Mafia Mask 561

Chapter 561: The Rescue Begins

Daniel’s POV

I stormed out of the law school building, my blood already at boiling point as I spotted the patrol officers leaning casually against their squad car. Behind me, I could hear Sybilla and Max Philip’s hurried footsteps, but my focus was entirely on these incompetent badges who had failed the one job that mattered most.

"Which one of you idiots told me Lila never left this building?" I demanded, stopping mere inches from the first officer’s face.

The younger cop shifted nervously under my glare. "Inspector Martinez, we maintained visual on all exits. We didn’t observe the young lady departing the premises."

"Then explain to me how you managed to let a suspicious individual walk right past your position without intervention." My fists clenched involuntarily as I fought the urge to introduce both their faces to the hood of their patrol car.

"Inspector, we assessed the situation and determined no action was warranted," the same officer replied, his defensive tone only fueling my rage.

"No action warranted?" My voice rose with each syllable, drawing stares from passing students. "Your assignment was to provide protection for a woman whose life is under direct threat from rival families, and you observed suspicious activity but chose to ignore it? What kind of law enforcement officers are you?"

The second officer was fidgeting like a guilty child, running his hand through his hair repeatedly. Something in his nervous energy told me he had more information.

"You," I jabbed my finger directly at his chest. "Start talking. Tell me exactly what transpired here, or I guarantee you’ll both be facing Internal Affairs by dawn, followed by immediate termination and possible criminal charges."

The officer swallowed hard, finally meeting my eyes. "Inspector Martinez, we did spot the individual in question. I immediately identified him as suspicious and recommended to my partner that we should intercept. But then several young women approached our vehicle and initiated conversation. My partner insisted it wasn't a priority matter. While he was... distracted by one of the students, the suspicious male departed with someone wearing a black hooded sweatshirt. I couldn't pursue alone - protocol requires backup in case of armed resistance. Their vehicle displayed no license plates."

The rage coursing through my veins threatened to overwhelm my professional composure. "Not a priority? Someone from a protected family was abducted under your watch and that's 'not a priority'? I can't decide what's more pathetic - you abandoning your post to flirt during an active protection detail," I fixed the first officer with a withering stare, "or you being too cowardly to engage a single suspect when you're armed and trained for exactly these situations. Both of you, get out of my sight before I do something we'll all regret."

"Inspector Martinez, you wouldn't actually file reports with Internal Affairs, would you?" the second officer asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"Count on it," I spat, turning my back on both of them in disgust.

I strode toward my vehicle, my mind already calculating the next moves. I knew exactly who had orchestrated Lila's abduction and where they would take her. The Sullivan family's enemies had finally made their move, and my connection to both families made me the perfect target for their psychological warfare.

Pulling out my encrypted phone, I dialed Beckett's number.

"Daniel," he answered, his usual casual tone immediately shifting when he heard the tension in my breathing.

"Beckett, they've taken Lila. A man infiltrated the campus and extracted her while those useless patrol officers were playing games. This has your mother's fingerprints all over it. I'm sending you an image of the abductor - tell me if you recognize him," I spoke rapidly, already forwarding the security footage I'd obtained from campus surveillance.

"Daniel, this cannot be happening," Beckett's voice turned sharp with anxiety. "Let me examine that photograph." After several tense seconds, he continued, "That's definitely one of Connor's enforcers. I've seen him at the underground poker games. Daniel, this situation is escalating beyond family politics. When did the extraction occur? What's our operational plan?"

"Earlier this evening. They haven't reached their final destination yet, but time is critical. I'm mobilizing my tactical team and heading to their location. We need to execute Lila's recovery before they can consolidate their position," I explained while starting my engine.

"Smart move bringing your people. We can't trust local law enforcement - too many of them are on Connor and Claire's payroll," Beckett warned.

"I'm contacting Detective Gideon. He has an ongoing investigation into Connor's operations and can provide legitimate backup without family complications," I said.

"I'm proceeding directly to Claire's estate and I'm not leaving without my sister," Beckett declared, his voice carrying the unmistakable edge of a Sullivan family enforcer.

"Here's what we're going to do: maintain surveillance on her property and keep me informed of any developments. Once my team is assembled and equipped, we'll rendezvous at the staging area. Beckett, if you get visual confirmation of Lila's location, find a way to reach her. Under no circumstances allow that woman to harm her," I emphasized.

"Understood, Daniel. I'm already mobilizing our people," Beckett assured me, his voice now carrying the cold efficiency I knew he possessed when family honor was at stake.

I terminated the call and turned to address Sybilla and Max Philip, who had been waiting anxiously beside my car throughout the conversation.

"MP, did you drive here tonight?" I asked, and he nodded affirmatively. "Would you escort Sybilla home safely, please?"

"Absolutely, Daniel. I'll remain with her until we receive word from you," MP replied, and I felt a measure of relief knowing my sister would have protection during this crisis.

"Daniel, you will bring Lila home safely," Sybilla gripped my arm, tears beginning to stream down her face.

"I give you my word, little sister. Try to maintain your composure until I return. Consider staying at Jude's place if that provides additional security. And make sure Caleb is informed of the situation," I instructed her.

After ensuring my sister's safety arrangements, I got behind the wheel and drove directly to the precinct. I immediately began making strategic calls - first to Detective Adler, who agreed to meet me at headquarters, then to my specialized team members who would be essential for this type of operation. Finally, I contacted Gideon, who confirmed he was on duty and that his detective was already en route to Lila's city with authorization for cross-jurisdictional cooperation.

When I arrived at the station, my team was already assembled and ready for deployment. These officers all knew Lila personally and understood exactly what she meant to me; their determination was evident without requiring any motivational speeches.

"We're bringing her home safe, Inspector," Officer Bella stated with absolute conviction.

I provided them with a comprehensive briefing on the situation and warned them about potential interference from corrupted local law enforcement. My team knew exactly how to handle such complications.

Detective Adler had already processed all the necessary paperwork for the kidnapping case and secured the required authorizations for our cross-jurisdictional operation. Even the Deputy Chief was present, offering full departmental support.

"Everything is properly documented, Martinez. Focus entirely on the rescue mission - I'll handle all administrative matters until your return," Adler assured me.

"Adler, regarding those two patrol officers at the campus—" I began.

The Deputy Chief interrupted, "They've already been referred to Internal Affairs, Martinez. Their conduct is completely unacceptable and will be dealt with accordingly."

"Thank you both," I nodded appreciatively before heading toward the exit where my team was waiting.

As I walked past my assembled officers, I declared with absolute authority, "We're not returning to this city until Lila Sullivan is safe!"

We departed in a convoy of three patrol vehicles filled with heavily armed officers prepared for any level of resistance. My mind focused on a single, unwavering objective - reaching Lila before that vindictive woman could inflict any harm upon her.

Chapter 562: Gilded Prison

Lila's POV

The endless hours trapped in this armored SUV had drained every ounce of strength from my body. My tears had long since dried up, leaving behind only a hollow numbness that seemed to seep into my very bones.

"What's that commotion up ahead?" The driver's gravelly voice cut through the oppressive silence, and I managed to lift my head just enough to peer through the tinted windows.

"Keep your head down, princess!" The enforcer in the passenger seat swung his Glock in my direction, the cold metal gleaming under the streetlights. I froze instantly, my heart hammering against my ribs.

"No way in hell I'm stopping here," the driver muttered, his knuckles white against the steering wheel. "I know that silhouette. Better call the Don." He grabbed his encrypted phone with one hand while maintaining his grip on the wheel. "Boss, we've hit town, but we've got a situation. Can't deliver the package to the lady's estate. One of her brothers is posted outside like a damn sentinel." A pause as Connor's voice crackled through the speaker. "Not the lawyer brother, the other one - the family enforcer." Another tense silence. "Copy that, boss."

He terminated the call and exchanged a loaded glance with his partner, their unspoken communication sending ice through my veins. My mind raced frantically. If we were in my territory - Sullivan family

territory - which of my brothers had they spotted stationed outside Claire's compound? The desperate need to escape clawed at my throat, but with armed men surrounding me, how could I possibly break free?

Was Daniel mobilizing his police contacts and Martinez family resources to track me down? Recently, in the sanctuary of his penthouse apartment, he had sworn a solemn oath that he would move heaven and earth to find me if I ever vanished.

The familiar burn of despair returned to my throat as fresh tears carved paths down my cheeks. The armored vehicle gradually decelerated before coming to a complete stop in what appeared to be an abandoned industrial district. Where had they brought me? Several agonizing minutes passed before the driver stepped out, leaving his partner maintaining vigilant watch over me, his weapon still trained on my trembling form. Without warning, the door beside my head was yanked open.

"What the fuck have you animals done to her? Why is she trussed up like some street kidnapping victim?" The voice that cut through the night air sent liquid nitrogen through my bloodstream.

"Boss, we couldn't risk her making noise or attempting to bolt when we moved through populated areas," the gunman stammered, clearly intimidated.

"Point that piece elsewhere and get the hell out of my sight," Connor commanded with the authority of a man who ruled through fear and respect. With movements surprisingly gentle for someone who controlled half the city's underground casino operations, he helped me into a sitting position before sliding into the vehicle beside me. "Hello there, beautiful." His smile only magnified the terror coursing through my system. This unexpected tenderness felt more dangerous than outright brutality.

With practiced precision, he carefully peeled the industrial tape from my lips, then produced a switchblade to slice through the zip-ties binding my wrists and ankles. The sudden return of circulation sent painful tingles through my extremities.

"My apologies for the rough handling, sweetheart, but circumstances demanded we bring you back to the family," he said, his tone deceptively soothing.

"Why are you doing this, Connor? Why are you helping Claire manipulate me like this?" My voice emerged as barely more than a rasp.

His steel-gray eyes sharpened like a predator focusing on prey. "Claire told you about our arrangement?"

"I know she wants me back under her control. Please, Connor, you have to let me go. She's poison - she'll destroy everything I am." I pressed my back against the leather seat, trying to maintain some semblance of dignity while begging for mercy.

"Don't shed those beautiful tears, darling." His fingers brushed through my disheveled hair, each touch sending revulsion down my spine. "She won't harm a single hair on your head. I won't permit it. But releasing you isn't an option either." I pressed myself into the corner of the seat, desperate to maintain distance, but his gaze held something unnervingly familiar - as though my face triggered memories of someone he had lost long ago.

"You're the spitting image of her," he murmured, his voice taking on an almost reverent quality.

"I look nothing like Claire. We don't share a single feature," I protested, confusion mixing with my fear.

"Not Claire, sweetheart. The other one." His fingertips traced the curve of my cheekbone with disturbing gentleness.

"Who are you talking about?" The confusion in my voice seemed to snap him back to the present.

"Ancient history. Let's get you settled inside." He grasped my arm with firm but non-bruising pressure, though I remained frozen in place, uncertain whether compliance or resistance would serve me better. Noting my hesitation, he asked, "Can you walk on those legs?" I managed a slight nod. "Good. Come along then. I give you my word as a gentleman that no harm will come to you tonight."

Something in his tone made me believe him - at least regarding immediate physical safety. As I stepped out of the armored vehicle, his grip on my elbow tightened imperceptibly.

"I meant every word about your safety," he whispered close enough to my ear that I could smell his expensive cologne, "but don't entertain any fantasies about running. My men have orders to shoot first and ask questions later."

I surveyed our surroundings - isolated farmland stretching in every direction, with the nearest structures too distant for anyone to hear screams for help. This was Connor's private domain, far from prying eyes and Sullivan family protection.

Connor guided me toward what appeared to be a renovated farmhouse, the kind of place where wealthy criminals conducted business they preferred to keep off the books. He flipped switches as we entered, illuminating rooms filled with dust-covered furniture draped in white sheets, clearly unused for extended periods. He began yanking coverings off chairs and tables with methodical efficiency, leaving them scattered across the hardwood floors.

"Where exactly is this place?" I finally gathered enough courage to break the silence.

"My private retreat. Port't visited in years - I send cleaning crews occasionally, but not regularly. Originally planned to take you somewhere else," he explained while continuing his unveiling of furniture.

"Where were they supposed to deliver me?" I pressed, hoping to extract useful information while he seemed willing to talk.

"To your mother's compound. But Beckett was conducting surveillance outside, and I thought it prudent to keep you away from Sullivan family enforcement. Are you hungry?" His solicitous concern felt completely at odds with the circumstances.

"No, sir," I replied quietly, falling back on the formal respect that might keep me alive.

"Sweetheart, drop the 'sir' routine. Very soon, I'll be your husband." My blood turned to ice in my veins. Though Daniel and my sister-in-law had warned me about Claire's marriage schemes, hearing the timeline confirmed felt like a death sentence.

"I will never marry you!" The words erupted from my throat before I could stop them.

"Oh, but you absolutely will, darling. Claire will ensure your complete cooperation. I'm paying her quite a substantial dowry for the privilege." His smile widened with predatory satisfaction. "Relax, Lila. Life as my wife will be luxurious beyond your wildest dreams. You'll want for nothing."

"I don't want luxury or your twisted version of marriage," I shot back desperately.

"You'll come around to the idea soon enough. Sit down while I arrange for some food. Can't have my future bride getting sick from neglect."

Connor summoned one of his soldiers and issued quiet orders before returning to observe me with those unsettling eyes. I curled into the armchair like a wounded animal, my mind frantically searching for escape routes that simply didn't exist. Soon his subordinate returned with several bags of takeout, which Connor arranged on the coffee table with the care of a man hosting a dinner party rather than holding someone prisoner.

He prepared a plate and offered it to me with a flourish.

"Eat up, Lila. You must be starving after such a long journey. Afterward, I'll show you where you'll be resting."

I accepted the plate because the aroma actually did make my stomach growl with hunger. Connor served himself an identical portion and began eating with obvious enjoyment, so I reasoned the food wasn't drugged - he wouldn't risk poisoning himself. After we had both cleaned our plates, he offered me an expensive chocolate bar.

"Most women have a weakness for quality sweets," he smiled indulgently.

Anyone unfamiliar with Connor's reputation in the underground casino world might mistake him for a charming gentleman based on his current behavior, but I knew the violence that lurked beneath his polished exterior. Still, I needed to accept whatever kindness he offered if I hoped to survive long enough for rescue.

"Come along, I'll show you your accommodations," he announced, and every muscle in my body tensed. "Lila, nothing inappropriate will happen before our wedding ceremony. If I intended otherwise, location

wouldn’t have mattered - I could have acted in the vehicle. Trust me on this point. You’ll rest far better in a proper bed than on that couch."

His logic, twisted though it was, made a certain sense - if he wanted to assault me, he wouldn’t need privacy or comfort to do it. I followed him down a hallway to a bedroom containing a four-poster bed, antique dresser, reading chair, and entertainment center, all shrouded in protective sheets like the main living area. He methodically removed the coverings, revealing furnishings that belonged in a luxury hotel rather than a kidnapper’s hideout.

"I need to use the restroom," I said, and he gestured toward a door within the bedroom.

"Don’t attempt anything foolish, or I’ll have you zip-tied again myself," he warned with casual menace.

When I emerged, Connor had repositioned the armchair directly beside the bedroom door and settled himself into it like a guardian. He gestured toward the bed with one hand.

"Get some rest, sweetheart. Claire arrives tomorrow morning, and she can be rather... demanding when her plans face obstacles," he said, almost sounding genuinely concerned for my wellbeing.

I removed my shoes and pulled back the luxury bedspread, discovering four plump pillows arranged on perfectly crisp sheets. As I lay down and covered myself with the comforter, I deliberately turned away from Connor’s watchful presence. My mind raced through every possible escape scenario, but I had already noted the decorative iron bars on the windows. The door Connor now guarded represented the only exit from this gilded prison.

Despair settled over me like a suffocating blanket as questions swirled through my exhausted mind. I didn’t even know which state we were in - how would Daniel or Beckett ever locate me in this remote corner of Connor’s criminal empire?

Chapter 563: Racing Against Time

Daniel’s POV

The highway stretched endlessly before me as I pushed my unmarked police vehicle to its limits, emergency lights blazing through the darkness. No matter how fast I drove, the distance to the small

town seemed insurmountable. My hands gripped the steering wheel until my knuckles turned white, thinking of Lila trapped somewhere in Connor's web of gambling dens and smuggling operations. When I finally spotted the weathered town entrance sign, I pulled over, my heart hammering against my ribs like a caged animal. I grabbed my secure phone and called Beckett again.

"Any movement on our targets, Beckett?" My voice betrayed the anxiety eating away at my professional composure.

"Nothing yet, Inspector. Claire's estate is completely dark. No security patrol changes, like she's settled in for the night," Beckett replied from his position coordinating surveillance. As the current head of Sullivan family operations, he commanded resources that even my police connections envied.

"Has Detective Gideon's team made contact?"

"Yes, arrived earlier. Gideon suggested we relocate our command center. One of his trusted officers will maintain eyes on Claire's compound."

"Smart tactical thinking. I'm at the town perimeter now."

Beckett offered his family's safe house as our operational base, which I immediately accepted. The Sullivan family had learned long ago that maintaining legitimate residences alongside their money laundering empire provided perfect cover for sensitive meetings. Minutes later, I pulled up to an elegant Victorian mansion on a tree-lined street that screamed old money respectability. Beckett stood waiting under the portico, flanked by armed men in expensive suits who blended seamlessly with the neighborhood's affluent aesthetic.

Nathaniel and Katarina were inside, she with her eyes red and swollen from hours of crying. Despite her emotional devastation, she'd prepared enough food to feed a small army, along with several industrial-sized thermoses of coffee that my exhausted team accepted gratefully. In our world, family matriarchs like Katarina held sacred positions - their kitchens became war rooms where life-and-death decisions were made over homemade meals.

"Daniel, please eat something substantial. You need strength to bring Lila home safely," Katarina insisted for the third time, pressing a plate of her famous chicken potpie into my hands. Though my appetite had

completely vanished, I knew she was right. From past experience in family operations, I'd learned that adrenaline alone couldn't sustain a man through extended tactical operations.

As we consumed the meal, we exchanged critical intelligence. Beckett recited a comprehensive list of Connor's legitimate business fronts and underground properties, suggesting that if Connor was behind Lila's disappearance, she would most likely be held at one of his heavily fortified locations.

"We'll need federal warrants to legally breach those properties," Detective Gideon's superior reminded us, clearly uncomfortable with the gray areas where law enforcement intersected with family business.

I shook my head firmly. "Let's establish surveillance perimeters first. Any unusual activity or personnel movements could indicate Lila's location."

"Should we divide our operational forces?" Gideon asked, studying the tactical maps spread across Katarina's mahogany dining table.

"I believe our most effective strategy involves maintaining pressure on Claire. She'll eventually lead us directly to Lila's location," Beckett suggested, his voice carrying the cold calculation that made him such an effective family strategist.

"But what if Connor orchestrated this independently, without Claire's knowledge or approval?"

Nathaniel's quiet question hit me like a physical blow. I hadn't seriously considered this terrifying possibility - that Connor might be operating outside the traditional family alliance structures that governed our world.

"Dad, why would Connor make such a bold move without consulting Claire first? I understand they planned for Lila to marry him eventually, but kidnapping seems extreme even by our standards," Beckett questioned, though his expression suggested he feared his father's answer.

"Trust me, son. He's demonstrated capability for that level of violence and much worse throughout his career." Nathaniel's sigh carried the weight of decades in this business.

"Nathaniel, what critical information aren't you sharing with us?" I pressed, sensing hidden intelligence that could change our entire approach.

His weathered expression grew even heavier as he met my gaze directly.

"Connor was romantically involved with my first wife before she and I met. And yes, Lila bears an uncanny resemblance to her mother," Nathaniel said, anticipating Beckett's shocked question as his son's mouth opened. "Their relationship terminated when she discovered his true psychological nature. Then she found me, we fell deeply in love, married within the traditional ceremonies. But Connor never accepted that rejection."

He paused, lost in painful memories. "He pursued her relentlessly afterward, even attempted to abduct her on our wedding day - directly from the cathedral entrance while guests watched. She spotted his men from the bridal car and panicked, instructing her driver to circle the block repeatedly. She eventually entered through the service entrance behind the altar. Imagine that scenario - a mafia bride sneaking through kitchen corridors instead of walking down the aisle." Nathaniel's bitter laugh contained no trace of humor.

"So this man harbored obsessive feelings for your deceased wife, and now those dangerous emotions have transferred completely to Lila?" I asked, feeling ice form in my veins. Nathaniel nodded grimly. "This situation is significantly worse than I initially calculated. We need immediate surveillance on his primary residence."

"I'll dispatch my most experienced officer, Daniel. We know this territory and the local criminal networks," the detective offered, immediately assigning a man who departed through the service exit.

"I cannot simply remain here doing nothing productive!" My frustration threatened to overwhelm the tactical discipline that had kept me alive in both police work and family operations.

"Chief, there's little more we can accomplish now except maintain our positions and wait for actionable intelligence," Bella attempted reassurance, but nothing would ease the growing dread in my chest until Lila was safely back in my arms.

We spent the following hours studying detailed regional maps and satellite imagery, familiarizing ourselves with escape routes and potential strongholds. We decided to integrate my police resources

with Gideon’s local knowledge, creating hybrid teams that could operate in both legitimate and underground capacities. We developed multiple contingency strategies for various scenarios, preparing for every conceivable eventuality in this deadly game.

Despite Katarina’s maternal insistence that everyone should rest before dawn operations, nobody slept. Even she couldn’t close her eyes, pacing between the kitchen and our makeshift command center like a caged lioness protecting her pride.

"Daniel," Beckett said quietly, pulling me aside as the others continued their planning. "There’s something we need to discuss. Before all this happened, I’d already taken steps to protect Lila’s inheritance."

I looked at him questioningly, and he continued, "I established a holding company with an irrevocable board of directors. Lila’s assets are completely shielded from any hostile takeover attempts - even from Claire or Connor."

"Smart thinking," I acknowledged, though I wondered where this was leading.

"Here’s what I’m proposing," Beckett said, his voice dropping even lower. "What if we approach Claire with a monetary offer? A substantial sum in exchange for Lila’s safe return. It might be more effective than a prolonged standoff."

I considered this for a moment. In our world, everything had a price, and sometimes negotiation proved more efficient than force.

"How much are we talking about?" I asked.

"Enough to make it worth their while to end this cleanly. The Sullivan family has resources, and Lila’s trust fund could supplement any immediate cash requirements."

"And if they refuse?"

Beckett’s expression hardened. "Then we move to more direct measures. But at least we’ll have tried the civilized approach first."

I nodded slowly. It was a calculated risk, but one that might save Lila from prolonged captivity - or worse.

Hours crawled by with excruciating slowness. Local patrol officers combed through the town and surrounding rural areas, but each negative report intensified my growing desperation. As morning light finally broke across the horizon with still no significant developments - not even Claire doing anything beyond her routine church attendance - darker thoughts began invading my mind.

What if they had already harmed Lila before even reaching this godforsaken town?

Chapter 564: Bird in Cage

Lila’s POV

Sleep remained a distant hope throughout the endless night. Even if exhaustion had claimed me, Connor’s thunderous snoring would have shattered any attempt at rest. The casino magnate’s breathing sounded like machinery grinding in one of his underground gambling dens. When dawn finally broke through the reinforced windows of his private safe house, I sat rigidly on the edge of the bed, my spine turned deliberately away from him.

"Awake already, princess? You’re quite the early riser," he commented with that smugness typical of men who believed they controlled everything in their orbit.

I clenched my jaw to prevent myself from snapping back that sleeping through his earthquake of noise would require sedatives strong enough to fell a racehorse. This man, with his crude mannerisms disguised beneath expensive suits, represented everything vile about the families that ruled from the shadows.

"Connor, release me immediately. No matter what Claire promises you, I will never consent to this marriage. Never." I rose and confronted him directly, summoning every ounce of defiance my Sullivan bloodline had instilled in me.

His laughter carried the confidence of someone accustomed to breaking resistance through brutality and intimidation. "Such fire in those pretty eyes! Don't worry, sweetheart, I'll tame that spirit soon enough." His arrogance made me want to drive something sharp through his skull. "Listen carefully, Lila. I've been doing business with Claire for many years through the art procurement networks..."

"Yes, as her lover! You certainly know her intimately through those money laundering operations," I interrupted, surprising myself with my boldness in addressing the sordid reality of their relationship.

"So you're aware of our arrangement." He sighed without bothering to deny the accusation. "That partnership served its purpose. But here's what matters—when Claire wants something in this organization, she acquires it. Always. The Sullivan family doesn't accept failure."

"She cannot force me into this alliance," I declared, lifting my chin with the pride that came from my true heritage, not the fabricated bonds she'd constructed.

"We shall see about that. Now come, let's have breakfast, then I'll contact Claire about your arrival." He gestured toward the door, but I remained planted where I stood. "Would you prefer I carry you downstairs?"

I darted past him before his hands could make contact. The mere thought of his touch revolted me more than the stench of the illegal cigarettes he chain-smoked. True to his word, immediately after a breakfast of imported delicacies that felt like my last meal, he placed the call to my captor.

"Claire! The bird is secured in the cage," he announced with satisfaction dripping from every word. "Lila is here at the compound. No, I couldn't bring her to your penthouse." Even from across the room, I could hear her shrieking through the encrypted phone. "Because Daniel's surveillance teams were watching your building. She's at our old meeting location." More screaming followed from her end. "This is how the situation will proceed because I'm the one calling the shots! She remains here under my protection. My security teams are monitoring every exit. Exercise caution when you arrive. And remember our agreement—don't damage the merchandise!"

I almost laughed bitterly at his feigned concern for my welfare, as if I were valuable cargo rather than a human being. He terminated the call and fixed his cold stare on me.

"I have business to attend to at the casino. Make yourself comfortable in this safe house, but don't entertain thoughts of escape. My men have orders to watch you. Your mother will arrive soon."

"You understand what she wants beyond this forced marriage arrangement, don't you?" I asked, certain he was fully aware of the larger financial conspiracy.

"I have no interest in the details, but she won't seriously harm you," he replied with disturbing casualness.

I couldn't suppress my bitter laughter. "You don't know Claire at all." I no longer referred to her by any maternal title—she had forfeited that privilege despite the biological deception she'd maintained for years. "She'll beat me, whip me, torture me until my skin is raw, then continue the assault until she extracts what she wants. And since I cannot provide access to what she demands, she'll beat me until there's nothing left."

"What could she possibly want so desperately from a young woman?" he asked, seemingly genuinely puzzled by the depths of her obsession.

"My inheritance—the trust fund Beckett established with offshore protections. But it's completely untouchable by anyone, including her," I said, turning away and settling onto the leather sofa that probably cost more than most people's annual income.

The reinforced door slammed as he departed for his criminal enterprises. Moments later, it opened again to admit his lieutenant—the same driver who had transported me to this prison last night—who positioned himself like a guard by the entrance. Any lingering hope of escape evaporated instantly.

Lost in contemplation of my grim circumstances, I failed to notice Claire's arrival until her voice slithered into my consciousness like poison.

"Hello, my precious little girl!" Her tone carried that unhinged delight that always preceded sessions of calculated cruelty—she fed on fear and suffering like others consumed fine wine.

I remained motionless, watching as she brandished a black legal portfolio and the familiar leather whip that had carved permanent scars across my skin during countless previous encounters.

"Look what I retrieved from the penthouse safe. Perhaps you've missed our special bonding sessions?" She dangled the instrument of torture before my eyes like a beloved pet.

My silence seemed to energize her sadistic pleasure. "Not speaking today? Excellent—I won't have to endure your pathetic whimpering." She settled into the armchair across from me with the satisfied air of a predator cornering wounded prey. "Lila, Lila... I warned you that I'd bring you back into the family fold. You should understand by now that I always acquire what I desire within our organization."

Her laughter—that bone-chilling sound that preceded agony—froze the blood in my veins. During the sleepless night and the hours spent on this expensive prison furniture, I had reached a state of resigned acceptance. There was no escape from this compound, and she could never access my inheritance thanks to Beckett's sophisticated financial protections. I would endure her brutality, refuse to marry Connor, and eventually, she would beat me to death in her rage. I had made peace with this inevitable conclusion.

"Nothing to contribute to our conversation?" she prodded mockingly. I simply stared back, understanding that words had become meaningless currency in this transaction. "Perfect! Don't waste your breath! I'll handle all the talking. Here's our new arrangement—I've prepared legal documents for your signature, transferring all assets and properties to me and granting complete power of attorney over your offshore accounts. Since you're marrying Connor anyway, you won't require independent wealth or property. Your husband's casino empire will provide everything you need."

She placed the legal portfolio on the coffee table with a smile that could have frozen hell itself. I barely glanced at the papers, watching this scene unfold as if I were merely observing a play rather than participating in my own destruction.

"Sign them," she commanded, her voice dropping to that dangerous whisper that always preceded violence.

I didn't move. Didn't even acknowledge her demand.

The first blow came without warning—her palm cracking across my cheek with enough force to snap my head sideways. The second followed immediately, splitting my lip against my teeth. Blood trickled down my chin as I slowly turned back to face her, my expression unchanged.

"Sign the papers, Lila." The whip unfurled in her other hand like a serpent preparing to strike.

Still, I said nothing. Did nothing.

The leather bit into my shoulder through my thin shirt, the familiar burning sensation spreading across my skin. Then again across my back. And again. Each strike precisely calculated to cause maximum pain without permanent disfigurement—she'd had years to perfect her technique.

Tears leaked from my eyes, not from the physical pain but from the crushing weight of helplessness. Yet I remained silent, my hands folded in my lap, the papers untouched before me. *e*

"You stubborn little bitch!" she snarled, raising the whip for another strike. "Do you think your defiance matters? I'll beat you until you sign every page!"

"You can't have it," I whispered, finally speaking. My voice emerged hoarse and broken, but the words were clear. "Beckett protected everything. Offshore trusts with iron-clad provisions. Even if I signed those papers, even if you killed me, you'd never access a single dollar."

The whip froze mid-arc. Claire's face contorted with rage as the implications sank in.

"You're lying."

"The trust automatically reverts to charitable organizations if I die or if there's evidence of coercion. Beckett knew exactly what kind of person you are." I met her furious gaze without flinching. "Every beating you give me, every signature you force—it only strengthens the case for coercion. You've already lost, Claire. You just don't know it yet."

Her scream of fury echoed off the safe house walls. She struck me again and again with the whip, but now there was desperation behind each blow rather than calculated control. When she finally exhausted herself, both of us were breathing heavily, my shirt torn and bloody.

"This isn’t over," she hissed, gathering up the unsigned papers. "I’ll find another way. There’s always another way."

"No," I said quietly. "There isn’t."

She stormed toward the door, then paused to deliver one final threat. "Connor will break you where I failed. And when he tires of your defiance, I’ll be waiting."

The door slammed behind her with enough force to rattle the reinforced frame. I remained on the sofa, bleeding and battered, but for the first time in days, I allowed myself the smallest smile.

Beckett had protected me even from beyond the grave. The inheritance would remain safe, and Claire’s desperate gambit had failed completely. Now all I had to do was survive Connor’s inevitable retaliation when he learned the truth.

Chapter 565: Thread of Hope

Beckett’s POV

The night had been pure torment in the Sullivan family mansion. Dad sat hunched in his leather armchair, his weathered face etched with the kind of worry that comes from decades of navigating the treacherous waters of our world. Katarina paced across the marble floors, her manicured nails bitten down to nothing. And Daniel—Cristo, Daniel looked ready to paint the streets red with blood. Here we were at midday, and still no word about my sister Lila. The Martinez family soldiers had swept the city at dawn, checking every one of Connor’s legitimate fronts and underground operations I’d provided intel on, but Daniel’s phone remained ominously silent.

Running the Sullivan family’s legitimate operations seemed meaningless now. I’d ordered my assistant to cancel every board meeting and contract review—the family’s white-collar empire would have to survive without me while we hunted for Lila. The sharp ring of my encrypted phone shattered the suffocating silence. Claire’s name flashed on the screen like a curse. I activated the speaker so Dad and Katarina could listen, but gestured for them to remain quiet.

"What do you want, Claire?" I answered, not bothering to hide the venom in my voice.

"To negotiate, obviously." Her tone carried that familiar mixture of arrogance and calculated sweetness. "Isn't that what civilized families do?"

"I don't have time for your games, Claire. And even if I did, you'd be the last snake I'd waste breath on." I let the words hang, testing her composure.

"If I were you, I'd find the time." Her voice turned ice-cold, revealing the predator beneath the polished facade. "I'm waiting at my estate. Don't keep me waiting long." The line died with a decisive click.

"You're not walking into that viper's nest alone!" Dad shot up from his chair before I could speak.

With a heavy sigh, I contacted Daniel through our secure channel. He insisted on accompanying me, and before long, he, Gideon, and I were standing in Claire's opulent living room. The familiar scent of her expensive perfume mixed with the underlying odor of corruption made my stomach churn.

"I despise everything about this place," I muttered under my breath.

"Well, you managed to clear your busy schedule after all." Claire glided into the room like a queen holding court, her smile as sharp as a blade. "And you brought your associates. How is my precious daughter faring, Inspector?" The honeyed venom in her voice when she addressed Daniel was nauseating. His stare could have frozen the blood in her veins.

"Cut to the chase, Claire." My patience had worn thinner than paper.

"I want to discuss Lila's inheritance arrangements." Of course that's what this was about—it always came down to money and power with her.

"I've made sure it's beyond your reach," I replied with cold satisfaction. "Even if you force my sister to sign documents under duress, you won't see a single dollar. The trust has been restructured through offshore accounts in my name. Lila possesses nothing you can sink your claws into."

"You bastard!" Claire's mask slipped before she twisted her features into a cruel smile. "Such a pity you couldn't protect the little mouse as effectively as you protected those funds."

That crossed the line for Daniel. He moved like lightning, his powerful hands wrapping around Claire's throat with practiced precision.

"Listen very carefully," he growled, applying just enough pressure to make his point clear. "You have no conception of the forces you're provoking. Tell us where Lila is. Now."

"Daniel, release her," Gideon intervened calmly, his voice carrying the weight of experience. "She's not worth destroying your position over."

Reluctantly, Daniel loosened his grip. Claire collapsed against her expensive sofa, gasping and rubbing her throat with trembling fingers.

"You'll never see her again," she wheezed, her eyes blazing with malice. "Get out! GET OUT OF MY HOUSE!"

I moved closer, looming over her diminished form. "Name your price, Claire. How much to free my sister and disappear from our lives forever?"

Her expression transformed into something demonic. "You're actually prepared to pay? I want it all—every penny of her inheritance, every asset, every connection. That's my price. Pay up, or precious Lila vanishes permanently."

My secure phone buzzed insistently—Katarina calling. I wanted to ignore it, but she kept calling back with increasing urgency.

"What is it?" I answered, stepping away from Claire's toxic presence.

"Beckett, return home immediately," Katarina's voice carried an edge of desperate hope. "Someone's here who needs to speak with you urgently."

"I'm in the middle of something critical," I replied, gesturing toward the ongoing standoff with Claire.

"Beckett, abandon that demon and come here this instant. It’s about Lila." Katarina never pushed this hard unless the situation was genuinely desperate.

"We’re leaving." I ended the call and turned to Daniel. "Emergency at home."

"What about negotiating for your sister?" Claire called out mockingly as we headed toward the door.

"I know your demands, and they’re impossible. I need to leave—if our legitimate operations collapse, there won’t be anything left for you to extort." I gave her one final withering look before walking out with Daniel and Gideon.

"What’s the situation?" Daniel demanded once we were in my armored sedan.

"Unknown. Katarina said someone’s at the mansion wanting to speak with me. Must be connected to Lila." I pressed the accelerator, weaving through traffic with practiced efficiency.

When we arrived at the Sullivan family compound, I was surprised to find Rafael and Madeline waiting in our formal sitting room, both looking deeply troubled.

"Thank God you’re back," Katarina said, relief flooding her features.

"What’s happening?" I looked between her and Dad. "Daniel, meet Madeline—she and my mother gave birth on the same day at the private clinic—and her son Rafael. This is Daniel, Lila’s boyfriend and our family ally."

After quick introductions were made, Madeline stepped forward. "We’re here about Lila."

"Explain," I demanded, my heart racing.

Rafael moved closer. "I believe I spotted her last night. I apologize for the delay, but I didn’t know how to contact your family safely."

"Where did you see her?" I pressed.

"Late at night. Near the abandoned quarry by Connor's old compound. I was returning from the university and saw Connor with a young woman and armed men. The lighting was poor, but she matched the photograph from the news reports. This morning when I drove past again, I witnessed Claire entering the property. That's when I knew something was seriously wrong."

"Gideon, contact all our people," Daniel ordered, already moving toward the exit.

"Wait," Rafael warned. "Connor has heavy security there—professional muscle."

"Think strategically, Daniel," Gideon reasoned. "We need our full team."

Daniel's jaw clenched with barely controlled fury. "Fine! Assemble everyone. And find out how Claire reached that location without our surveillance detecting her. Post watchers on her estate as well."

It took some time for our forces to mobilize. Daniel prowled the mansion like a caged predator, radiating lethal tension. When they finally departed for the compound, they refused to let me join the operation.

I remained behind, my heart hammering against my ribs. For the first time in days, we had genuine intelligence—a thread of hope in the darkness. Lila might finally be coming home to where she belonged.

Chapter 566: Blood and Betrayal

Lila's POV

I pressed myself deeper into the corner of the dimly lit basement, my body aching from the savage beating Claire had delivered with her diamond-encrusted rings. Each bruise was a testament to the cruelty of the woman who had raised me in the Shadow of the Sullivan crime family. The sound of her designer heels clicking against the concrete floor announced her return before she even spoke.

"I’m back, you little pest," Claire announced, her voice carrying the satisfaction of a predator who had cornered her prey. "Your brother Beckett is finally ready to negotiate with me. Do you understand what this means? It means I’m about to claim everything that should have been mine from the beginning."

Her laughter echoed off the warehouse walls before her manicured hand struck my already swollen cheek. The familiar sting brought fresh tears, but I refused to give her the satisfaction of crying out.

"You know, Lila, I’m really going to miss these intimate conversations we have," she said, landing another blow with practiced precision. "There’s something so satisfying about putting spoiled mafia princesses in their place."

Apparently growing tired of standing, she settled into the expensive leather chair her men had brought down, crossing her legs with the casual elegance of someone discussing tomorrow’s weather rather than orchestrating my destruction.

"Do you have any idea how exhausting it’s been, pretending to care about you all these years?" She examined her perfectly manicured nails, each one painted the color of fresh blood. "Playing the devoted mother to Nathaniel Sullivan’s precious daughter while you lived in luxury, completely oblivious to how the family business really works."

"You never cared about me," I whispered, finding unexpected courage in what might be my final hours.

"What did you say?" Her cold blue eyes narrowed to deadly slits. "Don’t test my patience, girl. Not today."

"You never showed me real care," I repeated, my voice stronger this time despite the fear coursing through my veins.

Claire leaned forward, her eyes gleaming with malicious pleasure. "Now Justin, my actual son, him I genuinely loved. When I discovered I was carrying Justin, it was the most joyful moment of my entire life. Him, I raised with true maternal devotion." Her expression softened momentarily before hardening again as her gaze fixed on me. "You were nothing more than a strategic asset, a key to Nathaniel’s empire. The only reason your father married me was to secure your position in the family hierarchy. And let me tell you, being married to that sanctimonious man was pure tedium."

"My God, you're absolutely vicious," I said, finally seeing the true nature of the woman I had called mother my entire life.

"Vicious? No, darling, I'm simply pragmatic," she replied with a dismissive gesture. "And you were never part of my long-term plans. Neither was your father, for that matter." She rose from her seat and approached me again, her shadow engulfing my trembling form.

"Ha! Don't tell me you still haven't pieced it together? How utterly naive you Sullivan children can be!"

Her laugh was harsh and cutting, like shattered glass scraping against stone.

"What are you referring to?" I asked, though a terrible suspicion was already forming in my mind.

"About the dead woman!" Claire shrieked, her composure finally cracking. "That sanctified bitch! She had Connor completely under her spell, and he still hasn't recovered from losing her. He's so consumed by her memory that he's convinced himself marrying you will somehow bring her back. You! A pathetic substitute! Tell me, what supernatural power do you possess that makes every man in this organization fall at your feet?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," I lied, struggling to process her words while the pain in my body intensified.

"Oh, Lila! Stop this charade!" Claire stepped back, surveying me with complete contempt.

"You're not really my mother, are you?" I finally voiced the question that had haunted me for years.

"Of course not! But I had to maintain the illusion, had to endure your presence every single day." Her eyes flashed with years of accumulated resentment. "The sacrifices I made to marry into this family, raising you was just one of many. My only regret is not eliminating you when you were still helpless. If I had, your father might have left me, but at least I wouldn't have had to watch him stay married to me solely because of his devotion to you."

"Who is my real mother?" I asked desperately, needing to know the truth before whatever fate awaited me.

"Port't you figured that out yet? Should I enlighten you? Should I keep you in suspense?" Claire tapped her chin in mock deliberation. "I'm feeling generous today, so perhaps I'll tell you... Just kidding! Generosity has never been my strong suit."

"You're pure evil, Claire!" I spat the words at her, regretting every sleepless night I had spent wondering why she couldn't love me, every desperate attempt I had made to earn her approval.

"Perhaps I am. But I'm also finished with this conversation. See how pleasant our little chat has been? Now, you're going to sign these documents so I can formalize your marriage to Connor. That's the final piece of this puzzle." She placed an elegant folder on the table before me and commanded me to sign.

"What do you gain from this marriage?" I dared to ask, though I suspected I already knew the answer.

"What do you think? Power, little fool. Absolute control over territory and resources. I need both because your father's will left me virtually powerless." Her smile was venomous. "Now sign these papers so I can take them to our family's legal counsel and arrange your wedding. Later tonight, your devoted husband will arrive to consummate your union."

Her cackling ignited a rage within me I never knew I possessed. I would never marry Connor, not even to save my own life. I seized the papers, tore them into pieces, and scattered the fragments across the concrete floor.

"Not even if you kill me!" I declared.

The slap came instantly, harder than any before. She grabbed my hair, throwing me to the ground with surprising strength for someone who appeared so refined. With both hands, she tore the delicate fabric of my dress, exposing my back to the cold air. I heard the whistle of the leather whip before I felt its brutal bite into my flesh.

Each lash forced an involuntary scream from my throat. The agony was unlike anything I had ever experienced, white-hot fire spreading across my skin. I lost consciousness of time, of how many times the whip carved into my back, of how long I fought to remain aware.

As darkness began consuming the edges of my vision, I heard it—a voice calling Claire's name that reverberated through the warehouse. Connor's voice. It was the last sound I registered before surrendering to merciful unconsciousness.

Chapter 567: Empty Safe House

Daniel's POV

The isolated compound Rafael had pinpointed sat on the town's periphery, a perfect hideout for mafia operations with only a single residence visible in the distance. A narrow gravel road connected to the main highway, likely the route that college student had used when he witnessed suspicious activity involving black SUVs and armed men. We positioned our vehicles strategically, maintaining visual contact as Connor's armored sedan pulled through the compound gates. Soon, my tactical team had neutralized the perimeter guards and surrounded the property.

When I kicked open the reinforced door, Connor and Claire stood in the sparsely furnished safe house, their heated argument echoing through the room.

"Claire, what the hell have you done with her?" Connor was shouting as we stormed in.

"Police! Hands where I can see them! Move to the wall, slowly," I commanded, my voice cutting through their dispute like a blade.

Connor turned with a sneer that belonged to someone accustomed to buying his way out of trouble. "What is this amateur hour? Do you have any idea who you're dealing with?"

Before he could reach for the phone that undoubtedly contained numbers of corrupt officials, two of my officers moved in, restraining both suspects with professional efficiency. I caught the calculating smile that crossed Claire's lips, the expression of someone who believed she still held cards to play.

"Police, you entitled bastard," I snapped, approaching them with deliberate menace.

With the suspects secured, we conducted a systematic sweep of the compound. Lila wasn't there, but evidence of recent occupation was everywhere - takeout containers from high-end restaurants, expensive bedding hastily abandoned, and signs that this safe house had been activated specifically for this operation. The desperate fury clawing at my chest threatened to overwhelm my professional composure as I returned to the main room.

I grabbed Connor by his designer shirt collar, my patience completely exhausted. "Where is she?"

"Easy there, Inspector," he replied with the infuriating confidence of a man who'd corrupted half the city. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're referring to."

"Don't play games with me!" My grip tightened around the expensive fabric.

"I'm not playing anything. Release me immediately. You're completely ignorant of who you're crossing. I'll have all of you transferred to traffic duty for this embarrassment." His calm arrogance only stoked my rage higher.

"I'm not in the mood for your political connections. Where's Lila?" I demanded, refusing to release my hold.

"Ah, you must be the boyfriend," he said with mocking amusement. "Listen, boy, I know nothing about Lila's whereabouts. I came here specifically to demand answers from Claire about when my fiancée would be returning to fulfill our arrangement."

"Your fiancée? That's complete bullshit!" I lost control, my fist connecting solidly with his aristocratic jaw. He stumbled backward onto the leather couch but had the audacity to laugh, massaging his chin like this was merely an inconvenience.

"Quite the temper for a law enforcement officer!" He adjusted his position with practiced ease. "By all means, tear apart the entire compound. You'll discover nothing incriminating! This pathetic display amounts to nothing but harassment of legitimate businessmen. I suggest vacating my property before I make calls that will end all of your careers."

Just then, Gideon appeared in the doorway, his urgent gestures indicating developments outside. Something significant was happening beyond these walls. I glared at the two conspirators before me, frustrated that we lacked sufficient evidence for immediate arrests.

"Let’s move out. She’s not here," I called to my team. "But make no mistake - I’ll be monitoring both of you around the clock from now on."

Outside, I spotted an unmarked police vehicle that didn’t belong to our operation. Inspector Ezekiel, who had been providing crucial support for our investigation, was engaged in what appeared to be a territorial dispute with another detective. Gideon approached me with evident concern.

"You should have coordinated through me first, colleague. This is my jurisdiction," the stranger was complaining.

Ezekiel turned to me with barely concealed frustration. "Daniel, meet Inspector Andrew, the local detective. He’s upset we didn’t notify him before conducting the raid."

"We weren’t legally required to," I replied to Ezekiel while maintaining eye contact with Andrew.

"That’s exactly what I explained to him."

"It’s basic professional courtesy. You’re operating on my turf," Andrew insisted with the territorial instincts of a small-town cop.

I stepped closer, letting my height advantage speak first. "Let me clarify something. We’re hunting a kidnapping victim. Every second counts, and you’re wasting precious time."

"But no kidnapping was officially reported through proper channels—" Andrew began, but Ezekiel cut him off sharply.

"Andrew, the kidnapping occurred in Port Harbor. Daniel leads the violent crimes unit there. He has full jurisdiction, a court order, and direct authorization from the Public Safety Commissioner himself."

Andrew’s eyes narrowed as he studied me with growing suspicion. "Proper protocol dictates he should have coordinated through me, not circumvented my authority by appealing directly to commissioners and judges."

"I had compelling reasons," I warned. "Now, I’m strongly advising you - don’t obstruct our investigation, or you’ll face serious professional consequences."

"Are you threatening a fellow officer, colleague?" His posture stiffened defensively.

"Consider it a professional warning."

"I demand a full explanation for why you’re invading my jurisdiction, harassing respected community leaders, and surveilling the residences of prominent local families." Andrew’s tone revealed his displeasure at having his small-town authority challenged.

"You want explanations? Fine. It’s precisely because your wife maintains suspiciously close social ties with a person under active investigation, and another suspect wields considerable political influence in this community. Now, detective, enough interference. Stay out of my way." My patience had reached its absolute limit.

"That’s not how we operate here. You’re coming to the station to explain everything through proper channels." Andrew puffed out his chest, determined not to yield his territorial control.

"That’s absolutely not happening." I pulled out my phone and initiated a video call. "Commissioner, good afternoon."

"Daniel, perfect timing. Any progress on locating the girl?" the Public Safety Commissioner asked.

"Not yet. The local detective is actively obstructing our investigation. Could you provide immediate intervention?"

"Absolutely. Is he present?"

"Yes. He just interrupted an active raid and wants to halt our entire search operation."

"Put him on immediately." I handed the phone to Andrew, whose face visibly paled upon seeing the commissioner. "Inspector, I want you and all your officers to cease interfering with Inspector Martinez's case immediately. This investigation has been classified as highest priority."

"B-but Commissioner—" Andrew stammered.

"No excuses whatsoever. You're completely removed from this case, or I'll personally transfer you to an even smaller jurisdiction and ensure your career advancement ends permanently. I'm your direct superior issuing an explicit order. Disobedience will be formally documented in your permanent record. Is this understood?"

"Yes, sir. Full compliance." Andrew returned my phone, his face grim with defeat.

"Daniel, contact me if you require any additional support." The commissioner ended the call.

I turned to Andrew with cold finality. "Now get out of my operational area. If I encounter you or your officers around this investigation again, there will be severe consequences."

"Did you locate her?" Ezekiel asked as he caught up with me.

"No. We need continuous surveillance on those two conspirators. I'm absolutely certain they've moved her from this location."

"I'll brief my surveillance teams immediately. Let's return to Beckett's residence - I have critical information to share with you."

Chapter 568: Connor Takes Control

Connor's POV

The morning sun cast long shadows across my private estate as I reviewed the security footage from my downtown casino. My thoughts kept drifting to Lila Sullivan, that exquisite young woman who would soon be mine. The girl possessed a beauty that could make empires fall, and I intended to claim her.

Claire had proven herself completely incompetent in handling this arrangement. When she first approached me with the proposal to marry Lila to my worthless son, I considered it might serve a purpose. Perhaps marriage would finally stop him from hemorrhaging my money on cocaine and high-end escorts throughout the city. But the moment I laid eyes on Lila Sullivan, my plans shifted entirely. That stunning creature would become my wife, not his. Now I found myself as restless as a teenager with his first infatuation. I would accelerate the wedding timeline. Claire could scream all she wanted.

I was heading back toward my downtown operations, planning to visit my lawyer, when Inspector Andrew intercepted me near the harbor district. The man was nothing more than a marionette, dancing to his wife's demands and the substantial cash payments I deposited into his offshore accounts. His compliance had proven invaluable over the years, considering my son's endless legal complications and my own necessary business eliminations.

"Connor, thank God I caught you," Andrew gasped, clearly out of breath.

I barely masked my annoyance. "What is it this time? I have pressing matters to attend to."

"You instructed us to monitor Claire's residence and keep Beckett Sullivan away from the property," he said rapidly. "Beckett wasn't present, but we discovered a law enforcement officer conducting surveillance."

"Why would one of your officers be stationed there?" I asked, my attention suddenly focused.

"That's the problem - he wasn't from my department. A specialized unit arrived from outside our jurisdiction, a substantial team. They're conducting surveillance on all of you."

My blood chilled. "Elaborate."

"A detective from Port Harbor has partnered with someone from our local force. They're en route to your abandoned warehouse facility. They're searching for Lila Sullivan."

"Damn it to hell!" I slammed my fist against the steering wheel. "They absolutely cannot reach that location. Find a method to remove these law enforcement officers from my territory."

"Connor, I need you to understand—"

I didn't remain to hear his pathetic excuses, accelerating toward the warehouse complex. I had to reach Lila before they discovered her location.

When I arrived at the facility, fury consumed me at what I witnessed. Claire was viciously assaulting Lila, completely disregarding my explicit instructions against harming the girl. Lila's face was battered and severely swollen, nearly beyond recognition. How was I expected to enjoy my wedding night with the girl in this deplorable condition? She collapsed into unconsciousness just as I entered the building - fortunate timing, as Claire might have beaten her to death otherwise.

"What have you accomplished, Claire?" I demanded coldly.

Claire simply stared down at Lila's crumpled form with pure disgust.

I knelt beside Lila to assess her vital signs. Still breathing, but seriously injured. I immediately contacted my most reliable lieutenant.

"Remove her from this location immediately. Transport her somewhere completely secure. And acquire proper clothing for her." He lifted her unconscious body, and I noticed scattered documents and a manila folder on the concrete floor. I collected everything and handed it to him. "Listen very carefully - if you touch her inappropriately, you're a dead man. Are we clear?"

"Absolutely, boss," he replied, avoiding eye contact.

"Exit through the rear loading dock. Move with urgency." I followed him outside, observing as he positioned Lila in the back seat and concealed her with a blanket before departing through the rear property access. I turned toward the other security personnel.

"If either of you mentions her existence to anyone, you'll be joining the others I've buried in the harbor. Understood?" Their ashen faces confirmed they grasped my meaning perfectly. I pivoted and marched back into the warehouse, prepared to address Claire's insubordination.

"Now we settle our business," I stated, confronting her directly. "I specifically commanded you not to harm her. What motivated you to defy my direct orders?"

"That's not your business to question," Claire replied with contempt.

"What did you do to her, Claire?" I roared.

Before she could respond, the main entrance exploded inward. Those incompetent officers stormed inside, led by that detective claiming to be Lila's romantic interest. I nearly laughed at his presumption but maintained my composure.

They systematically searched every corner of the warehouse, discovering nothing incriminating. Moments earlier and they would have found her. My early departure from the casino had been incredibly fortuitous.

After realizing their investigation was unsuccessful, they retreated, though they positioned a surveillance unit outside the perimeter.

"What was that demonstration about, Connor?" Claire's voice escalated hysterically.

"Silence yourself. They're still monitoring nearby. Sit down and remain quiet." I observed from the window until they withdrew to a safer distance. "Useless amateurs!"

I returned to the main floor, settling into a chair across from Claire. With calculated composure, I began my interrogation.

"Explain why you assaulted her so brutally."

"I don’t report to you," Claire snapped defiantly.

"On the contrary, you absolutely do. Have you forgotten our financial arrangement? You’ve left her completely disfigured. How am I supposed to consummate my marriage in her current state?"

"Good God, Connor, is that your only concern? Behave according to your age," Claire spat venomously.

"Envious, Claire?" I chuckled darkly. "You understand exactly what this old man remains capable of achieving."

"Don’t be disgusting."

I laughed heartily. "Listen very carefully, Claire. Your involvement with Lila ends immediately. Tomorrow, she becomes my legal wife."

"That wasn’t our original agreement!" She leaped to her feet.

"You violated our contract first. What do you want from her? The inheritance money? You won’t access it. Lila informed me personally that Beckett ensured you would never touch her trust fund. Be satisfied with the compensation I’m providing you."

Claire’s expression twisted with absolute rage. "That manipulative little snake outsmarted me! I DESPISE HER!"

"Not her - Beckett orchestrated it. The young man possesses genuine intelligence, I’ll acknowledge that." Truly, Beckett was remarkable - dedicated, industrious, brilliant. Everything my son wasn’t.

"Whatever! When do I receive my payment?" Money remained Claire’s sole motivation.

"Tomorrow. I’ll provide you with the wedding arrangements later. Your attendance is mandatory - you’ll persuade her to marry me." My tone permitted no negotiation.

Claire grabbed her purse and stormed out, consumed by inexplicable hatred. I remained seated, organizing my subsequent moves. Surveying the warehouse, I considered transferring this property to my son. With my approaching marriage, I wanted him removed from my residence, free to create chaos away from my direct oversight.

Later, I contacted my lieutenant to learn Lila's current location. But before visiting my bride-to-be, I needed to finalize our wedding arrangements. Nothing would prevent me from possessing Lila Sullivan.

Chapter 569: Deception Unveiled

Daniel's POV

The defeat etched across my face spoke volumes as we returned to Beckett's private estate. Lila remained missing. I slumped into the leather armchair in his study, my body weighed down by exhaustion and the crushing fear that time was running out. Dark thoughts spiraled through my mind – I had to find her before Claire and Connor's twisted scheme reached its conclusion.

"What happened, Daniel?" Nathaniel settled beside me, genuine concern marking his weathered features. Even in his advanced years, the former head of the Sullivan family still commanded respect in these circles.

"She wasn't at the warehouse," I replied, my voice hollow with disappointment. "But I know she was there. The evidence of recent activity... they must have moved her moments before we arrived."

Ezekiel nodded grimly as he took his seat. The veteran detective had been invaluable in navigating the delicate balance between official police work and family business. "That's exactly what I suspect occurred. The detective approached my surveillance officer stationed outside Claire's penthouse and brought him to headquarters. He identified himself and demanded to know why we were watching a prominent Sullivan family member."

The pieces clicked together in my mind like bullets sliding into a chamber. "That's how she slipped away undetected. With our surveillance compromised, Claire could move freely without triggering our alerts."

"Precisely," Ezekiel confirmed, self-recrimination clear in his voice. "I've already reassigned that officer back to traffic duty. He's green, inexperienced. My mistake bringing him into a family operation. Despite

explicit instructions about discretion, he thought there would be no harm in cooperating with a fellow detective."

Ezekiel's guilt was written across his features. "That's why that detective showed up at the warehouse during our raid – he was accompanying my officer. I'm certain he tipped off Connor through official channels."

"Ezekiel, this isn't your fault," I said, though my scattered thoughts made offering real comfort impossible. "But now they know we're closing in. What's our next move?"

"We keep searching every lead, but you need some rest," Ezekiel suggested with the concern of someone who'd seen too many good men burn out.

"Rest isn't an option until she's safe," I insisted, burying my face in my hands. The weight of responsibility – both as her lover and as a Martinez family member – pressed down on me. Suddenly, a thought struck me. "Beckett, why wasn't that warehouse among Connor's properties you investigated?"

"Most likely because it's not registered under his name," Beckett replied thoughtfully, his sharp mind already working the angles. As the Sullivan family's current head, he understood the importance of hidden assets. "Interestingly, I don't know who officially owns that facility. It's been abandoned for years, perfect for off-the-books operations."

"Can you trace the real owner?" I asked, a spark of hope igniting in my chest.

"One phone call to the right people," Beckett assured me, already reaching for his encrypted device. We fell into tense silence as he made his inquiry, each of us knowing that in our world, information was power, and power could mean the difference between life and death.

After completing his call, Beckett looked up with new intelligence gleaming in his eyes. "The property belongs to Connor's son – inherited from his late mother's estate. There's another property as well, a small house also part of the inheritance. It's located in the valley, on the route to Twin Rock Cave. Remote location, isolated community. Perfect for keeping someone hidden."

"I’m familiar with that area," Gideon said decisively. The Thorne family’s security chief had proven invaluable in our search efforts. "I’ll conduct reconnaissance immediately. If I discover anything suspicious, you’ll know soon. Daniel, you should get some rest while we investigate. Bella, you’re with me?"

Bella agreed readily, and they departed together. Their growing partnership pleased me, especially since I’d promised Gideon a position within my own organization once this nightmare ended.

"What else can we do while we wait?" I asked Ezekiel, desperation seeping into my voice despite my efforts to maintain control.

"For now, we maintain surveillance on all known locations. Both Claire and Connor are being watched around the clock by teams that understand the gravity of crossing a Martinez operation."

I turned back to Beckett. "Could Claire own properties you might have missed in your initial investigation?"

"I was thorough in checking her registered assets," he assured me with the confidence of someone accustomed to dealing in shadows and secrets.

"Wait," Nathaniel interjected, his expression shifting as old memories surfaced. "When Claire claimed to be carrying my child years ago, she left the city. I made monthly visits, providing financial support and checking on her supposed condition."

"Was that house hers?" Beckett asked his father, clearly surprised by this revelation about family history he’d never heard.

"No, it belonged to someone Claire referred to as her godmother – an elderly woman who seemed completely devoted to her. She had no surviving family of her own. After Claire returned to the city with me, I never heard mention of this woman again. If she’s still alive, she’d be quite elderly now, but it’s worth investigating."

"That’s where I’m heading," I announced, already rising from my chair with renewed purpose.

"I'll accompany you," Nathaniel insisted firmly. "I can guide you there, and I remember the neighborhood layout." Inspector Ezekiel joined our expedition, understanding that in cases like these, official procedures often had to bend to family necessities.

The drive took several hours, winding through neighborhoods that existed on the margins of our organization's territory. We arrived at a community where children played in streets watched over by residents who understood the value of minding their own business. Nathaniel directed us to our destination – a modest house near the street's end where a young woman lounged against an open window.

"Excuse me," I called out, approaching with the confident bearing that came naturally to someone in my position. "We're looking for information about a woman who lived here many years ago."

"That would be my aunt. She passed away some years back," the woman replied, then her expression hardened with suspicion. "Why are you asking? Don't tell me that snake goddaughter of hers sent you to make some claim on our family property?"

"Who are you referring to?" I asked, genuinely confused by her immediate hostility.

"That worthless manipulator Claire. When my aunt died, she tried every legal trick to steal this house, but my brother's friend connected us with a lawyer who shut down her schemes permanently. Now the house belongs to my mother, my aunt's rightful sister."

"Actually, we hoped to discuss Claire with your aunt," I admitted. "And I completely agree – she's nothing but trouble."

This comment earned her trust instantly. "Come inside then. I'll get my mother." She ushered us into a small but comfortable living room and soon returned with an elderly woman who moved slowly but with dignity.

"Mom, these gentlemen are asking questions about Claire," she explained.

"That poisonous serpent!" the elderly woman spat with surprising venom, then her expression softened as recognition dawned while looking at Nathaniel. "I remember you, sir. You visited that lying witch

when she was pretending to carry your child. She would stuff pillows under her dress to deceive you completely."

"Yes, that was me," Nathaniel confirmed with a heavy sigh that carried decades of regret.

"There was another man who visited her regularly too. She never bothered with the fake pregnancy around him or the padded clothing. She would take him directly to her bedroom. I warned my sister repeatedly about allowing such shameful behavior in her house, but she spoiled Claire terribly."

"Do you recall this other man's name?" Nathaniel asked with growing urgency.

"Everyone in the neighborhood knew him – Connor. There was also a private nurse who helped Claire maintain her deception. They conspired together to obtain an infant that Claire would present as yours. When that nurse arrived one night with a tiny baby wrapped in blankets, I felt sick for that poor child. They actually laughed about their successful scheme."

"Do you know where that baby came from?" Nathaniel asked, his voice tight with controlled emotion.

"Sir, I know everything that happened! But I had no way to contact you to reveal the truth. I'm so grateful you're here now to finally learn what really occurred. Sweetie, make some coffee for these gentlemen while I tell them the whole story. It's long past time the truth came to light."

For the following period, the elderly woman detailed every aspect of Claire's elaborate deception, finally illuminating the darkness that had shrouded our family's past for decades.

Chapter 570: False Son Revealed

Connor's POV

I drove my armored Escalade through the narrow streets leading to Priscilla's establishment on the city's industrial outskirts. Her high-end escort service catered exclusively to the most powerful families in the organization, operating under the guise of an exclusive private club. The women there understood discretion and luxury in equal measure, and Priscilla herself had proven invaluable for delicate situations requiring a woman's touch.

"Well, if it isn’t the feared Connor himself, gracing us with an early visit," Priscilla purred as I entered her opulent office, decorated with velvet drapes and gold-framed mirrors.

"I require your services for a special procurement," I stated, settling my imposing frame into the leather chair across from her mahogany desk.

She arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. "And what compensation do I receive for this favor?"

"Name your terms. We both know nothing in this organization comes without a price." Her crimson lips curved into a knowing smile. "I need you to acquire certain feminine articles."

"Connor, darling, developing new interests in your golden years? A man of your reputation suddenly concerning himself with ladies’ attire?" Her dark eyes sparkled with dangerous amusement.

"Mind your tongue, Priscilla. These items are for my intended bride," I growled, my voice carrying the weight of barely contained violence.

Her expression shifted to genuine astonishment. "Marriage? A man like you?"

"Marriage indeed. And I trust you’ll continue providing your usual services even after my nuptials." My cold smile held no warmth.

"Why not allow your bride-to-be to handle her own shopping arrangements?"

"That’s beyond your concern." She responded with an elegant shrug, understanding the boundaries of our professional relationship.

"Acquire an appropriate white wedding gown and several of those expensive undergarments your girls favor. Include additional formal dresses as well. She’ll obtain the remainder herself later." I placed a thick envelope of cash on her desk. "This should more than suffice."

"Quite generous. What are her measurements?"

I gestured toward one of the escorts visible through the office's one-way glass. "Approximately her size." I motioned for the woman to join us. "Yes, similar proportions. While you're handling the shopping, I'll avail myself of her companionship."

Later, Priscilla returned as I was concluding my business arrangement. I compensated her for both the shopping expedition and the escort's services, then departed with my carefully wrapped packages.

Arriving at my fortified compound, I had initially planned to summon the family's private notary but reconsidered—conducting business on my own territory eliminated potential eavesdroppers. As I crossed the threshold of my mansion, an unwelcome sight greeted me.

"Sir, this young man has been waiting for quite some time," my longtime housekeeper informed me with barely concealed disapproval.

"What fresh annoyance is this?" I muttered. "Take these packages to my private quarters. Where's my worthless son?"

"Out gambling and carousing, as always." She gathered the shopping bags and disappeared down the marble-floored corridor.

I entered my study to find Justin Sullivan seated on the expensive Italian leather sofa, wearing an expression of misplaced confidence.

"Connor, we have pressing family business to discuss," the young man announced with ridiculous pomposity.

"Do we indeed? What might that concern?" I found the boy's presumption almost entertaining.

"I've recently learned that you're my biological father and—" I couldn't contain my laughter, the sound echoing off the wood-paneled walls. I laughed until my chest ached, watching the color drain from Justin's face. When my amusement finally subsided, the boy stared at me in obvious shock.

"Justin, which fool filled your head with such nonsense?" I wiped moisture from my eyes.

"My mother confided in me... After Nathaniel demanded a paternity test, she revealed that I'm your legitimate son." The pride in his voice was almost pathetic.

"So Nathaniel finally developed some intelligence! Listen carefully, boy, your mother is nothing more than a manipulative whore. I am definitely not your father." I chuckled again, amazed that Claire would attempt such an obvious scam. She knew I wasn't as gullible as her former mark.

"But she swore—" I cut him off with a dismissive wave.

"Go home and interrogate 'Pudge'—that's what everyone in the organization called your mother, in case you remained ignorant of her reputation. Ask her about the degenerate gambler who bestowed that charming nickname. He's your actual progenitor. But I'll save you the investigation. He was a pathetic card sharp who spent his miserable existence losing family money and running penny-ante cons. Your mother was obsessed with him, though he barely acknowledged her existence. After she lost the weight, he'd occasionally use her when he couldn't secure better company. Pudge craved the luxurious lifestyle that loser couldn't provide, so she ensnared Nathaniel, who possessed wealth but was already married. She attempted the same con on me initially but failed spectacularly. And she won't succeed now either. You're the absolute image of your real father, kid—you even inherited his self-destructive gambling addiction. Now remove yourself from my property. I have legitimate family business to conduct."

Justin sat frozen, struggling to process the devastating revelation. "Move it, boy. Out!"

He fled my mansion, undoubtedly racing back to confront Pudge with a barrage of accusations. This was precisely the complication I didn't need—I already supported one disappointment of a son, but at least that one carried my actual DNA. I refused to accept financial responsibility for another man's genetic mistake.

After Justin's hasty departure, I contacted my most trusted lieutenant to verify Lila's condition. The man confirmed her location—a brilliant safehouse where no law enforcement would consider searching. He reported that she had regained consciousness despite her injuries. He'd procured medical supplies and bandages, and his wife was providing nursing care. I warned him that if Lila sustained even the slightest

permanent damage, Claire would suffer unimaginable consequences. I promised to contact him with additional instructions and assured him of substantial compensation.

Next, I telephoned the family's private notary to arrange the ceremony. Given the late hour, I reached the man at his residence. I wanted an early morning wedding, but the notary refused, citing an unmovable prior commitment. He also required time to prepare the backdated documentation. We agreed on an afternoon ceremony at the private registry office. I still needed to determine how to transport Lila there without detection, but Inspector Andrew would handle those logistics.

I immediately called Andrew and instructed him to ensure complete privacy at the registry office during my wedding ceremony. Andrew assured me everything was arranged—he would plant false evidence to misdirect those fools searching for Lila. His confidence satisfied me. Now I simply needed to wait for the appropriate moment. I'd confront Claire in the morning; currently, she was likely engaged in a fascinating conversation with her bastard son. What I wouldn't give to witness that particular family reunion!