained completely uninterested in physical intimacy. Her lover, however, proved equally despicable. He laughed cruelly in her face, denying any paternal responsibility, which sent her into a rage that I thoroughly enjoyed witnessing.

Still, Claire continues her charade throughout their social circle, claiming she's barely recovered from her first delivery and is already blessing Nathaniel with another Sullivan heir. Nothing but elaborate lies! I don't understand how she convinced that grieving fool to accept her story, but this child definitely isn't his. I almost pity Nathaniel—even the most powerful men can be blinded by manipulation. Even after their marriage ceremony, Claire continued her affair with Connor, meeting him in secret locations across the city, and now carries his bastard child.

The truth remains simple: she's always been obsessed with Connor.

They conducted their affair before his wife's convenient death, and afterward, Claire expected him to make her his official woman. When that didn't materialize, she trapped Nathaniel in a marriage alliance instead. Connor consistently mocks her behind closed doors, claiming she's only suitable for bedding, never marriage material for a man of his standing. I've never understood her attraction to that crude, violent enforcer with his terrible reputation—arguably worse than my own dark history—but she remains devoted to him. They resumed their relationship during her absence from the city and continued upon her return to the Sullivan compound. Now they privately ridicule Nathaniel, knowing he'll raise Connor's illegitimate child believing it carries Sullivan blood.

Ultimately, their twisted family drama isn't my primary concern. They can resolve their own sordid problems through whatever violent means they prefer. I simply want my substantial payment so I can disappear from this dangerous city before they discover what really happened at that remote birthing facility and I end up in federal custody—or worse, at the bottom of the river.

Chapter 554: Empty Handed Revenge

Claire's POV

Those three hadn't bothered me since returning from the Thorne estate, which suited me perfectly. I'd expected them to confront me about what I did to that little brat Lila, but the silence was preferable. Let sleeping dogs lie.

Today marked the divorce hearing, my long-awaited opportunity to finally rid myself of Nathaniel while securing half the Sullivan family assets he controlled. I wasn't some naive fool when we married into this organization—I had insisted on shared financial interests. Nathaniel initially wanted to keep the family business separate from our personal arrangement, but a dramatic scene and threats regarding his position as Lila's guardian quickly changed his mind. Still grieving over his other daughter, he caved to my demands without resistance. His precious other daughter...

If he only knew the truth about what really happened to her...

I arrived at the private courthouse right on schedule. These weren't ordinary family court proceedings—the Sullivan family had arrangements with certain judges who understood the delicate nature of our business dealings. Nathaniel was already there, his face contorting with disgust when he spotted me. I ignored his contemptuous glare. The judge called us into his chambers, and we took our seats across from each other. When asked about the possibility of reconciliation, we both answered with a resounding "no." Nathaniel barely acknowledged my presence. I wanted to laugh in his pathetic face but restrained myself. The judge proceeded to the division of assets, and Nathaniel's attorney presented the documents listing our shared holdings in the family operations.

"Very well, according to these documents, Nathaniel, you control the safe house where Claire resides, a vehicle, and a substantial amount in legitimate accounts. And Claire owns a vehicle. The art gallery and real estate holdings appear to be held separately. How would you like to proceed with the division? Will it be amicable?" the judge asked, reviewing the paperwork with practiced discretion.

"Wait just a minute!" I interrupted, sensing a scheme. "He also controls the dairy farm operation and the money laundering network. He's hiding family assets."

Nathaniel turned to face me with a smug expression. "Actually, I don't, Claire. The farm operation, the laundering network, and everything else belonged to my father. His testament has been executed without contest. Everything belongs to Beckett and Lila according to Sullivan family law."

"What are you talking about? I was present when the family council read the will. Your father left you a significant portion of everything," I protested as Nathaniel chuckled.

The judge cleared his throat. "Mrs. Claire Ward Sullivan, according to the documentation Mr. Nathaniel Sullivan has provided, including the sealed family testament, he indeed controls nothing beyond the safe house, vehicle, and legitimate account."

Nathaniel leaned forward. "You see, Claire, the old man specified that certain portions of the testament would only be revealed after Lila reached maturity, and only in the presence of his true heirs—Beckett, Lila, and myself as guardian. Did that detail slip your mind?"

Damn! I had forgotten about that clause. But could the old patriarch have revoked what he'd already granted? Was such manipulation possible even in death?

"But you had management rights in the operations," I argued desperately.

"Ah, that. I transferred those rights to Beckett and Lila right after the testament reading. It made no sense for me to retain a small portion of their inheritance. Besides, I needed funds to finance your extravagant lifestyle while maintaining our cover. That's where the money in the legitimate account came from—what remains after liquidating my management stake. Beyond that, I live on my security consultant salary, which covers our expenses and your luxuries, which have already consumed a significant portion of the proceeds."

I turned to my attorney, who was examining the documents Nathaniel's lawyer had submitted with growing concern.

"Yes, Claire, that's accurate," my attorney confirmed. "Nathaniel renounced his management position in favor of the true heirs and liquidated his minimal stake in the family operations. Everything appears properly documented and legally binding within family law."

"But we're married! I should have approved these decisions," I protested loudly.

"Not for renouncing guardianship rights. As for liquidating his operational stake, you granted him power of attorney when you joined the family, permitting him to manage business affairs, including asset transfers," my attorney reminded me. I had signed that document to avoid operational headaches, never imagining he could liquidate his position.

"What did you say?" I glared at Nathaniel with rage boiling inside me. "You can't do this!"

"I can and I did because it was within my authority. It was the old man's wish, and I honored the family tradition," Nathaniel replied confidently.

I turned desperately to my attorney. "This can't be right. There must be something we can do to invalidate this."

"Unfortunately, there isn't, Claire. The transaction is legally binding and was executed some time ago, when Nathaniel had no intention of leaving the family structure," my attorney explained.

The judge nodded. "That's correct. Everything appears to be in order and lawfully executed within our jurisdiction. There's nothing to be done. Let's focus on dividing the remaining assets."

"You shouldn't have done this, Nathaniel. What about Justin? Did you forget he's still part of this family?" I wasn't backing down.

"Ah, Justin." Nathaniel sighed. "It's time for honesty, Claire. I know Justin isn't blood. My attorney has filed to terminate my guardianship responsibilities. That boy never respected the family structure anyway—no loyalty, no respect for our ways."

"What are you talking about?" I was stunned.

How did Nathaniel discover Justin's true parentage? Only two people knew the truth—one was eliminated long ago, and the other, Connor, despised Nathaniel and would never reveal this information, especially since he never acknowledged the child's existence.

"I'm referring to your arrangement with Connor. Don't bother denying it—I have documentation, which is already in the case file," Nathaniel stated smugly.

The judge interjected, "The paternity investigation has reached my desk, Nathaniel. I've ordered Justin to appear at two private facilities for testing. Once results arrive, I'll issue my ruling. Now, back to dividing assets."

"I want everything!" I demanded without hesitation. "Since he liquidated our family assets without consulting me, I deserve everything that remains."

"That's not how this works, Claire," the judge explained. "The safe house's value exceeds the combined worth of the vehicle and legitimate account. You also possess a vehicle worth more than Nathaniel's. If you can't reach an agreement, I'll order everything liquidated and split the proceeds equally."

"Your Honor, I’m willing to give her the safe house and one vehicle, but I want to keep my car and the money," Nathaniel offered.

My attorney pulled me aside, whispering that this was a generous offer, considering the safe house’s substantial value and the complications of our family connections.

"Fine, I’ll take the house and my car. You can keep your old vehicle and the money," I conceded reluctantly. "And how much ongoing support will I receive?"

Nathaniel’s attorney spoke firmly. "Your Honor, my client refuses to pay ongoing support. They have no minor children under their joint guardianship, and Justin, who isn’t even my client’s responsibility, lives with his mother and doesn’t contribute to family operations. As for Lila, she’s independent and working within the organization. Claire is perfectly capable of supporting herself through legitimate means. Let’s not overlook her breach of family loyalty."

The judge nodded in agreement.

"No, absolutely not!" I lost my composure entirely. "I’ve been part of this family structure for many years! During that time, I never needed legitimate employment, and I refuse to—"

"This isn’t about what you’re willing to do!" the judge interrupted sharply. "It’s about what our arrangements mandate, and Nathaniel is within his rights. Therefore, he isn’t required to provide ongoing support."

"How will I maintain my position?" I looked at Nathaniel desperately.

"Like everyone else outside the family, Claire—through legitimate work!" Nathaniel laughed.

I left the private courthouse divorced, owning a safe house and vehicle I couldn’t afford to maintain, with empty accounts. My hatred for the Sullivan family reached unprecedented heights. I would destroy them where it hurt most. I would crush that little brat Lila and reclaim what should have been mine by right.

Chapter 555: Opening the Tomb

Beckett’s POV

The past few days had been a labyrinth of revelations and unanswered questions. The weight of our discoveries pressed heavily on my shoulders as the acting head of the Sullivan family, but having Katarina beside me made the burden more manageable. Our world was changing rapidly, affecting everyone in our inner circle, though I held onto the belief that these upheavals would ultimately strengthen our position in the long run.

The divorce between my father and that manipulative snake Claire had been finalized exactly as we’d orchestrated. She retained possession of the estate—that house filled with bitter memories for Lila and me—along with her collection of luxury vehicles. Though part of me believed the settlement was overly generous, I couldn’t summon the energy to care. Purging that toxic woman from our family operations was victory enough, and my father appeared genuinely relieved to terminate a marriage he’d only maintained to shield my sister from harm. I shuddered to imagine what Claire might have inflicted upon Lila had my father not provided that legal protection through matrimony.

With Claire eliminated from our affairs, our immediate focus centered on fortifying Lila’s security, ensuring that venomous creature could never threaten my sister again.

Through Daniel and Detective Gideon’s connections within the system, we’d swiftly obtained authorization to exhume my mother’s remains and the infant buried alongside her for comprehensive DNA analysis. We’d arranged everything within Gideon’s jurisdiction; the detective had thrown himself wholeheartedly into our cause, navigating all the complex legal procedures with the presiding judge. Relief flooded through me when he secured permission to locate the other family—whoever they were deserved to learn the truth without further delay.

Now I stood in the cemetery alongside Gideon, Katarina, and two forensic specialists from the city morgue, awaiting the administration’s final clearance to open the tomb.

"Did I arrive in time?" My father’s voice pierced the solemn atmosphere as he approached our gathering with hurried steps.

"Dad, I thought you’d decided against coming!" My surprise was evident, given his adamant declaration yesterday that he wouldn’t attend.

"I reconsidered, Beckett." He paused to catch his breath. "Laying my wife and daughter to rest was the most devastating moment of my existence. She was so young with endless possibilities ahead—a future with her children—and this infant never experienced a single breath of life. Standing here while they're disturbed is agonizing, but I refuse to be a coward. And I won't abandon you to confront this alone." His gaze fixed upon the headstone with reverent solemnity, almost prayerful in its intensity.

"Nathaniel! What a surprise! I was merely bringing fresh flowers to daddy's memorial and could scarcely believe what I was seeing. Hello there, gentlemen!"

My jaw clenched as Felicia, the local precinct captain's wife, materialized beside our group.

This was precisely the complication we didn't need—the neighborhood's most notorious gossip witnessing our confidential family business.

"It would have been preferable if you'd overlooked us entirely or at least feigned ignorance," I muttered through gritted teeth.

"Ever the gentleman, aren't you, Beckett?" Felicia's eyes narrowed in my direction before redirecting her attention toward my father. "Nathaniel, I simply cannot ignore that despicable treatment you subjected Claire to. My dear friend is completely shattered—cast aside after years of devoted marriage and left with practically nothing!"

"Felicia," my father responded with measured control, "if there's one absolute certainty in this entire mess, it's that Claire isn't suffering. And she's hardly impoverished—she possesses a magnificent estate and a fleet of luxury automobiles in her name."

"You're absolutely ruthless, Nathaniel!" She huffed with theatrical indignation. "Claire is emotionally destroyed. And here you stand, abandoning your devoted wife only to shed tears at some other woman's grave." Her words made my hands twitch toward violence.

"Felicia, don't insult my intelligence," my father's composure finally cracked. "The woman interred here was my legitimate wife; Claire was merely the replacement. You understand perfectly how circumstances unfolded back then. In fact, you seem to possess intimate knowledge about everyone's private affairs."

"We'd appreciate complete privacy," he continued firmly. "This concerns family matters exclusively, and your presence constitutes an unwelcome intrusion."

"My word, you've inherited your son's appalling manners! Claire truly served as your moral foundation." Felicia was pivoting to leave just as the cemetery administrator appeared.

"Everything's been approved, Mr. Sullivan! Your documentation is completely in order. We can proceed immediately with opening the tomb." The administrator's announcement instantly captured Felicia's undivided attention, causing her to whip back around toward us.

"Opening the tomb? What exactly are you people planning to accomplish?" Her eyes gleamed with barely concealed curiosity and malicious intent.

"None of your damn business!" I snapped, my patience completely evaporated.

"It absolutely is my concern! I'm married to this town's precinct captain, and if you're engaging in grave desecration, I'm contacting my husband immediately." Felicia knew perfectly well this was a legitimate legal procedure, but she was fishing desperately for information to spread.

"Nobody is desecrating anything, Mrs. Felicia..." the administrator began before catching my warning glare and promptly silencing himself.

"Felicia, leave immediately. Now." My voice rose as my restraint completely disintegrated.

"I absolutely will not, you insolent punk! This community maintains laws and standards of proper conduct. Explain right now why you're opening this grave!"

Felicia's self-righteous posturing was almost comical if it weren't so infuriating.

"Felicia, enough!" Katarina stepped forward decisively, her patience clearly exhausted beyond measure. "Depart now unless you want me to grab your hair exactly like I did with Claire."

"Who do you think you're—" Felicia began indignantly, but stopped abruptly when Katarina lunged aggressively toward her, reaching for her carefully styled hair. Felicia stumbled backward in genuine alarm. "You're completely insane! This isn't finished, this isn't finished!" She retreated hastily.

With Felicia finally gone, I authorized the cemetery workers to proceed with opening the grave. Once the tomb lay exposed, we confronted the most emotionally challenging part: collecting the delicate remains. My father completely broke down, sobbing as intensely as he had on that tragic burial day—a memory still vivid in my mind after all these years. This time, however, I could provide him support. Katarina and I flanked him on either side, steadying his trembling frame as we watched the workers meticulously gather each fragile bone and place them in specially designated containers. The forensic experts then collected their required samples, and afterward, my mother and the mysterious baby would finally rest in eternal peace. We'd decided to transfer their remains to separate chambers in the ossuary, ensuring that whichever family the infant ultimately belonged to—whether ours or another's—would have an appropriate place to pay their respects.

With the cemetery procedures finally completed, all we could do now was wait patiently for the crucial test results.

"Excuse me, sir." A hesitant voice interrupted my contemplation. I turned to discover a stranger with anxious, worried eyes. "Sorry to disturb you, but they informed me that baby you just relocated might actually be mine?"

Chapter 556: A Mother's Truth

Beckett's POV

The woman who approached me outside the Thorne family's private chapel looked to be middle-aged, dressed modestly with tears glistening in her reddened eyes. Her hands nervously twisted a rosary while a young man stood protectively at her side, his arm supporting her trembling frame.

"I apologize for my mother's condition," the young man said quietly. "She hasn't been herself since the family investigator visited our home."

I stepped closer and gently took her hands in mine. The deep sorrow in her eyes was unmistakable - the kind that comes from decades of weeping. The skin around her eyes bore witness to countless tears

shed. My grandmother always said that nothing in this world could truly heal the heart of a mother who had lost her child.

"I'm deeply sorry," I whispered, feeling my own emotions rising to the surface. In that moment, I realized the infant we had laid to rest in our family cemetery could have been her daughter or my sister. Our pain connected us across the years. "Would you be willing to talk? Do you have time?"

She nodded silently, her eyes speaking volumes.

We left the chapel grounds behind and settled into a private booth at the family's exclusive restaurant. My father and this woman shared a bond through their parallel tragedies, but Madeline had lived with uncertainty for many years. I understood then that worse than knowing your child had died was not knowing where your child might be.

"When I gave birth to my children, no one believed me when I said there were two," Madeline began, her voice gaining strength as she shared her story. "My husband thought grief and pain had made me imagine things, since I nearly died during childbirth. But I wasn't imagining anything. I know what I saw and heard."

"What exactly did you see and hear, Madeline?" I asked gently.

"Rafael here was born first," she said, nodding toward her son. "His cry was strong and powerful. The private doctor announced he was a boy, placed him in my arms, and then told me to push again because another baby was coming. I had no idea I was carrying twins - we couldn't afford the special medical attention the family wives received. I was shocked but overjoyed. It was a blessing from God. We lived humbly in the outer territories under Sullivan family protection. Money was tight, but we had enough love for two children and more. After everything happened, my husband couldn't bear to stay in that place. He requested a transfer and now works directly for your legitimate businesses here in the city." A faint smile crossed her face. "Life improved for us here, but still, no one believed I had two babies. Not even my husband believed me until your investigator came to our door."

"What do you remember about the second baby?" Katarina asked, leaning forward intently.

"I remember just enough to be certain there was another child - a little girl," Madeline replied, her eyes distant with memory. "Her cry was so faint, so weak, like she barely had strength to make a sound. I

heard the doctor say it was a girl, but he never let me see her properly. Then I started feeling weaker and weaker until everything went black. When I woke up at the private medical facility, the doctor told me I'd nearly died but that my baby was fine. When I asked about the other one, nobody knew what I was talking about. I was frantic! And afterward, that doctor had completely disappeared from the family's network. Now they've found and arrested that corrupt physician, and your people told me the baby we laid to rest might be mine."

I listened to her heartbreaking story, stunned that anyone within our organization could commit such a cruel betrayal of trust.

"Madeline," Katarina explained gently, "we'll need to complete the DNA testing to know if the baby belongs to you or my father-in-law's family."

"I've already been to the family's private medical center, dear," Madeline said. "But the results will take some time to come back. Your investigator explained everything. I was deeply moved by the other family's story - such terrible suffering. He said the young lady raised in your family might be my daughter, or perhaps my daughter was the little angel who passed away. But in my heart," she pressed her hand against her chest, "I feel the baby we buried is my little girl."

The raw emotion in her gesture spoke of years of contained grief.

"I am truly sorry," my father said, visibly affected. "Lila is a wonderful daughter, and I hope she's mine, but I know that would mean your child died. I can't begin to apologize for your suffering."

"Please, Nathaniel, no apologies needed," Madeline said. "I came here to thank you all. For decades I've lived with doubt, with people thinking I was losing my mind. Whatever the results show, you're giving me peace - the peace of knowing where my baby girl is. At least I'll have a grave to visit and bring flowers to." Her resilience amazed me. "I just wanted to thank you and say I'm sorry for everything your family has endured. If there's anything I can do to help the family, please let me know."

We talked more and learned she couldn't have more children after the difficult birth. Her son Rafael was studying business while working in the family's legitimate enterprises, attending college nearby. They were clearly a loyal, hardworking family who had remained devoted despite their tragedy.

Before parting ways, I asked for her husband's position within our organization, making a mental note to ensure they received better care and protection.

Driving back to the estate, the weight of realization settled over me. My sister Lila had lost more than any of us. While she endured decades of psychological manipulation and rejection from Claire, she could have been raised by Madeline or my mother - women who would have cherished her. She would have been wanted, loved, infinitely happier. Nothing could erase what my sister suffered at Claire's hands, and the thought of how different her life could have been filled me with profound rage.

But I couldn't afford to dwell in that fury. I needed to stay focused and alert. It wouldn't be long before Claire discovered our investigation into the past, and I was certain she would try to eliminate Lila permanently - something I was determined would never happen. The Sullivan family protected its own, and Lila was blood. That meant everything in our world.

The corruption ran deeper than I'd imagined, but we would root it out completely. No one betrayed the family and lived to profit from it.

Chapter 557: Exhuming the Past

Claire's POV

These past days had been absolutely torturous. I still hadn't devised a proper scheme to extract the laundered funds from Nathaniel's offshore accounts. My thoughts scattered when the housemaid burst into the marble-floored sitting room of our estate, breathing heavily and gesticulating wildly.

"Claire! There are three men at the security gate. Three! One claims to be a federal court officer looking for young Justin, and the other two—rather dangerous types if I'm honest—say Don Connor sent them to see you." The woman's voice echoed through the entire wing of the mansion.

Justin strode into the sitting room, his designer suit impeccable but his brow furrowed with concern. "Why would a federal court officer be asking for me, Tessa?"

"He insisted on speaking only with you directly, sir," the maid replied with wide, fearful eyes.

I rolled my eyes, already irritated by this intrusion into my carefully orchestrated morning. "Just escort them all in at once."

Tessa scurried away through the palatial corridors, returning moments later with three men trailing behind her. They stood awkwardly in my opulent sitting room, clearly out of place among the imported Italian furniture and Renaissance paintings that served as fronts for our money laundering operations.

I addressed the most professional-looking one, easily identifiable as the court officer by his federal badge and crisp suit. "What business brings the federal courts to our family estate, officer?"

The man ignored me completely, turning to Justin instead. "Are you Justin Ward Sullivan?"

"Yes, that's me. What's this about?" Justin crossed his arms defensively, his expensive watch catching the light from the crystal chandelier.

"Sign here, please." The officer thrust a federal document and pen toward him. "Your father is contesting paternity through the family courts and requires you to appear at these two accredited laboratories for DNA testing."

"What?" Justin turned to me, his face reddening with rage. "Mom, that old bastard has completely lost his mind! I'm going to have him—"

"SILENCE, JUSTIN!" I snapped, cutting off his foolish ranting in front of a federal officer. Turning to the official, I asked with calculated calm, "And what happens if he refuses to comply with this court order?"

The officer's expression hardened, his eyes reflecting the kind of authority that even mafia families respected. "Believe me, ma'am, it would be in everyone's best interest if he complies with federal jurisdiction."

With nothing more to add, the officer departed through our secured entrance, leaving us with Don Connor's two enforcers.

"Mom—" Justin began to whine like the spoiled heir he'd always been.

"Be quiet and sit down," I commanded sharply, my voice carrying the authority I'd cultivated through decades in this underworld. "Let me handle these gentlemen first. We'll discuss your legal situation afterward." Justin reluctantly obeyed, slumping into a velvet-upholstered chair while I addressed the two men. "Did Don Connor explain your assignment clearly?"

The taller one, with a face like carved granite and scars that spoke of violence, nodded. "Yes, ma'am. We're here to collect the girl's photograph and known locations from you."

I'd anticipated this request and had everything prepared in my private study. Reaching into my Hermès purse, I pulled out an envelope containing a photograph and several handwritten addresses, handing it over with the practiced efficiency of someone accustomed to such transactions.

"When do you plan to execute the operation?" I inquired.

"Today. We'll deliver the girl to you by tomorrow evening."

I couldn't help but smile, the first genuine expression of satisfaction I'd felt in weeks. Finally, something was proceeding according to my carefully laid plans.

After dismissing Connor's enforcers through our private security corridor, I turned my attention to Justin. The time had come for a conversation I never imagined having with my heir.

"Justin, Nathaniel is not your biological father. He discovered this somehow through his own family's intelligence network, though I don't know exactly how," I stated plainly, seeing no reason to soften the blow that would reshape his entire understanding of his place in our organization.

To my surprise, Justin smirked with the arrogance that came from growing up in this world of power and privilege. "I've always suspected it! I never connected with that old man, can't stand Beckett and his sanctimonious attitude, and frankly, Lila's righteousness annoys me too. I knew I couldn't possibly belong to that family's bloodline. So who's my real father?"

"Listen carefully, Justin. It's in our best interest that you appear genuinely concerned about this legal situation." I grabbed the federal paperwork from his hands, scanning the official letterhead. "Damn!

These are two of the most prestigious forensic laboratories in the country. Without Aria's connections in the medical establishment, I can't manipulate these results."

"I don't even want you to fix anything, Mom. It's actually liberating not to be connected to that self-righteous family. Now tell me—who's my father?" Justin persisted, his excitement growing like that of a child discovering a new toy.

"Your father is Don Connor," I admitted finally, watching his face transform.

Justin's expression lit up like he'd just inherited a casino empire. "Are you serious? You've hidden this from me all these years? Connor is a legend in this business! This is incredible news!"

"Don't get too excited," I cautioned, remembering Connor's reputation for ruthlessness even toward his own blood. "Connor never believed you were his son."

Justin laughed with the confidence of youth and privilege. "I wouldn't have believed you either, Mom. But everything's different now. He knows me, and once the DNA test confirms it, I'll have his name—and access to his empire. He's generous with his acknowledged children, isn't he? Finally, something good happens in this mess!"

I watched him pace excitedly around our lavishly appointed room, already regretting my honesty. He had no idea what kind of man Connor truly was or what brutal challenges awaited anyone seeking to claim a place in his organization. But I had more pressing matters—preparing for my daughter's imminent arrival.

"Claire! Claire!" The maid's shrill voice interrupted my strategic planning as she bustled into the room again, her face flushed with nervous energy.

"What now, you incompetent woman?" I snapped, my patience completely exhausted.

"I'm not incompetent," she pouted childishly, apparently immune to the dangerous atmosphere that surrounded our family.

"Whatever. What is it, Tessa?"

"Phone call for you. Some lawyer, I forgot his name." This woman couldn't remember anything useful despite the generous salary we paid for discretion.

Taking the secure phone, I shooed her away before answering. It was indeed Aria's attorney, complaining about not receiving payment and refusing to continue representing her in the federal case without it.

"I'm working on securing the necessary funds," I assured him, knowing how expensive it was to buy silence in federal court.

"That's precisely the problem, Claire. I'm a lawyer—I don't trust promises when it comes to payment in cases involving organized crime. Defense attorneys are always the first to get eliminated when money gets tight."

"I understand your concern, but I guarantee you'll receive full payment within the week."

"Not soon enough. Your associate has been transferred to federal prison and she's absolutely unbearable. I won't work for free, especially not in RICO cases." I knew exactly how difficult Aria could be under pressure.

After considerable negotiation involving veiled threats and promises, I persuaded him to wait until next week. I'd have the money once I handed Lila over to Connor—he'd pay handsomely for Nathaniel's precious daughter.

I hung up, my head pounding from the day's mounting complications. As I massaged my temples, I heard the maid protesting in the marble hallway.

"Felicia, you can't just barge past security like that—"

"But I already have," Felicia announced, sweeping into the room with the theatrical flair she'd cultivated through years in our social circle. "Claire, darling, forgive the intrusion, but I have information you'll find absolutely fascinating."

"Do I even want to know?" I sighed, bracing myself for another complication.

"It's about your ex-husband." That caught my attention immediately.

"You'll never guess where I saw him today," Felicia teased, drawing out the suspense with the skill of a practiced gossip.

"Just tell me, woman!" My patience had completely evaporated under the weight of federal investigations and family conspiracies.

"Nathaniel was at the family mausoleum with Beckett and that lawyer, Katarina," she revealed triumphantly.

"And why should that concern me?"

"They were exhuming a grave."

My blood froze instantly in my veins. This couldn't be happening after so many years of careful cover-ups.

"Why would they disturb the dead?" I asked, sinking into a chair as my legs weakened with the implications.

"I'm not sure. I only know they transferred the remains to the private ossuary. They weren't alone—two forensic specialists accompanied them."

"But why move those remains now? It makes no sense after all these years." I was barely listening anymore, lost in my own spiraling thoughts about what evidence might have been preserved.

"I don’t know the details. I had to leave quickly after that vicious Katarina threatened to have security remove me forcibly. Can you imagine such treatment?"

I stared at Felicia, occasionally entertaining similar violent impulses myself when dealing with her intrusions.

"Felicia, dear, you’ve caught me at a terrible time. I need to handle some urgent family business," I said, attempting politeness while internally calculating damage control.

"Where to? I’ll join you!" she offered, completely oblivious to the boundaries that governed our dangerous world.

"Private family business involving Nathaniel and Beckett, I’m afraid. But I’ll visit you later this week," I promised, guiding her firmly toward the secured exit.

After Felicia finally departed through our electronic gates, I stood frozen in my palatial sitting room, my mind racing through decades of carefully buried secrets. Why were they disturbing that particular grave? I needed to discover what they’d uncovered. They couldn’t possibly be unearthing the past—not now, not when I was so close to securing everything I’d worked for through years of manipulation and murder.

Chapter 558: Into the Trap

Lila’s POV

The irony wasn’t lost on me that everything in my carefully constructed world was crumbling while somehow remaining exactly the same. The revelations from those blood-stained diary pages had left me completely shattered. That journal contained secrets that shook me to my very foundation. The lingering possibility that Claire wasn’t my biological mother - which explained so many unanswered questions about my place in the Sullivan family’s money laundering empire - still left me drowning in unease and dread.

Everyone in my circle seemed to sense my fragile state lately. Daniel had been unusually protective, my girlfriends from Thorne Group called daily to monitor my wellbeing, Sybilla and Jude hovered over me

like bodyguards at the corporate offices, and even my college friend Max Philip - MP as I'd always called him - kept shooting worried glances in my direction during our law classes.

Beneath all this chaos was the bitter divorce battle between those I'd believed were my parents. According to my father, Claire was absolutely furious about the financial settlement that would strip her of control over the family's legitimate art gallery and real estate holdings.

But when wasn't it about money with her? If not for the promise of wealth and power, she never would have pursued my father, and his first wife might still be alive today. If not for her desperate need to maintain control over the Sullivan family's extensive money laundering network, she wouldn't be so frantically trying to drag me back under her thumb.

If not for her endless greed, my entire life would have followed a completely different trajectory.

"Hello? Anyone home in there?" MP waved his hand directly in front of my face, chuckling at my obvious mental absence. "Where has your mind wandered off to now? You didn't even notice me approaching your desk."

"Sorry, MP. My thoughts are scattered everywhere. There's just so much chaos happening right now..." I looked up at my friend, who offered me a sympathetic smile that reminded me why I treasured our friendship.

"I understand completely, Best Friend, but the only crisis you can actually solve right now is your empty stomach. Class just ended - time to hit the cafeteria." I hadn't even registered that our criminal law lecture had concluded. Honestly, I couldn't recall a single word the professor had said. I'd been physically present, eyes focused forward, but my mind had been miles away, trapped in family secrets and dangerous revelations.

"Honestly, MP, food is the last thing on my mind. Would you be terribly upset if I skipped the cafeteria today?" I looked at him with pleading eyes, hoping he'd understand.

"Of course I'd be upset!" He pressed his hand dramatically against his chest, making me laugh despite the heavy weight on my shoulders. "But I'll be the good friend I am and bring something back here for you. Don't think I'll let you waste away to nothing. Just promise me you won't move from this exact spot, okay?"

I smiled genuinely as my dear friend blew me an exaggerated kiss before disappearing through the classroom doorway. I remained in my seat, absently watching students filter in and out of the room for the next class, until an unfamiliar girl approached my desk with obvious hesitation.

"Excuse me, there's a man outside asking specifically for you. He's waiting by the main entrance," she said nervously. I recognized her as one of the newer students who typically hung around with the campus gossips and social climbers.

"A man?" I asked, genuinely surprised that anyone would be seeking me out here at the law school.

"Yeah, really tall guy with an intense, serious expression," she explained quickly before hurrying back to rejoin her group of friends.

From that vague description, it could only be Daniel. But why would he show up unannounced at my college campus? Had something terrible happened with the family business or the ongoing investigation? I rose from my seat and headed toward the exit, completely unaware of the dangerous figure who approached from behind until I felt his heavy, threatening hand clamp down on my shoulder.

"You're going to come with me very quietly, or your little college friend will face very serious and permanent consequences," he growled menacingly, pressing what unmistakably felt like the barrel of a gun against my spine. "Move. Now."

Terror froze me completely, my thoughts immediately jumping to MP's safety. This stranger practically lifted me off my feet as my legs threatened to buckle beneath me. Before we exited the building, he threw a dark coat over my shoulders and yanked the hood up to obscure my face from any potential witnesses.

"Who are you?" I finally managed to whisper. "I'm not going anywhere with you." I attempted to resist his grip, but his fingers tightened painfully around my arm, and I knew without doubt it would leave dark bruises.

"Oh yes, you absolutely are. Unless you want that loyal friend who's always trailing after you to end up bleeding out on the ground before you can even think about screaming for help," he threatened, his cold tone convincing me he wasn't making empty promises.

"Who sent you?" I demanded again, though dread was already building in my chest.

"Your mother sent me. Now shut your mouth, keep your head down, and don't make any kind of scene." His muscular arm tightened around my shoulders as he forced me forward, my feet barely maintaining contact with the ground.

Pure panic surged through my entire body when he confirmed my mother had orchestrated this. I would have screamed for help if not for his credible threat against MP's life. I couldn't risk my innocent friend's safety. On the street, he roughly shoved me into the backseat of a waiting black sedan and climbed in beside me. Another man sat behind the steering wheel and immediately pulled away from the curb.

"Put your hands out in front," my captor demanded harshly. When I instinctively hid my hands beneath my legs, his voice turned even more dangerous. "I don't have patience for childish games." He yanked my arms roughly behind my back, securing them tightly with plastic zip ties that cut into my wrists. Then he bound my ankles with identical restraints.

"Please, don't do this to me. Just let me go!" I begged through tears that were streaming down my face.

"That's not happening today. My boss would literally kill me if I failed to deliver you as promised," he responded with a chilling smile that made my blood run cold. "You're quite beautiful. Now I understand why the boss has taken such a special interest in you. Maybe we should have some private fun before delivering you to your mother's estate." His rough hand moved toward my thigh.

The car jerked to a sudden, violent stop, and the driver whipped around in his seat with fury in his eyes.

"Don't you dare touch her," he warned with deadly seriousness. "She belongs to the boss exclusively. He'll destroy both of us slowly if anything happens to her before delivery. Move to the front seat immediately."

"Who is your boss?" I asked through my overwhelming fear, though I already suspected the terrifying answer.

They both responded with bone-chilling laughter that echoed through the vehicle. The man beside me slapped a piece of duct tape brutally across my mouth, then dragged me roughly from the car only to shove me back inside across the entire seat. He relocated to the front passenger seat, and they continued driving toward my unknown fate.

I was utterly helpless and completely at their mercy. Despair washed over me in paralyzing waves as we drove through the city. All I could do during that seemingly endless, nightmarish journey was cry silently behind the tape, wondering if I would ever see my loved ones again.

Chapter 559: Lila Vanishes

Daniel's POV

The antique clock in my penthouse office showed I still had time before collecting Lila from her evening law classes, but every instinct honed through decades in both police work and family business screamed that I should leave immediately. The recent threats from rival families had made me increasingly uneasy about her attending night sessions at the university. Too many dark corners on campus, too many potential ambush points, even with our people maintaining surveillance at every entrance.

I sat behind my mahogany desk, face buried in my hands, wrestling with mounting anxiety when Sybilla appeared in the doorway of my study.

"What's got you wound tighter than a Swiss watch, big brother?" she asked, crossing her arms and giving me that penetrating stare she'd perfected since childhood.

I raised my head to meet her concerned gaze. "Nothing worth mentioning. Why do you ask?"

"Because you're sighing like a man facing execution and your jaw's clenched so tight I'm surprised your teeth haven't cracked."

Sybilla moved into the room, settling into the leather chair across from my desk, her sharp eyes never leaving mine.

"It’s this entire situation with Lila," I admitted, running a hand through my hair. "Her insistence on continuing these night classes, the ongoing tensions with Connor’s people, the fact that Claire still has connections we haven’t fully mapped. Every fiber of my being tells me something’s wrong."

"We’re all concerned," Sybilla said quietly. "But she’s got MP shadowing her every move, plus our patrol units stationed throughout the campus. You seem particularly agitated today though."

I nodded, acknowledging her perceptive observation. "You’re absolutely right. This feeling won’t leave me alone." Rising abruptly from my chair, I reached for my suit jacket. "I’m collecting her early."

That’s precisely when my secure phone buzzed against the desk. The moment I recognized the caller identification, my blood turned to ice water.

"Inspector Martinez speaking."

"Daniel, it’s Max Philip, Lila’s friend." His voice carried an unmistakable tremor of panic.

My heart dropped into my stomach like a stone. "Where is Lila?" I demanded, my professional training warring with personal terror.

"I left her in the lecture hall to grab refreshments from the vending machines because she insisted on staying to review her notes," MP explained, words spilling out in a frantic rush. "When I returned to the classroom, she had vanished completely. All her belongings were still arranged on her desk, but Lila was nowhere to be found. I’ve conducted a thorough search of the entire building, even convinced the maintenance staff to check the women’s facilities. Nobody witnessed anything unusual. The administration refuses to grant me access to security recordings. I don’t know what other options I have."

"How long has she been missing?" I fought to maintain my professional demeanor while my imagination conjured increasingly horrifying scenarios.

Sybilla materialized beside me, already holding my wallet and car keys, silently urging me toward the door with urgent gestures.

"For a while now," MP confessed reluctantly.

"A while?" I exploded, my carefully maintained control shattering. "You waited this long before contacting me?"

Sybilla smoothly extracted the phone from my white-knuckled grip. "MP, this is Sybilla speaking. Tell me exactly what happened step by step." She listened intently while physically guiding me toward the private elevator. "Remain at the main entrance. We're en route." She returned my phone, shooting me a reproachful look. "You just reduced that poor kid to tears."

"He lost Lila!" I snapped, my voice echoing off the elevator walls.

"And we will locate her," Sybilla countered with steel in her voice. "But first you need to regain control of yourself."

As we descended toward the parking garage, my chest began constricting painfully. The elevator walls seemed to close in around me, and I stumbled sideways, struggling for breath.

"Daniel, focus on your breathing!" Sybilla seized my shoulders firmly. "Look directly at me. Draw air in through your nose, release it through your mouth. Slowly and steadily."

She was completely right. Surrendering to panic would serve no purpose in helping Lila. By the time we reached the underground garage, I had wrestled my emotions back under some semblance of control.

"Hand over the keys," I demanded, extending my palm toward her.

Sybilla startled slightly at my commanding tone but complied without argument.

While speeding through the city streets toward the university, I activated the Bluetooth system to contact our surveillance team.

"I need immediate confirmation of whether Lila departed the campus premises," I barked before the officer could complete his standard greeting.

"Inspector Martinez, the young lady has not exited the grounds," he responded promptly.

"She has disappeared from inside the building. Are you absolutely certain you maintained proper observation?" I pressed, detecting subtle uncertainty in his tone.

"Yes, Inspector. We maintained visual contact with all exits."

His careful phrasing raised immediate red flags in my mind. "Did anything out of the ordinary occur? Any suspicious individuals entering or leaving?"

"Well..." the officer hesitated noticeably. "There was someone who seemed somehow out of place..."

"And you failed to intercept him because?" I slammed my palm against the steering wheel in frustration.

"He entered the building and emerged rather quickly with someone accompanying him. But it definitely was not the young lady. I am completely certain of that fact!"

His forced confidence failed to convince me entirely. "I am currently en route. You had better be absolutely positive about that assessment."

I terminated the call and glanced sideways at Sybilla.

"He’s not entirely certain, is he?" she asked perceptively.

I shook my head grimly, pressing harder on the accelerator.

At the university, I displayed my badge to campus security and immediately spotted MP engaged in heated discussion with an older gentleman I recognized as the dean from my previous guest lecture.

"Max Philip!" I called out authoritatively.

Relief flooded his youthful features. "Daniel, thank God you're here. They refuse to take my concerns seriously."

I approached the dean with deliberate, measured steps. "They will take my concerns seriously, won't they?"

"Inspector Martinez," he smiled nervously, clearly recognizing my authority. "How may I assist you today?"

"I want immediate access to your security footage. Right now." My quiet tone carried unmistakable menace.

"Of course. Please follow me immediately."

In the cramped security office, we reviewed digital recordings from the corridor outside Lila's classroom. A large, professionally dressed man emerged from behind a structural pillar after MP's departure, engaged in brief conversation with a female student, handed her what appeared to be an envelope, then positioned himself strategically out of sight. The girl entered Lila's classroom as instructed. Moments later, Lila exited alongside the suspicious individual, who placed his arm around her shoulders in what appeared to be a friendly gesture while guiding her toward the stairwell.

Additional camera angles tracked their movement throughout the building. In the main lobby, the man helped Lila into a black hooded sweatshirt before approaching the exit. The security guard stationed mere steps away deliberately turned his attention in the opposite direction as they passed. Outside, Lila was efficiently guided into a silver sedan with heavily tinted windows and obscured license plates, which immediately departed the scene.

I brought my fist down hard on the security desk, rage and terror battling for dominance in my chest. This was clearly professional work. Organized, premeditated, executed with precision. The burning question consuming my thoughts was simple: why target Lila specifically?

This was not the moment for emotional collapse. I needed to transform into the detective, setting aside the terrified boyfriend. I would find her, no matter what resources it required, no matter what laws I had to bend. I would bring Lila home safely.

Chapter 560: Bought and Betrayed

Daniel’s POV

I inhaled slowly, attempting to organize my racing thoughts as my eyes scanned the security office. The surveillance footage we’d just reviewed showed Lila leaving with an unknown man, and I needed answers immediately.

"MP, do you recognize the girl who approached Lila in the corridor?" I asked, my voice tight with controlled anxiety.

MP, the head of internal security, shook his head briefly before recognition dawned. "Actually, yes. That’s Meredith, works in the legal department’s filing division. She’s relatively new, transferred from the Chicago branch recently."

I turned to Dean, who managed the legitimate business operations. He looked increasingly uncomfortable under my stare. "I need to speak with this employee immediately. And that security guard who let this man into our building without proper clearance while demanding my credentials when I arrived? I want him here too."

Dean swallowed visibly at my tone. "Your girlfriend, Inspector Martinez?"

"Yes, my girlfriend," I confirmed, stepping closer to him. "And if anything happens to her, this organization will face serious consequences. Your security guard might leave in handcuffs today. Every minute we waste could be critical for Lila’s safety."

Dean hastily picked up his phone, dispatching someone to locate both Meredith and the security guard. He led us to his private conference room, gesturing toward leather chairs.

"You’ll be more comfortable in here, Inspector."

"Comfort is the least of my concerns right now," I snapped, pacing across the polished marble floor. "I need answers, and I need them fast."

The door opened and a young woman entered, her lips curved into what she clearly thought was an alluring smile. Dean introduced us, and she extended a manicured hand toward me, her skirt barely covering her thighs as she sat and crossed her legs provocatively. I ignored her outstretched hand, crossing my arms over my chest instead.

"How can I help you, Inspector?" Meredith purred, tilting her head slightly.

"The man who approached you during lunch break today—who is he, what did he want, and what did he give you?" I demanded, watching her expression carefully.

Her smile faltered briefly. "What man?"

"Don’t play games," I warned, my voice dropping dangerously. "The security cameras captured everything. Start talking, or I’ll arrest you for conspiracy in a kidnapping investigation."

Her eyes widened. "Arrested? Dean, what’s happening?"

Dean leaned forward, his expression grave. "Meredith, this is extremely serious. The detective has video evidence. I strongly suggest you cooperate fully."

"And don’t even consider lying to me," I added coldly.

Her flirtatious demeanor evaporated, replaced by nervousness as she fidgeted with the hem of her skirt.

"Look, I barely know anything," she insisted, avoiding my gaze. "This guy just asked me to call Lila out of the legal archives. He gave me a hundred dollars for such a simple task. If she asked who wanted to see her, I was supposed to say ’Daniel.’ I don’t even know who Daniel is! Everyone knows Lila keeps to herself—she’s always either working or with that heir, Max. The man specifically told me to get her before Max returned from his meeting."

I placed both hands on the conference table, leaning toward her. "Let me enlighten you. I am Daniel, her boyfriend." Her eyes widened in shock. "And she doesn’t keep to herself—she’s cautious around people she doesn’t trust, unlike you. Tell me exactly what you said to her. Word for word."

"I just told her there was a man in the lobby asking for her. I described him as big with a stern face," Meredith mumbled.

"Daniel, Lila must have thought you were looking for her—big, stern-faced," Sybilla commented from where she stood near the window.

I nodded briefly before refocusing on Meredith. "And you thought it was perfectly normal for a stranger to pay you to lure a female employee out of her secure workplace?"

"Inspector, I thought he seemed off. He definitely wasn’t part of our organization. He was... intimidating," she admitted reluctantly.

"Yet you didn’t warn her? Didn’t alert building security?" My voice rose sharply, making her flinch.

"He paid me a hundred dollars just to deliver a message! I had no idea what he planned to do," she protested.

"What kind of person accepts money to potentially endanger a coworker? If she were your friend, would you have done the same thing?" I challenged.

Meredith’s defiance flared. "If she were my friend, I would have warned her, but she’s not."

"So you essentially handed her over to a criminal because she wasn’t in your social circle?" I slammed my palm against the table, causing her to jump. "Listen carefully—pray nothing happens to Lila, because if it does, I’ll make sure you’re charged as an accomplice to kidnapping and whatever else these criminals do to her."

Tears streamed down her face, but I felt no sympathy. My goal was to ensure she never endangered another person with such thoughtlessness again.

"I didn’t know..." she whimpered.

"You accepted money from a stranger who you admitted seemed suspicious. Did it never cross your mind he might have malicious intentions?" She lowered her head in shame. "I need your contact information. Don’t leave the city."

Dean handed her a paper to record her details, then added, "Meredith, this incident will be reported to the board. Disciplinary action is inevitable."

A knock interrupted us, and the security guard entered, looking confusingly confident.

"Have a seat," Dean instructed. "Inspector Martinez has questions for you, and we have security footage of today’s events, so honesty is your only option."

I fixed the guard with a hard stare. "You allowed an unauthorized individual into this building today. There’s no entry record, yet to access our premises, proper identification is required. When he left, he was escorting an employee, and you conveniently looked away. Explain."

The guard shifted nervously, clearly debating his response.

"The truth!" I demanded, slamming the table again.

"Inspector, he claimed to be the employee’s relative wanting to surprise her. When they left together, nothing seemed suspicious," he rushed out unconvincingly.

"That’s how you want to play this? Fine. You’re under arrest for facilitating a kidnapping," I declared, reaching for my handcuffs.

The guard laughed nervously. "You can’t arrest me without cause."

"Facilitating a kidnapping is more than sufficient cause. If that man harms her in any way, you'll be charged as an accomplice to every crime he commits. The security footage and your badge records clearing him through are irrefutable evidence. And let me make this perfectly clear—I will personally ensure you receive the maximum sentence possible because the woman he took is my girlfriend."

"Shit," he muttered, rubbing his face anxiously.

"Exactly," I confirmed grimly.

"Inspector, I'll talk if you promise not to involve me in this," he pleaded.

"This isn't a negotiation. Talk now, or I'll add obstruction of justice to your charges."

"He paid me to let him in and out without questions or records. That's it." The guard's words tumbled out quickly.

"How much?" I demanded through gritted teeth. "How much was her safety worth to you?"

"I didn't know what he planned! He gave me two hundred dollars."

"You worthless piece of—" I stepped toward him, fists clenched.

"Easy, Daniel," Sybilla cautioned from behind me.

I forced myself to stop. "Write down your contact information. If you attempt to leave town, I will find you, no matter what it takes."

"What will happen to him, Dean?" I asked, collecting both sets of contact information.

"Immediate termination and blacklisting from all operations," Dean replied firmly as the guard’s face crumpled.

"I’ll return if necessary," I stated, taking the papers and a copy of the security footage. It was time to mobilize my team. Every second counted now.