Mafia Mask 571

Chapter 571: Temporary Refuge

Lila’s POV

Consciousness returned with a violent jolt as I found myself slumped in the back seat of a black sedan. Every muscle in my body screamed in agony, and the world spun sickeningly around me. Struggling to sit upright, I caught the driver’s eyes in the rearview mirror. It was Scott, one of Connor’s enforcers who had driven me from the Thorne Group offices to this nightmare.

"Don’t worry, miss. I won’t hurt you," he said quickly, noticing the panic flooding my features.

"You already have by delivering me to that psychopath," I replied, my voice cracking. I glimpsed my reflection in the window and barely recognized the battered face staring back. Fresh tears carved paths down my swollen cheeks. "Look what she did to me."

"Miss, I just follow orders from the famiglia. We don’t question the bosses," Scott said, avoiding my gaze in the mirror. "Please don’t make this harder. I’m taking you to my place where my wife will patch you up until Connor gives new instructions. Nobody will lay a hand on you there. The don was furious with that crazy woman for what she did to you."

"You won’t let me go, will you?" I already knew his answer would crush what little hope I had left.

"I can’t, miss. Now please stay quiet. You’re in bad shape, and I don’t want to have to use restraints," he warned. I decided silence was my best option, especially given how much pain coursed through my broken body.

Eventually, Scott pulled up to a modest house surrounded by high brick walls and wrought iron gates. After the electronic locks disengaged, he helped me from the vehicle and guided me toward the front door. "Estelle! Jolene!" he called out.

A middle-aged woman appeared, drying her hands on a kitchen towel. Her eyes widened in shock at the sight of me.

"Mother of God! What's this, Scott?" she gasped.

"A girl, obviously," he replied gruffly. "Come on, help me get her inside."

"Who is she? Be careful what kind of trouble you're bringing into my house!" she warned, her weathered face creasing with worry.

"It's famiglia business. Help me get her to the couch, and I'll explain everything," Scott responded. The woman's disapproval was etched deep in every line of her face.

After settling me onto their worn sofa, they retreated to the kitchen to speak in hushed tones. When they returned, Estelle carried medical supplies and clean clothing in her arms.

"Come, child. I'll help you get cleaned up," she offered with surprising gentleness. I stood gratefully; I desperately needed to wash away the blood and humiliation. "Scott, go get those bandages I mentioned. She needs proper dressing for these wounds."

In the small bathroom, Estelle helped me peel away my torn clothes and positioned a plastic stool under the shower head. The lukewarm water stung my open cuts and bruises, forcing involuntary groans from my lips.

"Sweet Jesus, who did this to you?" she asked, genuine horror coloring her voice. "Let me wash your back, dear."

Her touch was remarkably gentle as she carefully cleaned away the dried blood and debris. I wept silently, not from the physical pain but from the cruelty I'd endured and the terrifying uncertainty that stretched ahead of me. After helping me dry off, she handed me fresh clothes.

"These will be loose on you, but the undergarments should fit. They're new—I bought them for my niece, but I can get more later," she explained while helping me into soft cotton pants and an oversized sweater. The loose fabric was a blessing since anything tight would have pressed against my injuries.

When we returned to the living room, Scott sat waiting with a manila envelope beside him on the coffee table.

"Miss, the don says you'll stay here tonight. Tomorrow is your wedding ceremony," he stated flatly, still avoiding direct eye contact.

"What? This girl is marrying that monster Connor? Absolutely not!" Estelle was horrified.

"Estelle, stay out of famiglia business! You know what happens to people who cross the don," Scott warned, genuine fear creeping into his voice.

"Scott, for the love of God, what will happen to this child with that evil man?" Estelle persisted, her maternal instincts overriding her caution.

"It won't be worse than what her own mother did to her," Scott replied, gesturing toward my battered face.

"That woman is not my mother!" I snapped with more force than I'd managed all day.

"What do you mean? Everyone in the families knows you're Claire and Nathaniel Sullivan's daughter. Though no real mother would do this to her child," Scott stood up, genuinely confused.

"Lila Sullivan! My God, I didn't recognize you with your face so damaged," Estelle breathed. "Scott, have you lost your mind? You've kidnapped a Sullivan family princess. This will bring war between the families!"

"Estelle, it was the don's orders—and her mother authorized it," Scott insisted before walking toward the kitchen.

"The other families will demand blood, and you'll end up in a shallow grave because of your boss!" Estelle called after him. She turned back to me with deep compassion. "Come, let me tend to those wounds properly."

With meticulous care, Estelle cleaned each mark on my body, applied antiseptic ointments, bandaged the worst injuries, and gave me strong painkillers. When she finished, she sighed heavily, her eyes brimming with pity and anger.

"Estelle, please help me. That woman truly isn't my mother," I begged desperately, grabbing her weathered hand.

"Oh, child, if I help you escape, that man will have my whole family killed," she said, torn between compassion and the brutal reality of famiglia justice. "Why do you say she's not your mother?"

"Because she isn't. I just discovered the truth. She stole me as a baby and has been lying to everyone for years. She's always beaten and tormented me. Today, she was going to kill me," I explained, my voice trembling.

"I never trusted that woman. So different from Mr. Sullivan's first wife—now she was a real lady from good famiglia," Estelle said with a nostalgic smile.

"You knew her?" I asked eagerly, sensing a potential ally.

"Yes, my mother worked for the Sullivan household. Mrs. Alice was kind, honorable, and loving—everything a don's wife should be. My mother only left when she got cancer and moved in with family, shortly before the lady became pregnant again. Sometimes I'd visit there, and Mrs. Alice always welcomed me warmly, invited me to sit in her parlor, offered proper hospitality, and treated me with respect. As for Claire, I've known her reputation for years through the famiglia network. She acts innocent now, but she's rotten to the core! Did you know she was Connor's mistress before she married into the Sullivan family?"

"I discovered that recently. I feel terrible for my father," I admitted.

"Do you know who your real mother might be?" Estelle asked softly.

"It could be my father's first wife, or perhaps someone else. I don't know yet," I sniffled as she gazed at me with deep sympathy.

"Oh, honey! What a terrible situation! I wish I could help—nobody deserves to marry that pig Connor. They say his first wife died from his beatings, and the families covered it up." Seeing my terror, she quickly added, "Don't think about that now. I'll make you something to eat. Just rest there—the medicine I gave you is strong and will make you drowsy. But listen—don't try to escape. There's no way out without Scott seeing you, and if you try, he'll have to restrain you, which would be much worse given your condition."

I nodded, accepting the harsh reality. In my current state, I wouldn't make it past the front gate anyway. The crushing realization settled over me like a death shroud: no one was coming to save me from this nightmare.

Chapter 572: Blood and Lies

Claire's POV

The feds had nearly tracked down Lila's safe house. Thank God Connor's contacts in law enforcement tipped me off in time. Now I needed to handle this trust fund situation. Had Beckett really managed to freeze me out of Lila's inheritance? He hadn't shown me any actual court documents – this could all be an elaborate bluff from the Sullivan family's legal team.

Perhaps I could exploit his desperate need to find his precious little sister. A negotiation might work in my favor. I grabbed my purse, ready to face that sanctimonious fool who thought he could outmaneuver me.

"MOM! MOM!" Justin's voice boomed through the penthouse as he slammed through the front door. "There you are!"

"Keep your voice down! What do you want?" This kid had some audacity storming in here like he owned the place.

"Mom, I confronted Connor at his private club and told him he's my father," Justin said, his face red with rage. "But he laughed in my face. I demand the truth – no more games. Who is my real father?"

"I explicitly told you to stay away from him!" I rose from my chair, clutching my purse, ready to leave. This interrogation could wait until later.

Before I could take a step, Justin shoved me back into the leather armchair. The unexpected force of his push caught me completely off guard.

"Have you completely lost your mind? Get out of my way," I snapped, but he towered over me, his posture unyielding.

"You're going to tell me everything – about my father, about that psychopath who calls you Pudge – and you're telling me right now!" Justin's voice dropped to a menacing growl that reminded me uncomfortably of the enforcers who worked the casino floors.

"We'll discuss this later, Justin. I have business to attend to," I tried again, but he blocked my path like a bouncer.

"I'm not budging until you give me answers," he insisted, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Or did you sleep with so many men in the families that you can't even remember who knocked you up?"

His crude words hit like a slap. "Show some respect! I'm still your mother!" I shot to my feet, meeting his hostile glare.

"Right now, you're just some crime family whore who doesn't know her bastard son's father," he spat back. I raised my hand to strike him, but he caught my wrist mid-swing. "And I've been thinking – if I'm not connected to the Sullivan bloodline, maybe Lila isn't either. So why did Nathaniel only demand a DNA test from me?"

"You ignorant child," I hissed through clenched teeth. "Listen very carefully, Justin. You will show me the respect I deserve as your mother, whether you like it or not. Want to know why Nathaniel never questioned Lila's paternity? Because she is Sullivan blood – I'm just not her biological mother. As for you, yes, you're my son, conceived with a worthless street dealer just like you're becoming. I was fool enough to think I loved him."

Justin's expression froze as I continued ruthlessly, "There's your precious truth – you're nobody's heir. If you want to find dear old daddy, try the morgue. And guess who's responsible for putting him there? Connor. He didn't pull the trigger personally, but he ordered the hit. Now you know everything. Move aside."

Justin stood there speechless as I pushed past him and stormed toward the elevator.

I needed to confront Beckett immediately, but first I had to verify this inheritance freeze. The family's private law firm was my next destination. The senior partner seemed prepared for my arrival, legal documents arranged precisely on his mahogany desk. Within a short while, I had my devastating answer – Beckett had indeed checkmated me. I wouldn't access a single dollar of Lila's trust fund.

Fine. If I couldn't secure what I wanted through legitimate channels, I'd find alternative methods. I drove to Beckett's estate compound and called him from my car.

"I'm at your front gate. Keep that wife of yours out of earshot," I said curtly before ending the call.

Minutes later, he emerged from the main house and approached my vehicle with the cautious gait of someone expecting trouble.

"What do you want, Claire?" His tone was arctic, stripped of any pretense of family courtesy.

"Aren't you going to invite me inside for coffee?" His expression remained granite. "I'm here regarding your beloved little sister – isn't that what you call her?"

"Where is Lila?" He leaned down to my window, his voice carrying the quiet authority that made him feared in boardrooms and back alleys alike.

"That information has a price. How much are you willing to transfer?"

"State your terms, Claire. Or let me guess – cash? Everything always comes down to money with you."

"Not everything," I laughed bitterly. "I want a substantial ownership stake in your legitimate operations, the family compound, and a guaranteed lifetime pension that would make a senator jealous."

"Why the compound? You've always despised that old place. And company shares? You hate actual work. What's your real agenda?"

"Simple – to make all of you miserable! I want access to waltz into those corporate offices whenever I please. And I want the compound because I know how much your sentimental father treasured that property."

"Those demands are ridiculous. I'll authorize the pension, nothing more. Accept it or we'll locate Lila without your assistance."

"You might eventually find her," I said with calculated nonchalance, "but she might not be breathing when you do."

His face darkened with barely controlled violence. "The pension plus a reasonable percentage of the legitimate businesses. Tell me her location immediately."

The counteroffer wasn't terrible. "Agreed. But I determine the pension amount. Have your lawyers prepare the contracts, and once everything's properly executed, I'll reveal where she's hidden." I started the engine and pulled away, leaving Beckett seething behind the wrought iron gates.

Now I needed to discover exactly where Connor had stashed that little princess. I still had unfinished business with Lila.

I stopped by Connor's private gentleman's club, immediately regretting the decision. He was insufferable as always.

"Well, well, what brings you here, Pudge? How did that heart-to-heart with your bastard go?" Connor's laughter scraped against my nerves like fingernails on concrete.

"You moron! Couldn't you keep your mouth shut about the past?" I snapped.

"I refuse to play daddy to another man's spawn, especially worthless trash like Justin. Bad blood runs in families," he smirked while lighting an expensive cigar.

"You’re absolutely impossible." His amused chuckling was maddening. "I need Lila’s exact location."

"So you can eliminate her permanently? Not happening, sweetheart. But I expect you at the family lawyer’s office tomorrow at the appointed time. Your precious daughter is going to become my wife, and once those papers are signed, I’ll transfer the agreed payment."

"Don’t even think about double-crossing me, Connor," I warned with steel in my voice.

"Don’t double-cross me, Claire," he countered, his tone infinitely more dangerous.

I left for home, my mind spinning with possibilities. Somehow, I would orchestrate everything to work exactly as I envisioned. Everyone would pay their debts – one way or another.

Chapter 573: Sacred Ground Showdown

Daniel’s POV

The drive back from the Sullivan family’s former consigliere’s widow was suffocatingly quiet. Nathaniel stared blankly through the bulletproof windows, his face a mask of shock and betrayal. What we had just uncovered was beyond disturbing – a conspiracy so intricate that it had remained buried within the family archives for decades. I had witnessed many ruthless power plays in my years navigating both sides of the law, but this one surpassed them all in its calculated brutality.

I checked my encrypted phone repeatedly during the journey, hoping for word from Detective Ezekiel about Lila’s location. Nothing. Not even the faintest intelligence from our street informants. My chest constricted with each passing mile through the city’s shadows.

When we finally reached Beckett’s fortified estate, he emerged from the reinforced entrance before we’d even cleared the security checkpoint.

"Dad! Daniel! Any leads?" Desperation carved deep lines across his features as he searched our faces for hope.

I shook my head as I collapsed into the leather armchair in his study. "Nothing solid on Lila yet, Beckett. The meeting was... revelatory, but it didn't point us to her location."

Beckett's shoulders sagged. "I was praying you'd uncovered something. It looks like our only choice now is to meet Claire's terms."

"What terms?" I straightened up, my detective instincts flaring to life.

"She made an appearance while you were gone. Laid out her conditions with crystal clarity." Beckett slumped into the chair across from me, exhaustion etched into every line of his powerful frame.

Nathaniel, who had remained silent since we'd left the widow's penthouse, finally found his voice. "What does that serpent want?"

"A lifetime tribute – amount of her choosing, naturally – plus ten percent ownership of our legitimate operations." Beckett dragged his hands through his hair. "And believe me, that's after negotiation. Her opening demands were far more aggressive."

"Do it." Nathaniel's voice was granite despite his obvious anguish. "Whatever she demands. Just bring my daughter home safely."

Katarina, who had been silently monitoring from her position near the window, stepped forward. "Nathaniel, what happened today? What did you uncover?"

"The truth, Katarina." Nathaniel's voice fractured. "The complete, devastating truth that's been hidden within our own walls all these years."

Before he could elaborate, the security system chimed. Katarina moved to the monitors, returning with an unexpected smile breaking through the tension.

"Who's requesting entry?" Beckett asked, his brows knitting together.

"Million-dollar backup!" Katarina announced, moving swiftly to disable the locks.

Within moments, the mansion was alive with familiar voices as our inner circle flooded in. Zoe reached me first, her intelligence operative instincts sharp with concern.

"Inspector, please tell me you're sitting here because you've already located Tiny Cipher," she demanded.

The entire network had mobilized – Caleb and Ivy, Dominic and Gemma, Jude, Sybilla, Finn, and Zoe – all bearing matching expressions of worry and lethal determination.

"We haven't found her yet," I admitted, feeling Caleb's reassuring presence at my shoulder. "But we have extensive surveillance operations running throughout the territory."

"How are you managing, Daniel?" Caleb inquired. "What resources do we need to deploy?"

"Honestly? I'm barely holding it together. But having the family here stabilizes me." I managed a strained smile. "Perhaps fresh tactical minds are what this operation requires. We might be overlooking something critical."

As Katarina conducted introductions between our people and Nathaniel, I watched him visibly affected by the realization of how deeply protected his daughter was within our network. Sybilla, with her natural diplomatic skills, quickly drew Nathaniel into conversation, providing momentary respite from his torment.

"MP wanted to be here," Jude informed us, "but he had a university examination. I assured him we'd maintain communication."

Zoe, always our most direct operator, turned to Katarina. "Just provide me with that viper's coordinates. I'll extract the information we need."

"Include me in that operation," Katarina agreed, a dangerous gleam in her experienced eyes.

"Ladies, we cannot provoke Claire at this juncture," Beckett cautioned. "Not while she maintains tactical superiority."

"Oh, she'll provide intelligence," Gemma assured him, exchanging a loaded look with Zoe.

"Are you seriously planning enhanced interrogation?" Caleb appeared alarmed.

"That's not a woman, Caleb," Katarina retorted coldly. "That's a demon wearing human skin."

Despite everything, I found myself laughing grimly. The image of my team confronting Claire was both terrifying and oddly reassuring.

Jude's fingers snapped suddenly. "Wait, I have a superior strategy. Instead of focusing surveillance on Claire and Connor directly, what if we investigate their trusted associates? Allies, family connections – anyone who might be providing safe harbor."

"Jude, you're a tactical genius!" I exclaimed, mentally cursing myself for missing such an obvious angle. "We've been watching their primary assets and movements, but not their support network."

"I'm not tracking," Beckett frowned.

"Consider it – close associates, employees, anyone with loyalty who would execute orders without question," I explained.

Understanding dawned across Beckett's face. "Claire only maintains one genuine friendship – the crooked detective's wife – but there are her church congregation members. And Connor trusts no one, but his crew is absolutely terrified of him. They'd follow any directive he issued."

"Perfect," Caleb nodded approvingly. "Provide us with identities and locations. We'll divide forces and maximize coverage."

Shortly afterward, we had operational parameters established. Everyone took multiple addresses to investigate, with Sybilla remaining at base to support Nathaniel and coordinate communications. We worked through the darkness, questioning contacts regardless of the hour, systematically eliminating possibilities.

By sunrise, we reconvened outside the cathedral. Claire and her devoted congregation never missed morning mass. I briefed the priest beforehand, explaining our suspicions. The holy man was visibly shaken – Claire had cultivated a facade of righteousness that had deceived everyone, including him.

As mass concluded, our female operatives positioned themselves strategically around the plaza. Before I could intervene, they had Claire completely surrounded.

"Jesus Christ," Beckett murmured beside me, "those women are absolutely fearless."

"Come now, Claire," Zoe called out, her voice carrying across the square. "Tell everyone how you were Connor's kept woman and how Justin isn't actually Nathaniel's blood."

"These women have lost their minds!" Claire sputtered as her church companions stared in mounting shock.

"Claire, what are they discussing?" demanded an elderly matron from her group.

"Nothing but fabrications, Mrs. Burke," Claire insisted, though her composure was rapidly deteriorating.

"We might be unhinged," Ivy shot back, "but at least we're not pathological liars."

"Just reveal Lila's location," Katarina demanded, closing distance.

Claire's face twisted with pure hatred. "You washed-up escort!"

"What's this disturbance in my jurisdiction?" A menacing voice cut through the confrontation. The corrupt detective – Claire's puppet husband – had materialized, his hand resting ominously on his service weapon as he assessed the scene with predatory calculation.

Chapter 574: Race Against Time

Daniel's POV

I tensed as the corrupt district attorney strutted into the town square. The call from Claire hadn't surprised me—I'd anticipated her desperation. He'd come rushing to protect his benefactor from public humiliation, another puppet in the Martinez family's extensive network of bought officials.

What he didn't expect was my preparation. Inspector Adler from Internal Affairs had just forwarded me files confirming what I suspected about the district attorney. The Federal Bureau was disturbed by how this prosecutor ran the jurisdiction like his personal kingdom. A thorough investigation into his activities revealed numerous cases of evidence tampering, witness intimidation, and taking bribes from rival families.

"Great, another corrupt official who thinks he owns this city," Zoe remarked with venom, causing the district attorney's face to contort with rage.

"You're all under arrest for disturbing the peace and conspiracy," he declared, gesturing to his security detail as he advanced toward the wives of the most powerful families in North America.

I stepped forward immediately. "Touch one hair on their heads and the Federal Bureau will personally drag you away for years of corruption, evidence tampering, and taking blood money from Connor's family!" My voice carried across the murmuring crowd of civilians and made men alike.

"Inspector Martinez." His eyes narrowed with contempt. "Do you have any evidence against me?"

"Not just evidence—warehouses full of documentation. But I don't even need it. That mansion you live in on the Upper East Side and those Italian sports cars your family drives around? Completely inconsistent with your government salary. Where's that money coming from?" I challenged.

Suspicion crossed his weathered face. "You've been conducting surveillance on me?"

"I do my homework. Always."

"I'm simply maintaining order by controlling this public disturbance. These women are inciting chaos in a district I'm sworn to protect," he justified, struggling to maintain his authority.

"I told you—don't you dare lay a finger on them." My voice carried the lethal edge that had earned respect in both law enforcement and the underworld.

"You're defending these women when you don't even know what families they represent?" he provoked, clearly unaware of exactly how deep he was digging his own grave.

"Who said I don't know?" I countered coolly. "You're the one who's uninformed. Allow me to introduce Ivy Thorne, Gemma West, and Zoe Miller. Notice anything about those names? Thorne, West, Miller—some of the most powerful crime families on the East Coast. And naturally, you already recognize Katarina Sullivan, whose family controls the most lucrative money laundering operation through high-end art galleries. So, even without my federal evidence against you, do you really want to wage war against these bloodlines? Their husbands are standing right over there, and they didn't build their empires by being forgiving."

He visibly paled. "Thorne, West, and Miller families? What kind of war are you dragging me into, Martinez?"

"They're under my protection." I held his gaze with deadly certainty.

"Look, I understand you're desperate to find Lila, but she's making fools of all of you. She's probably at some college party, getting drunk with sorority friends. You don't need this public circus." His condescending tone suggested he possessed superior knowledge of the situation.

"You worthless piece of—" I lunged forward, but Caleb and Jude caught me before I could crush his windpipe.

"Easy, Daniel," Caleb cautioned before turning his cold Thorne family stare on the prosecutor. "Listen very carefully. Return to your office and stay there. Let Inspector Martinez find Lila. Don't interfere, and

don’t touch any of these women, or I’ll personally ensure a federal investigation into every dirty deal you’ve made over the years."

The district attorney backed down immediately. "Just end this public spectacle in the square."

"Fine, we’ll release your precious Claire," Zoe agreed with royal disdain, "but we’re far from finished with her. Perhaps the newspaper’s crime desk would be interested in her story." She turned to address the other wives. "Let’s move out, ladies! And citizens, beware of these corrupt officials who sell justice to the highest bidder!"

Like queens addressing their subjects, Zoe led the procession through the crowd, stopping occasionally to confirm everything they’d revealed about Claire’s schemes. As Claire attempted to slip past unnoticed, boos and curses erupted from onlookers who now understood exactly what kind of monster had been living among them.

Back at Beckett’s heavily fortified townhouse, he stared at the women in amazement as they gleefully recounted Claire’s complete humiliation.

"We should create dossiers listing all that witch’s lies and schemes and distribute them to every family in the five boroughs," Katarina suggested with bloodthirsty enthusiasm.

"Katarina, let’s not escalate this into a full-scale vendetta," Beckett said, though he was clearly amused by their new warrior allies’ excitement.

"Absolutely not!" Zoe tossed her perfectly styled hair. "The only reason I haven’t beaten her into the ground is because we haven’t found Lila yet. But just wait, Beckett. When we do, that woman will pay for every moment of suffering she’s caused."

"Everyone, I’m losing my mind here," I interjected, desperation creeping into my voice. "Time is running out and we still haven’t found Lila." We’d searched every corner of this city, called in favors from every contact I had in both law enforcement and the underworld.

"Have you checked Scott’s safe house? He’s Connor’s most trusted lieutenant," Nathaniel suggested, looking as exhausted as I felt.

"Yes, personally. His mother answered the door, claimed he hadn't been home for days. She seemed genuinely ignorant," I said, rubbing my bloodshot eyes. Multiple sleepless nights of searching were destroying me.

"But Scott doesn't live with his mother anymore," Katarina revealed, immediately capturing everyone's complete attention.

"What do you mean?" Beckett asked, leaning forward intently.

"Beckett, you're so disconnected from street intelligence. Scott's been living with Estelle for quite a while now. He bought a compound on the outskirts—renovated it with high walls, electronic gates, surveillance cameras, the works. You remember Estelle, right Nathaniel? Her mother used to manage security at your estate."

"Yes, I remember her. She got sick and left, then my wife became pregnant." Nathaniel seemed to be connecting dots from the past. "How do you know all this intelligence, Katarina?"

"Nathaniel, clearly you don't understand our city's information networks. Here, the wives discuss everything about everyone's business," Katarina smiled with the confidence of someone who'd spent years cultivating sources.

"Let's go! I need someone behind the wheel—fast!" Jude volunteered immediately, already reaching for his keys.

It was already past midday when we left for the compound Katarina had described. Jude drove at maximum speed through traffic that parted like the Red Sea when they recognized the Thorne family vehicles. The compound was easy to identify—the only fortress matching Katarina's precise description. I rang the security intercom, and a woman's voice answered nervously.

"Police! Open the gate immediately!" I flashed my inspector's badge at the camera, feeling a surge of desperate hope that Lila might be inside these walls.

A middle-aged woman appeared at the gate, eyeing us with obvious terror. She recognized Beckett instantly. "Beckett Sullivan?"

"That's right. You must be Estelle?" Beckett replied with deadly calm.

"Yes, sir. I know exactly why you're here," she said, glancing at me with the fear of someone who understood the consequences of crossing these families.

"Good, that saves us time," I said with barely controlled violence. "Where is she?"

"Can you promise you won't reveal that I talked? Please?" Raw fear showed in her eyes.

"Start talking, or I'll arrest you as an accessory to kidnapping," I threatened, my patience completely gone.

"Inspector, I'll cooperate completely, but I don't want to die. If Connor discovers I told you..." Genuine terror filled her voice as she looked around nervously.

"Connor?" Beckett asked, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. She nodded frantically.

"Please, just tell me where my woman is," I pleaded, my desperation overriding my training.

"She was here until this morning. Connor had Scott transport her to the notary's office downtown. He's forcing her to marry him today. She told me she'd rather die than become his wife, and from what I witnessed, that Claire woman might actually kill her if she refuses to sign." Her words confirmed every nightmare I'd been having.

"We need to get to that notary's office—now!" I turned and sprinted back to the car, my heart pounding with terror and rage.

Jude drove like a man possessed toward downtown. I prayed to whatever gods might be listening that we'd arrive in time. At that moment, I would have destroyed anyone and anything that stood between me and saving Lila's life.

Chapter 575: Forced Wedding Ceremony

Claire's POV

I entered the private registry office to find Connor already positioned there like some victorious don about to claim his prize. He was deep in conversation with the corrupt notary, sliding a thick envelope across the mahogany desk that undoubtedly contained enough cash to ensure this sketchy ceremony would proceed without questions.

"Connor! Where is she?" I demanded, striding toward them with purpose.

"Relax, Claire! My future wife is being escorted here as we speak," Connor replied with that insufferable smugness that made my skin crawl.

"You should have arranged this at your casino or one of your warehouses, somewhere those cops couldn't interfere." I couldn't fathom his reasoning for choosing such an exposed location.

"Listen, Claire, I would've preferred that too, but our friend here couldn't make house calls today, and I'm eager to finalize this merger. Don't worry, nobody's going to crash our little party." Connor dismissed my concerns with the confidence of a man who owned half the city's officials.

"Stop calling me that," I warned, which only made him chuckle like the arrogant bastard he was. "How can you be so certain they won't track us down before you finish this ceremony?"

"I had the detective's partner handle it. Those fools are chasing shadows at the old quarry right now. By the time they realize they've been played, Lila and I will be long gone on my private jet."

"And how exactly did he manage that? Getting all those officers to chase ghosts?" I remained skeptical, knowing Daniel had no fondness for his corrupt colleagues.

"He had one of his bought men play the helpful insider, feeding them false intel about our location."

Connor’s laughter filled the room as he turned his attention to the door where one of his security thugs was pushing Lila inside.

She wore an oversized white blouse and green shorts that hung loosely on her petite frame, paired with those ridiculous flip-flops. I admired my artistic handiwork decorating her once-flawless face and smiled with deep satisfaction. Purple bruises bloomed across her porcelain skin, with the distinctive imprint of my signet ring marking both cheeks - a ring I’d commissioned years ago specifically to leave identifying marks when discipline was required. A particularly vicious bruise was developing around her right eye, extending down her cheekbone, the eye nearly swollen shut from our earlier conversation.

I felt the urge to give the other eye matching treatment.

"Don’t even think about hitting her again!" Connor warned, apparently reading my thoughts. He approached the thug who had delivered Lila. "Why isn’t she wearing what I sent?"

"She refused, boss. Didn’t think you’d want me forcing a dress on her." The muscle explained nervously.

"You thought correctly. Lila, why didn’t you put on the wedding gown? We’re about to become husband and wife..." Lila lifted her head, meeting Connor’s gaze with pure defiance blazing in her good eye.

"I will never marry you!" Each word carried the weight of absolute determination and rage.

"Oh, spare us the theatrics, Lila." I inserted myself into their standoff, relishing the opportunity to crush her spirit further. "You’re marrying Connor and that’s the end of it. Accept your fate. You’ll never see that detective, your pathetic friends, or your precious brother ever again."

"I hate you, Claire! I hate you!" Lila cried out, which only filled me with perverse pleasure. "But you can’t force me to marry anyone."

"We’ll see about that," I replied with a predatory smile. "Come on, Connor, let’s get this merger finalized. Unless you want me to dress her by force?"

"I told you not to damage her further. Look at her condition - she’s barely presentable for a honeymoon," Connor complained, and I noticed Lila visibly recoil at the implication.

"Then we’ll marry her exactly as she is," I said, grinning wickedly.

"I already said I won’t get married! I’d rather die, Claire, but I won’t marry him," Lila declared with surprising boldness.

"We’ll see about that stubborn streak. Let’s proceed, Connor." I turned and seated myself at the ornate table where the bought notary waited with his forged documents.

Connor grabbed Lila’s arm roughly, dragging her to the chair positioned in front of the notary’s desk.

"Scott, sit here as our witness," Connor called to his thug, who promptly complied. "You may begin the ceremony, notary."

"Sir, you cannot perform this marriage. I refuse to marry him. You cannot marry me when I’m explicitly refusing," Lila challenged the notary, who regarded her with practiced false sympathy.

"Dear child, you’re simply experiencing pre-wedding nerves, that’s all. I’m certain you’ll find great happiness with your new husband," the notary replied with sickeningly fake kindness, making it crystal clear he would proceed regardless of her protests.

"You’re part of this conspiracy too? Another soul bought by Mr. Connor? My God! How do you sleep at night?" Lila stared at the notary with undisguised revulsion.

"I sleep very comfortably with my debts paid, young lady. Now remain quiet so I can conduct your marriage ceremony," the notary snapped, dropping his benevolent mask entirely. The hypocrite, masquerading as a moral, upstanding citizen while selling his integrity to Connor for blood money.

"Lila, stay silent. You don’t need to speak, just sign the register," Connor instructed, reaching for her hand, which she jerked away as if scalded.

"I won’t sign anything! I won’t be silent and I won’t marry you!" Lila leaped up and began backing toward the exit. "HELP! HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!" She bolted toward the door, screaming loud enough to alert the entire building.

"SHUT UP, LILA!" I roared, lunging toward her.

A registry clerk burst through the connecting door, but the notary quickly shoved him out and secured the lock. Scott reached the street door just as Lila grasped the handle, blocking her escape route. I seized her by her golden hair and yanked her back to the chair while the notary barricaded the street entrance.

"HELP! HEEEELP!" Lila continued screaming and struggling against my grip.

"Silence her," the notary ordered Connor impatiently.

"I’ll handle this!" I declared, slapping her while maintaining my iron grip on her hair. "Close that mouth or I’ll give you something much worse to scream about."

"I told you not to hit her, Claire!" Connor protested weakly.

"You want this wedding completed, don’t you? Then let me handle this little rat my way." I glared at him until he relented, taking his seat beside the struggling Lila.

"Fine, but ensure she stays quiet and signs the register." Connor finally realized that gentle persuasion wouldn’t suffice.

"Don’t worry, I brought something that will make her very cooperative." I reached into my designer purse and withdrew the prepared syringe.

The first drug would render the little brat compliant enough to complete the ceremony. After Connor transferred my payment, I planned to administer the second dose that would eliminate her

permanently. I'd simply tell him it was to make her docile for their wedding night - he'd never suspect my true intentions.

As I positioned the needle against Lila's trembling arm, a thunderous crash erupted throughout the room. I quickly injected the compliance drug, then witnessed that damned detective bursting through the doorway like an avenging angel. My carefully orchestrated plans were crumbling around me, but I could still eliminate the little rat permanently. I frantically grabbed the lethal syringe from my purse, preparing to plunge the fatal dose into her arm before anyone could stop me.

Chapter 576: Race Against Time

Daniel's POV

Speeding through the city streets with Jude gripping the wheel, I reached for my phone to contact Inspector Ezekiel, only to find the battery completely drained. Beckett wordlessly handed me his device, and I quickly located Ezekiel's number in his contacts.

"Ezekiel, this is Daniel," I barked the moment he picked up.

"Daniel! Thank God. I've been trying to reach you for a while now. We've located Lila's position and we're mobilizing now," Ezekiel's voice crackled through the speaker.

"Excellent. That's exactly why I'm calling. We need to converge at the municipal notary building immediately." I was about to disconnect when Ezekiel's puzzled tone stopped me cold.

"What notary building? Daniel, our intelligence points to the old ravine district. Lila's being held in a safehouse there. We're already en route."

My blood turned to ice. "Who provided that intelligence?"

"A precinct officer came forward. Claims the local detective captain is working for Connor's organization. Says he couldn't stomach being part of it anymore. He's riding with us now, along with your associates from Thorne."

"Ezekiel, listen to me carefully. It’s a setup. Lila is being held at the city notary building. Connor is forcing her into a marriage contract as we speak. They’ve orchestrated this diversion to clear law enforcement from downtown," I explained with barely contained urgency.

"Are you absolutely certain about this?" Ezekiel pressed.

"Beyond any doubt. We located the holding facility where Lila was imprisoned. The woman there disclosed everything before we left. I’m convinced she was being truthful. Get to the notary building with maximum speed. We’ll rendezvous there." I terminated the call and fixed Jude with a steel gaze. "Push this vehicle to its absolute limit. Now."

Jude floored the accelerator, and I silently prayed we wouldn’t wrap ourselves around a light pole before reaching our destination. The instant we screeched to a halt outside the imposing notary building, I launched myself from the passenger seat before Jude had fully stopped and charged through the entrance.

"Where are they conducting the ceremony?" I demanded, scanning the faces of startled administrative staff. One younger employee refused to meet my gaze, and I stalked directly toward him. "WHERE THE HELL ARE THEY?"

Without uttering a word, he gestured toward a heavy wooden door. Finding it securely locked, I drove my boot into it with every ounce of strength I possessed. The door exploded inward, revealing a tableau that sent murderous rage coursing through my veins.

Connor sat positioned in an immaculate ivory suit beside Lila, who was fighting against a massive enforcer restraining her while Claire administered an injection into her exposed arm. A distinguished gentleman in formal attire—unmistakably the notary—observed the entire proceedings with disturbing professional detachment.

Every person in the room froze at my violent entrance, but Claire had already completed her injection. Lila’s struggles ceased abruptly, her body becoming disturbingly limp. When Claire reached for a second prepared syringe, I exploded into motion, seizing her wrist with crushing force.

"Beckett, extract Lila immediately! Transport her to the emergency room—Claire has administered some kind of chemical sedative!" I roared, wrestling Claire to the marble floor and securing handcuffs

around her wrists. "Jude, maintain surveillance on this serpent and secure that syringe as evidence. We need to identify exactly what substance she injected into Lila."

I pivoted to observe Connor attempting to slip away quietly, his muscle-bound enforcer shadowing his movement. The notary had pressed himself flat against the ornate wall, frantically dabbing perspiration from his face with an embroidered handkerchief.

"Remain exactly where you are, Connor." I drew my service weapon and discharged a warning shot into the ornate ceiling. Connor turned slowly, displaying that insufferable smugness I'd grown to despise.

"Inspector, you're making a catastrophic mistake antagonizing me," he sneered with calculated menace. "Scott!"

I spotted Connor's bodyguard reaching beneath his jacket for concealed hardware. Without a moment's hesitation, I put a round through his kneecap. He collapsed heavily, and I quickly confiscated his weapon while maintaining my aim on Connor.

"Both of you, take seats immediately," I commanded Connor and the trembling notary, feeling momentarily in control of the volatile situation. We simply needed Ezekiel's backup to arrive.

"Daniel." Beckett's voice drew my attention to the shattered doorway. He stood there cradling an unconscious Lila in his arms, but my heart stopped completely when I observed Inspector Andrew positioned behind him, pressing a pistol against Beckett's skull.

"Place Lila in the chair beside Connor," Andrew instructed with chilling composure.

"What in God's name is happening here?" I demanded.

"That's precisely what I should be asking, Inspector Martinez. This is my jurisdiction. You cannot simply storm in disrupting established operations. We conduct business according to different protocols here." Andrew's voice maintained an unnervingly calm cadence. "Drop your weapon, slide it across the floor, assume a kneeling position, and elevate your hands—unless you're eager to witness your associate's cerebral matter decorating these walls."

I complied without hesitation, unwilling to gamble with Beckett’s survival.

"Excellent cooperation. Now, Beckett, you and your colleague will kneel beside Daniel with your hands raised." Andrew circled the spacious room methodically, collecting my discarded weapon before approaching Claire. He handed her the handcuff key, and she freed herself while he kept his pistol trained on our group. "Notary, let’s expedite this marriage ceremony. Afterward, we’ll attend to Scott’s medical needs."

The notary resumed his official position and began reciting the ceremonial words as if the entire situation were completely routine. Connor’s satisfaction was palpable, matching Claire’s vindictive triumph. When the moment arrived for signatures, Lila sat zombie-like, her eyes open but clearly void of awareness or comprehension.

"Claire, what exactly did you administer to her?" Connor inquired, genuine concern creeping into his voice.

"Simply something to ensure her cooperation. She can provide her fingerprint instead of a written signature, correct?" Claire asked the notary.

"Certainly, I’ll retrieve the ink pad." The notary moved toward the destroyed entrance.

"Following the ceremony’s completion, I’ll ensure these individuals vanish permanently. No complications or witnesses," Andrew stated matter-of-factly, pressing his weapon against my skull.

Glancing at Beckett beside me, he silently mouthed "remain calm" followed by "Ezekiel"—reminding me that reinforcements were approaching. Observing Lila in that drugged, helpless state made me want to charge forward regardless of consequences, but I couldn’t risk Jude and Beckett’s lives with reckless action.

I maintained absolute silence, desperately hoping for Ezekiel’s timely intervention. As if responding to my silent prayers, the notary reappeared wearing handcuffs, escorted by Inspector Ezekiel. Armed officers flooded the chamber behind him, rapidly subduing Claire, Connor, and the wounded Scott.

"Damn it all to hell!" Inspector Andrew cursed behind me.

Chapter 577: Racing Against Poison

Daniel’s POV

The cold steel of Inspector Andrew’s service weapon pressed against my temple as he unleashed a torrent of profanity. My pulse thundered beneath my skin, but years of navigating both police work and family politics had taught me to maintain composure under pressure.

"Come on, Inspector Ezekiel. We both know how this city really operates," Andrew’s voice carried the desperation of a man watching his corrupt empire crumble. "Why turn on me now? We’ve all looked the other way when it mattered."

Ezekiel remained unwavering, his weapon trained on Andrew. "Lower your gun, Andrew. This charade ends now. Maybe you’ve convinced yourself this is how justice works in our world, but where I come from, we don’t solve problems through backdoor deals and willful blindness. You’ve enjoyed the privileges of corruption long enough. Time to face the music."

"Perhaps," Andrew snarled, driving the barrel harder against my skull. "But I’m dragging this worthless Martinez bastard to hell with me. If it wasn’t for him and his family’s interference, my arrangement with the Sullivan and Connor operations would still be running smoothly."

Ezekiel kept his tone measured and professional. "You don’t want to do that, Andrew. Pulling that trigger will only escalate your problems exponentially."

Through my peripheral vision, I caught Gideon’s careful positioning across the luxury suite. The seasoned detective moved with the silent precision that had made him legendary in underground circles. I recognized the setup and prepared myself for action.

Andrew released a bitter laugh that echoed off the expensive marble walls. "Worse than my current predicament? Impossible. Unless you’re suggesting you’d conveniently forget what you witnessed here tonight?"

"That’s not going to happen," Ezekiel replied with finality.

I felt the subtle pressure against my shoe - Gideon's prearranged signal. Without hesitation, I shoved Beckett and Jude toward the reinforced mahogany bar and threw myself to the polished floor. The gunshot cracked through the air like thunder. I rolled just in time to see Gideon launching himself at Andrew, seizing his arm and forcing it skyward. The bullet embedded itself in the ornate ceiling molding. Two backup officers surged forward, efficiently disarming Andrew and forcing him face-down against the Persian carpet.

The immediate threat had been neutralized, but the real nightmare was just beginning. Lila had been systematically drugged by Claire, and I had no knowledge of what pharmaceutical cocktail that psychotic woman had administered. I scrambled to my feet and rushed toward the woman who had become my entire world.

Lila was slumped in an antique leather chair, barely maintaining consciousness. Her once-beautiful face was swollen and discolored, her delicate limbs covered with bruises that documented Claire's methodical brutality over the past several days. When I touched her skin, it felt unnaturally cold. I pressed my fingers to her pulse point - she was breathing, but the weak rhythm beneath my touch filled me with terror.

"Lila! Little one, open your eyes. Look at me." No response whatsoever. My carefully constructed world seemed to collapse around me in that moment. I whipped around toward Claire, who was now restrained in handcuffs by a uniformed officer. "What substance did you inject her with?" I demanded.

Claire responded with laughter devoid of any human warmth. "Hopefully enough to finish her permanently!" she cackled, clearly reveling in her handiwork.

"Daniel," Gideon placed a steadying hand on my shoulder. "Get her to the medical facility immediately. We'll handle the cleanup here."

I gestured to Beckett and Jude, then carefully lifted Lila into my arms. The extensive bruising covering her body painted a horrific picture of what she had endured during her captivity. We rushed to the armored vehicle and sped toward the medical center, which was mercifully located just minutes from Connor's compromised compound.

I burst through the clinic doors carrying her unconscious form. An elderly gentleman approached immediately, his expression shifting to alarm when he saw Lila's condition.

"Lila Sullivan. What in God’s name happened to her?" he asked urgently.

"Are you the attending physician?" I questioned as a nurse materialized beside us.

"Yes, I’m the town’s primary doctor. What happened to this girl?" he repeated with growing concern.

"She was kidnapped by Claire Ward and Connor’s organization. Claire beat her repeatedly and injected her with an unknown substance. Jude, provide him with the syringe we recovered."

The doctor’s face registered pure horror as he examined the evidence. Beckett entered behind us, having secured the vehicle.

"Please wait in the corridor," the doctor instructed, pulling on sterile gloves.

"I’m not leaving her side," I stated with absolute conviction.

The doctor looked between me and Beckett with obvious disapproval.

"He’s her boyfriend, doctor," Beckett explained smoothly. "Neither of us is going anywhere under any circumstances."

With a resigned shake of his head, the doctor began his examination of Lila. He checked her vital signs methodically, assessed her numerous injuries, and ordered comprehensive blood work. The nurse inserted an IV line to begin flushing fluids through her system.

"Dear Lord," the doctor muttered under his breath. "What did that deranged woman do to this innocent girl?" He gestured toward a nearby chair. "What was your name again, Inspector?"

"Daniel. Is her condition life-threatening?" Anxiety coursed through my veins like poison.

"Daniel, I cannot identify the substance without laboratory analysis, which will require considerable time. I'm administering IV fluids to help flush toxins from her system, but she requires a fully equipped hospital for comprehensive testing and intensive treatment. Have you contacted Nathaniel Sullivan yet?"

"Not yet. We just extracted her from the compound and discovered her in this condition," I explained.

The doctor studied me intently. "Are you affiliated with law enforcement?"

"Inspector from Port Harbor. This was a joint operation coordinated with your local police department."

"Excellent! I sincerely hope Claire has been arrested. This isn't her first assault on Lila. I've contacted your local detective multiple times, but he never took any meaningful action," the doctor said with obvious bitterness.

"Lila required medical attention previously due to beatings?" Beckett asked, his voice tight with suppressed rage.

"Multiple occasions. She would beg me to maintain confidentiality, arriving here under cover of darkness. I approached the detective anyway, but each time I did, Lila would return even more severely battered. Eventually I stopped reporting it. She would plead with me to tell her father she had fallen or suffered some accident, but Claire was invariably the cause. This girl has survived absolute hell."

"Yet she remains the kindest, most extraordinary person I've ever encountered," I said, gazing at Lila's still form.

"Indeed she is. I'll call for ambulance transport immediately."

"Wouldn't it be more efficient if we transported her ourselves?" I suggested.

"The journey would certainly be faster, but hospital admission protocols become significantly more complicated without official emergency transport."

"What if you accompanied us?" I proposed.

At that moment, a young woman burst through the doors. "Doctor, we have a man with a gunshot wound to his leg requiring immediate attention." She glanced at Lila with obvious disdain.

"That's one of Connor's enforcers who participated in kidnapping Lila," I snapped coldly. "Nothing remotely urgent about his situation from my perspective."

"I still have a medical obligation to treat him, Daniel," the doctor said gently.

"Here's the arrangement: you come with us to the hospital, and a patrol unit can transport the wounded man separately," I decided, making it clear this wasn't a negotiation.

"Let me examine his wound and control the bleeding first," the doctor agreed, departing but returning within minutes. "The reception area is crowded with people asking questions about Lila. Could one of you address them?"

"I'll handle the crowd," Beckett volunteered, following the doctor toward the front.

Shortly afterward, we departed for the hospital in the neighboring city. Lila remained completely unresponsive. I cradled her head in my lap in the backseat while Beckett navigated traffic with the doctor beside him providing directions. Scott led our convoy in a patrol car, emergency lights cutting through the darkness ahead.

The journey took only minutes, the neighboring city mercifully close to our location. But each passing second felt like an eternity as I watched Lila's pale face, willing her to open her eyes and return to me from whatever dark place the drugs had taken her.

Chapter 578: Fathers Ultimate Betrayal

Daniel's POV

Endless days had passed with Lila lying motionless in the pristine hospital bed, surrounded by the quiet hum of machines monitoring her vital signs. The private medical facility, one Thorne family maintained

for discrete care of their associates, provided the best treatment money could buy. The doctors explained that Claire had injected Lila with a powerful pharmaceutical sedative, the kind used in high-stakes operations when someone needed to disappear quietly. They assured me she had narrowly avoided a lethal overdose, but their clinical words offered little comfort. Until those beautiful amber eyes opened again, cold dread would continue to grip my chest like a vice.

My security detail maintained their posts outside the room while I kept my vigil. The soft leather chair beside Lila's bed had become my world, every breath she took monitored, every flutter of her eyelids analyzed for signs of consciousness returning.

"Daniel, this isn't healthy for a man in your position." Katarina appeared in the doorway, her designer heels clicking softly against the polished floor. Concern etched her elegant features as she surveyed my disheveled state. "You haven't left this room in days. Not even for a proper meal. Come back to the estate for a few hours. I'll stay with her personally."

I rubbed my tired eyes, feeling the weight of sleepless nights. "I appreciate the offer, Katarina, but my answer hasn't changed since the numerous times someone suggested it. I'm not leaving until Lila does."

"And when she wakes up, she'll find the most powerful inspector in the city collapsed from exhaustion," Jude chimed in as he entered with our other friends trailing behind him like a concerned entourage.

Zoe crossed her arms, that familiar smirk playing at her lips despite the gravity of the situation. "Inspector, if you don't shower soon, we'll need to call the hazmat team about the biohazard you're becoming."

Despite my fatigue, I managed a weak smile. "Are you suggesting I smell, crazy girl?"

Ivy dramatically leaned over Lila's bed, taking an exaggerated sniff in my direction. "Suggesting? No. Stating an undeniable fact? Absolutely."

"Such brutal honesty from my dearest friends," I laughed as the girls theatrically covered their noses with their silk scarves.

"That’s what family does," Caleb said, always quick to support his wife’s antics. "Come on, the girls want some quality time with Lila. We’ll physically drag you back to the Thorne estate if necessary."

"What if she wakes while I’m gone?" My voice betrayed the anxiety that had been eating at me for days.

Gemma pointed firmly toward the door with the authority of someone accustomed to being obeyed. "We’ll call you immediately. Now go shower before we need to declare this room a disaster zone."

Recognizing defeat against this united front of concerned friends, I approached Lila’s bedside and gently pressed my lips to her forehead. Her skin felt warm and soft, a small comfort in this sterile environment. "I’ll be back soon, little one," I whispered, hoping somewhere in her unconscious mind, she could hear the promise in my voice.

My brief respite at the Thorne estate proved shorter than anticipated. Inspector Ezekiel called my secure line, requesting my immediate presence at the downtown precinct. With my team already back in Port Harbor handling the aftermath of recent events, I assumed he needed final details for the ongoing investigation. Better to handle whatever bureaucratic matters required my attention quickly and return to Lila’s side.

The precinct buzzed with its usual activity as I navigated the familiar corridors. I found Ezekiel buried behind stacks of case files and evidence reports, the fluorescent lights casting harsh shadows across his weathered face.

"May I come in?"

He looked up, instantly brightening despite the late hour. "Martinez! Please, sit down. How’s Lila holding up?"

"Still unconscious," I admitted, unable to hide the worry that had become my constant companion. "The doctors say it’s concerning but not unexpected given the dosage."

"Understandable concern, but she’s stronger than most people give her credit for." He gestured toward the chair across from his cluttered desk. "Your team did exceptional work wrapping up the loose ends of this operation."

"They’re the best in the business. Though I’m still planning to steal Gideon from your department permanently."

Ezekiel laughed heartily, a welcome sound in the tense atmosphere. "The boy deserves the opportunity to work bigger cases. This quiet city doesn’t challenge someone with his analytical skills. His work tracing Lila’s family history was particularly impressive." His expression suddenly grew serious, the lightness evaporating from his features. "But that’s not why I called you down here tonight. Claire has been demanding to speak with you specifically."

My jaw tightened involuntarily. "What could that deranged woman possibly want with me?"

"She wouldn’t elaborate—just insisted it concerned information you’d find valuable." Ezekiel’s brow furrowed as he pulled out a separate file. "The strange thing is, she only started making these demands after receiving permission to make one phone call. Her high-priced lawyer somehow convinced a judge to authorize this meeting."

"Any idea who she contacted?"

"That’s what caught my attention. The area code was traced back to Greenleaf. That’s your hometown, isn’t it?"

An uneasy feeling settled deep in my stomach like ice water. "Yes... that’s an interesting coincidence."

"After that call, she became increasingly agitated and refused to provide her complete statement until speaking with you personally."

I steeled myself for whatever game Claire intended to play. "Let’s get this over with, then."

Minutes later, Claire sat across from me in the sterile interrogation room, that infuriating smirk plastered across her face like a mask of malicious satisfaction. "Hello, Daniel! Is your precious Lila dead yet?" She laughed as if she’d delivered the most clever joke imaginable.

"Lila is recovering well," I lied smoothly, keeping my expression carefully neutral. "What exactly do you want?"

"I thought you might enjoy hearing about the delightful day I met your distinguished father." Her eyes glinted with pure malice, like a predator savoring the moment before striking.

I scoffed, masking my growing confusion behind practiced indifference. "If you're attempting some crude manipulation, you've chosen poorly. You've never met my father."

"That's always been your problem, Daniel. You're so absolutely certain about things you know nothing about." With calculated, deliberate movements, Claire reached into her prison-issued pocket and slid a familiar business card across the scratched metal table.

The moment I recognized the expensive cardstock, ice flooded my veins. My father's personal business card—something he reserved exclusively for individuals he deemed extremely important to family operations. Turning it over with trembling fingers, I saw his distinctive handwriting noting his Port Harbor hotel information and meeting times.

"How did you acquire this?" I asked, already dreading the answer that would shatter everything I thought I knew.

Claire's smile widened with triumphant satisfaction. "Your father gave it to me personally when he proposed our mutually beneficial partnership to separate you and Lila permanently. He offered to finance the girl's kidnapping operation." She proceeded to detail their clandestine meeting with such precise accuracy that doubt became impossible.

I listened in stunned silence, processing this ultimate betrayal. When she finished recounting every damning detail, I had only one question remaining. "If you're such close allies, why reveal this to me?"

"Because your father abandoned our agreement at the last moment. Suddenly, he withdrew all support for our plan to separate you two lovebirds. I still don't understand his change of heart—he seemed so determined during our initial meeting. But I warned him that betraying me wouldn't come without consequences, and knowing you, this revelation will cause him considerable problems." Claire couldn't possibly know that I already understood exactly why my father had suddenly accepted Lila.

I concealed my inner turmoil, unwilling to give her the satisfaction of seeing how deeply her words had cut. "Anything else you feel compelled to share?"

"That's everything for now. But do come back and tell me how your heart-to-heart conversation with daddy dearest goes." She laughed with cruel delight. "Inspector Ezekiel, I'm ready for my lawyer now."

As the officer escorted Claire back to her cell, Ezekiel glanced at me with genuine sympathy. "That was certainly unexpected."

"Indeed it was." I sighed heavily, staring at the business card that had become evidence of my father's ultimate betrayal. The man who raised me had conspired with the woman who nearly killed the only person I'd ever truly loved—a new low even for him. One thing was absolutely certain: I would get to the bottom of this treachery, no matter what it cost me.

Chapter 579: Return to Me

Daniel's POV

After leaving the secure law enforcement facility downtown, I drove straight across the city to the private medical center where Lila was recovering. The facility was one of Thorne's legitimate enterprises, ensuring both discretion and the highest level of care. When I walked into Lila's guarded room, I found my sisters gathered around her bed, their animated chatter about future plans filling the sterile space with warmth.

Ivy was recounting some amusing incident involving the quadruplets and their attempts to outsmart their grandparents during a recent family gathering at the estate.

"Oh, Daniel! You're back sooner than expected?" Zoe's voice carried a hint of disappointment as she glanced up from her meticulous work. She was carefully applying a fresh coat of polish to Lila's fingernails, treating her unconscious form with the reverence of preparing a sleeping princess.

"What exactly are you doing?" I asked, unable to suppress my amusement at the scene.

She grinned without pausing in her task. "Giving our little warrior a proper manicure. After everything she's endured, she deserves to wake up looking absolutely stunning." She applied a quick-dry spray over the wet polish with practiced efficiency.

"I have to admit, it does look elegant," I conceded, then addressed the group. "Ladies, I appreciate everything you've done, but you can head out now. As you can obviously tell, I managed to clean myself up."

"There's my devastatingly handsome brother, finally smelling like civilization again!" Sybilla leaped up to embrace me. I wrapped my arms around her and pressed a kiss to the top of her head, grateful for their unwavering support.

"But we're having such a wonderful time here," Ivy protested with an exaggerated pout.

Gemma nodded with genuine enthusiasm. "This is honestly the most adult conversation I've had since the children arrived."

"You two have serious problems," Zoe declared, pointing an accusatory finger at them both. "We absolutely must revive our sisters' nights out."

"That would be absolutely divine," Ivy sighed with longing.

One by one, they offered gentle farewells to the sleeping Lila before embracing me and extracting solemn promises to contact them the instant she opened her eyes. Zoe lingered after the others had departed. Before pulling me into her arms, she studied my face with that penetrating gaze that never failed to see through any facade.

"Something's eating at you, isn't it?" she asked with quiet concern.

"I'm just worried about Lila, Zo." I forced what I hoped was a convincing smile, though it wasn't entirely fabricated—Lila remained my paramount concern. The inevitable confrontation with my father would have to wait its turn.

After my sisters left, I positioned a chair directly beside Lila’s bed and took her delicate hand in mine. Hours dissolved unnoticed until darkness claimed the city and a night nurse entered, activating the overhead lights and pulling me back to the present moment.

"How is our most cherished patient doing? Any signs of her returning to us?" she inquired cheerfully while approaching the bed. I shook my head in response.

"That’s completely normal," she reassured me with professional warmth. "She’ll awaken fully refreshed when her body is ready. I’m just here for her scheduled examination and to replace her IV fluids." She moved with practiced efficiency around the bed while I stepped aside to provide adequate space.

My phone buzzed insistently in my jacket pocket. A glance at the screen revealed exactly the person I had no desire to speak with—my father. Ignoring his call would likely result in an unwanted personal appearance, which would be infinitely worse. With reluctance, I stepped into the corridor and accepted the call.

"Daniel, how is Lila’s condition?" he demanded immediately.

"Since when do you genuinely care?" My voice emerged cold and emotionless.

"Son, I’m fully aware of what happened to her. I’m genuinely concerned. Sybilla mentioned she hasn’t regained consciousness." If Sybilla was maintaining communication with him, this call wasn’t truly about Lila’s wellbeing—he was probing to determine whether I’d spoken with Claire.

"Not yet. And since we’re dispensing with pleasantries, yes, I spoke extensively with Claire. She shared quite the riveting tale about your shared history." I had zero patience for diplomatic maneuvering.

"Listen carefully, Daniel, whatever she told you—"

"Enough! I’m finished with the endless deception!" I cut him off with razor-sharp finality. "I explicitly warned you about the consequences of pursuing this course. You actively sought out the individual who inflicted the most brutal harm on Lila and were prepared to finance some twisted abduction scheme solely to keep her away from me. The only factor that derailed your plan was discovering her wealth and promising business ventures. So, Elias Martinez, consider yourself officially without a middle son. Don’t

contact me again." I terminated the call, feeling as though the accumulated weight of generations had crashed onto my shoulders.

When I returned to the room, the nurse had completed her duties and departed, leaving the lights illuminated. I resumed my vigil beside Lila, taking her hand once more. I leaned close to her ear and whispered with complete sincerity:

"You are the absolute love of my life, little one. The most precious treasure in my world, the person who means everything to me. I need you desperately—please come back to me." Each word carried the full force of my heart, simultaneously a declaration and a desperate plea. I needed her arms around my neck, her gentle voice promising me that everything would be alright.

I felt her fingers twitch almost imperceptibly in mine, but wondered if my desperate hope was deceiving my senses. I pressed a tender kiss to her lips and rested my forehead against hers, closing my eyes.

"I'm here, big guy. I'll always be here." Her voice, barely audible, seemed to anchor my soul.

I lifted my head, opening my eyes. She was blinking repeatedly, squinting against the harsh light as her vision slowly adjusted. She had returned to me.

Tears of overwhelming relief and joy sprang to my eyes. "My little one! You're awake!" I kissed her carefully, though every fiber of my being longed to crush her against me. "I need to summon the doctor..."

"Doctor?" Confusion clouded her beautiful features as she took in her unfamiliar surroundings. "Where are we?"

"We're in the medical facility, beautiful. How do you feel?" I studied her intently for any indication of pain while pressing the call button.

"Completely numb. What happened?" Her bewilderment was evident and heartbreaking.

"What's the last thing you remember?" I asked with infinite gentleness.

"I remember arriving at that office building and trying to escape, but Claire grabbed my hair, and then... nothing." Her eyes searched mine desperately for answers.

The nurse entered briskly before I could respond. "Well, look who's rejoined the living! Our sleeping princess is awake! Wonderful news! I'll fetch the doctor immediately." She pivoted and vanished as quickly as she'd appeared.

"We reached that location in time," I explained carefully. "Claire and Connor have been arrested and are facing justice. Let the doctor examine you thoroughly first, and I'll provide all the details when you're stronger. What matters is that you're safe now, with me, and nobody will ever separate us again." I kissed her forehead, silently thanking whatever forces had brought her back to me.

"You came for me," she murmured, her voice still weak but radiating warmth. "You promised you would, and you kept that promise."

"Tiny one, I would cross every ocean and climb every mountain for you." I gently stroked her hair and offered her the most loving smile I could summon, my heart finally finding peace now that she had returned to me.

Chapter 580: Blood Truth Emerges

Lila's POV

The private medical facility finally cleared me for discharge after their specialists confirmed that Claire's cocktail of sedatives and hallucinogens had been purged from my system. The family doctor warned that residual effects might linger for days, prescribing rest as the only remedy. Daniel personally escorted me from the discreet clinic back to Beckett's heavily fortified estate in the hills.

My allies from Port Harbor had returned once word spread through our network that I was conscious and stable. Caleb's encrypted message assured me that Ivy would oversee my responsibilities in Thorne's legal department indefinitely. Max called from a secure line, his voice thick with guilt over how Connor had exploited our business relationship to orchestrate the kidnapping. I spent most of the conversation reassuring him, though I knew when we met face-to-face, the weight of responsibility would crush him again.

Arriving at Beckett's compound, I was moved to see colorful banners and balloons adorning the main entrance. My father, brother, and sister-in-law had prepared a heartfelt homecoming celebration despite the circumstances. Katarina had prepared a magnificent feast that warmed both body and soul. After eating, I declined their suggestions to rest in the master suite, preferring to remain in the security of their presence in the main parlor.

"I think it's time someone told me exactly what happened," I said, settling into the leather sofa with my father's protective arm around me. Until now, I had avoided pressing for details, but I could wait no longer. They exchanged loaded glances before Daniel spoke.

"Tiny one, the doctor emphasized rest above all. This isn't a simple tale of street justice," he said, clearly trying to shield me from additional trauma.

"I need to understand everything. Please," I insisted, my voice brooking no further deflection.

With a resigned sigh, Daniel recounted the entire operation—from Max's panicked call about my disappearance through tracking me to Connor's private casino and the tactical assault that freed me from that nightmare.

"Claire and Connor are now locked away in maximum security federal holding," he concluded with grim satisfaction.

"Will they remain there?" I asked, unable to mask the lingering dread in my voice.

"Without question, little one. Their networks have been dismantled completely. They will never threaten you again," Daniel assured me with the confidence of someone who controlled both sides of the law. "Now, tell us what you remember from your captivity."

I shared my ordeal—from the moment that college girl delivered Connor's message through my abduction and Claire's vicious interrogation techniques. I described the agony of her chemical cocktails, the terror of believing I would never see my family again, and how death seemed preferable to being forced into a marriage contract with Connor that would have surrendered my inheritance.

"Strangely, Connor never laid a hand on me directly. But Claire..." I shuddered involuntarily. "She seemed to derive genuine pleasure from inflicting pain."

"She will never touch you again," Daniel promised, his dark eyes flashing with lethal intent.

"Claire told me she wasn't my biological mother," I added, my voice catching slightly. "I felt relieved, honestly. But I still have no idea who my real mother is." Tears welled in my eyes as I voiced my deepest longing. "I want to meet Madeline and Rafael."

"They are eager to meet you as well," Daniel said gently. "Perhaps tomorrow. Today is for healing."

"Sweetheart," my father interjected, stroking my hair with infinite tenderness, "the DNA analysis is still processing, but there's something you need to know immediately."

"What is it, Dad?" I asked, noting the gravity in his expression.

"We already know who your mother is, even without laboratory confirmation."

I glanced around the room, realizing everyone else was privy to information I lacked. "What do you mean?"

"While you were missing, Daniel mobilized every resource at our disposal," my father began. "When conventional methods failed, I remembered Claire's godmother—the woman Claire claimed to live with during her supposed pregnancy with my child."

"Did you locate her?" I asked, leaning forward intently.

"No. When we arrived at the address, we encountered a younger woman who informed us her aunt—Claire's godmother—had passed away long ago. The property now belonged to her mother, who agreed to meet with us. This woman knew everything and finally revealed the truth behind decades of deception."

"What did she tell you?" My pulse quickened with anticipation and dread.

"Claire was never pregnant with my child. She wore elaborate prosthetics whenever I visited during that period. This woman also revealed that Claire received regular visits from Connor, with whom she was conducting an affair. Tiffany would visit as well—she worked at our estate then—and together they conspired against our entire family. Claire also maintained contact with Aria, a corrupt nurse later arrested for performing illegal procedures. Together, they orchestrated an elaborate scheme to deceive me and seize control of the Sullivan fortune." My father's voice cracked under the weight of these revelations.

"What exactly did Claire and this Aria accomplish?" I pressed.

"Aria had access to confidential medical records through her position at the private clinic that served our community. She knew of another woman pregnant at the same time as my wife—when Claire was pretending to expect. This woman was Madeline. Claire and Aria arranged for both deliveries to occur on the same night, deliberately choosing a date when I would be away from the estate on urgent business." Tears streamed down my father's weathered face as he struggled to continue. "Daniel, please..."

Daniel nodded solemnly and took over the narrative. "The evening before your father's departure with Beckett on family business, Aria visited Madeline under the guise of a routine check-up and secretly administered labor-inducing medication—the same substance Tiffany later gave to your father's wife."

I listened in mounting horror as Daniel continued his account.

"Madeline went into premature labor and delivered twins—a son and a daughter. Aria deliberately caused complications during the delivery, leaving Madeline hemorrhaging critically. She would have died if her husband hadn't discovered the situation and rushed her to emergency care. Aria placed the baby girl in her medical bag, covered with sterile blankets, and fled claiming another patient required immediate attention. She instructed Madeline's husband not to disturb his 'recovering' wife."

My stomach clenched as I began to comprehend the full scope of this atrocity.

"Aria proceeded directly to your family's estate where your father's wife was already in active labor. She assisted with that delivery—also a girl. The original plan was to exchange the infants because Claire

needed your father’s DNA test to match if questions arose later. Madeline’s daughter would remain with your father’s wife, while your father’s biological daughter would go to Claire for her charade."

Daniel paused, his expression pained by what came next. "During transport from Madeline’s residence to the estate, the infant in Aria’s bag—completely covered for concealment—suffocated to death."

I broke into uncontrollable sobs, overwhelmed by such calculated cruelty.

"It’s alright, my sister," Beckett knelt before me, taking my trembling hands in his steady grip.

"Please continue," I managed between broken breaths.

"Aria delivered your father’s wife’s baby successfully," Daniel said softly. "She ensured the mother, already weakened by complications, would not survive the hemorrhaging that followed. After your father’s wife died, Aria placed the deceased infant in her arms and took the living child—this time ensuring adequate air circulation. She delivered this baby to Claire, who later contacted your father with news of your birth. She deliberately timed this announcement to exploit his devastating grief over losing his wife." Daniel rubbed my back gently as he concluded.

"So..." I struggled to form words through my tears. "My mother... my mother was Alice, wasn’t she?"

"Yes, my precious sister," Beckett affirmed, his own tears falling freely. "You are that treasured baby Alice anticipated with such joy and love. You were cherished by your mother, your brother, and your father before you drew your first breath. We continue to love you with that same intensity, and I know Alice watches over you from beyond."

Words abandoned me completely. I collapsed into my brother’s embrace, sobbing with a release that seemed to purge a lifetime of confusion and pain. For the first time in my existence, I felt an unshakeable sense of belonging—absolute certainty about my place in this family and this dangerous world we inhabited. The mother I had secretly yearned for throughout my childhood had indeed been my mother all along. In this moment of devastating truth came profound peace: I finally understood who I was and where I truly belonged in the Sullivan dynasty.