Mafia Mask 581

Chapter 581: Hearts Finally Meet

Lila’s POV

Uncovering the complete truth about my bloodline and my rightful place in the Sullivan dynasty felt like stepping from shadow into blazing sunlight. I was no longer the frightened girl Claire had manipulated and controlled. I had emerged as the legitimate heiress to one of New York’s most powerful underground empires—a butterfly finally breaking free from its cage.

Learning that Alice was my true mother gave me something I’d never possessed before: unshakeable belonging. I finally felt worthy of everything surrounding me—not just the vast fortune or the sprawling criminal enterprise, but the fierce loyalty of my family and the protective circle that had shielded me since birth. Yet this revelation also exposed the breathtaking cruelty that greed could inspire. Claire’s scheme to steal an empire through baby-switching was evil in its purest form.

Daniel kept insisting I rest after everything we’d endured, but rest felt impossible. Energy surged through my veins, and I had pressing matters demanding my attention. Meeting Madeline topped that list—the courageous mother who’d lost her daughter to such heartless manipulation but never abandoned hope, even when the entire world dismissed her claims as delusion.

"Tiny one? You ready? They’re here," Daniel appeared in the bedroom doorway as I applied the final touches to my appearance.

"Ready!" I swept on my lipstick and moved toward him.

"Beautiful as always!" Daniel pressed his lips to my neck and captured my hand. "Come on, they’re waiting in the main room."

When we entered the spacious living area of Daniel’s penthouse, I found my father, my brother Beckett, and Katarina seated with three unfamiliar faces—Madeline, her husband, and their son. My father handled the introductions with the formal dignity befitting his position as Sullivan family patriarch, and immediately, both Madeline and I surrendered to overwhelming emotion.

Our lives, so cruelly entangled by Claire's machinations, finally converged in person.

"How absolutely beautiful you are!" Madeline whispered through her tears. "May I hold you?"

I opened my arms without hesitation, and when we embraced, something extraordinary occurred. It felt like being held by the mother I'd never known—the comforting arms of a woman who'd searched relentlessly for her stolen child but somehow found strength to survive. We remained locked in that embrace, and when we finally separated, she tenderly touched my face.

"Lila, my daughter would be exactly your age now. I believe she would have grown into someone just as beautiful as you. I'm nobody important—just an ordinary woman—but somehow I feel maternal toward you. I see echoes of my lost baby in you. Whenever you need a mother's comfort, my home is always open."

Madeline spoke with that unmistakable maternal warmth that penetrates straight to the soul.

"Oh, Madeline, I feel that connection to your daughter too. Our lives should have been so different, shouldn't they? But fate still brought us together somehow. Please know you can always turn to me when you need a daughter's love." I embraced her again. A diabolical plot had linked us, but we were transforming that evil into something precious and healing.

The afternoon unfolded with meaningful conversation. I discovered that Rafael, Madeline's son, and I not only shared a birthday but countless interests. He was studying business administration in college. Beckett surprised me by announcing he'd offered Rafael a position within our family's legitimate enterprises, beginning the following week.

This news thrilled me—I knew my brother would provide Rafael with real opportunities for advancement and recognize his potential. I seized the moment to thank Rafael for approaching Beckett when he'd spotted me in that nightmare situation.

Beckett had also arranged a promotion for Madeline's husband within our organization's security division. He was a decent, hardworking man who'd been carrying guilt for doubting his wife's claims for so many years. Before our farewells, Madeline shared something profound—that she could finally begin truly living because she now had a grave to visit and closure about her daughter's fate.

"You know, Lila," she said quietly, "there's only one torment worse than losing a child—not knowing where they are or what became of them. I endured that agony for so long. Now I'm finally free from that particular hell because I know what happened to my baby and where she rests." Madeline offered me a gentle smile.

"Madeline, may I ask you something?" I ventured.

"Of course, dear," she encouraged.

"What name had you chosen for your daughter? I mean, I'm wondering if you'll change her name now..." I was curious whether she planned to rename the baby who, until now, had been buried under my identity.

"When I was carrying her," Madeline explained, "I'd chosen Lulu. I always selected my children's names for their meanings—Rafael means 'God's peace,' and Lulu means 'God beholds.'" Her smile carried decades of grief.

"That's beautiful," I said genuinely.

"Yes, but now, when the DNA results are officially processed and I can register my daughter's death certificate properly, I'd like your permission to give her your mother's name—the woman who unknowingly held my baby and cared for her all those years." Madeline's eyes glistened, and emotion swept through me again.

"What a touching tribute," my father responded, visibly moved. "We're deeply honored. I know Alice would be profoundly touched—she loved that baby with the same devotion she gave all her children."

Madeline thanked us, and we exchanged farewells with promises to maintain contact. I turned to embrace Beckett, grateful for his support of her request.

"Thank you for honoring her wish. And thank you for giving Rafael this chance. I know you'll help him succeed, and he deserves that opportunity." I looked at them with deep gratitude.

"Nothing to thank me for, Lila. You're exactly like Alice—always seeing people's potential. Rafael seems promising. I suspect he'll become invaluable eventually, especially since you don't plan to return to the business side." Beckett smiled knowingly.

"You're right—my future isn't in the family operations anymore. But I promise to visit more frequently," I assured them, a commitment I fully intended to honor.

"Are you really leaving tomorrow?" Katarina asked. "You could stay through the weekend. It's wonderful having you here."

"We need to leave tomorrow, Katarina. Work is calling, and I have law school assignments to catch up on," I explained. "I just have two final matters to handle before we go."

Chapter 582: Blood Runs True

Lila's POV

I woke before dawn, my heart pounding with anticipation that had nothing to do with fear and everything to do with finally knowing who I really was. By the time my family gathered around the breakfast table in the heavily guarded Sullivan estate, I could barely contain the nervous energy coursing through my veins. I hurried everyone through their meals, eager to embark on the journey that would mark a pivotal moment in my life. Today, I would visit the cemetery not as Claire's adopted pawn, but as a daughter who finally understood her true bloodline within the Sullivan crime family.

Dad had shared that white peace lilies were my real mother's favorite flowers, which explained their abundance throughout our family compound. These elegant blooms weren't just decorative choices - they were Alice's signature, scattered across the grounds like silent tributes to the woman who should have raised me. I had asked Beckett to arrange for an extravagant bouquet of these pristine flowers to bring to her grave, along with a smaller arrangement of delicate white blossoms for Madeline's baby, an innocent soul who never had the chance to witness the complex world of organized crime we inhabited.

Standing before the marble monument that bore my mother's name - Alice Jewell Sullivan - I felt a profound connection to this woman whose blood ran through my veins. According to Dad, her name perfectly captured her essence: pure-hearted and genuine, qualities that seemed impossible to maintain in our world of territorial wars and family vendettas. Over the past several days, both Dad and Beckett had painted vivid pictures of her beauty, kindness, and unwavering loyalty. They described a woman

who somehow believed in honor even within the brutal hierarchy of our criminal empire, approaching life with compassion despite the violence that surrounded our family business.

Clutching a photograph of her, I could now see her refined features reflected in my own face when I looked in the mirror. She had transformed from an abstract concept - my father's first wife and former underboss of our money laundering operations - into my mother, a real person with a face, a name, and a legacy that lived on through the stories my father and brother eagerly shared with me.

I placed the peace lilies in the marble holder and rested my forehead against the cool stone that stood at my height. Tears flowed freely as I mourned what we had both lost - the life we should have shared navigating the treacherous waters of mafia politics together. I whispered prayers and spoke to her directly, confessing how much I missed her presence, how proud I was to carry her bloodline, and how deeply I loved her despite the decades of deception that had kept us apart.

Next, I moved to the small grave nearby - the final resting place of a baby girl who never drew her first breath. Again, I grieved, prayed, and spoke from my heart to another victim of our world's cruelty.

"These tiny white flowers are for you," I whispered, carefully arranging them in the holder. "Little lilies for you, who from this day forward will be known as Alice, sharing a name with my mother and these beautiful blossoms."

Leaving the cemetery, I felt a profound sense of peace wash over me. Something fundamental had shifted inside - I felt connected to my mother and to my rightful position within the Sullivan family hierarchy in a way I never had before. I said goodbye to my father, brother, and Katarina, as I had one final confrontation to complete before returning to our territory.

"Daughter, are you certain you want to face this woman?" My father's eyes clouded with concern, the kind of protective instinct that ran deep in our bloodline.

"Yes, Dad. She can't manipulate me anymore," I assured him with newfound confidence born from understanding my true heritage.

After bidding farewell to my family, Daniel drove me to the neighboring jurisdiction where Claire was being held in a maximum-security facility that our allied families had significant influence over. Inspector

Ezekiel was waiting for us when we arrived, his presence a reminder of how law enforcement and organized crime intersected in our world.

"Lila! It’s good to see you’ve recovered from that ordeal," he said with genuine warmth, though his eyes held the respect reserved for legitimate family heirs.

"Yes, Inspector. The physical marks are fading quickly, and makeup covers most of them now," I replied with a small smile, unconsciously touching where Claire’s hired muscle had left their calling cards.

"The resilience of Sullivan women," he chuckled knowingly. "Are you absolutely sure you want to confront this woman?" When I nodded firmly, he instructed the correctional officers to bring Claire to the secured meeting room.

"Well, look who’s come to visit!" Claire sauntered into the room with her typical arrogance, though the orange prison jumpsuit had stripped away much of her former intimidating presence. "What a surprise. Missing me, little rat?"

"No, Claire. I simply wanted to see you caged and stripped of any power you thought you had," I responded coolly, my voice carrying the authority of my bloodline.

"My, my, where did all this backbone come from? Acting like real family now, are we? But I know better - you’re still just a frightened little girl playing dress-up."

Her familiar condescending laugh no longer sent shivers down my spine. The sound held no power over me anymore, not when I knew exactly who I was and what I represented.

"I’m not that frightened girl anymore, Claire. I’m Alice Sullivan’s daughter, and I carry her strength." I met her gaze steadily, refusing to be diminished.

"Oh really? And you came all this way just to tell me that?" Her cold stare - one I had endured my entire life - attempted to intimidate me one final time.

"Actually, I came to ask if it was worth it. You never achieved what you wanted. You lived in luxury for years through deception, but now you'll rot in a cell. You wanted control of our money laundering network, and you failed completely. Was destroying lives worth this ending?"

As I studied her, I began to feel something unexpected - pity for this small, bitter woman who had never understood what real family loyalty meant in our world.

"It would have been worth it if I'd managed to marry you off to Connor," she spat venomously. "He would have made you suffer exquisitely while expanding his casino operations. But listen carefully, little rat - it wasn't just about the money or territory. I hated your father's precious Alice, and I still do! Because of her, I had to settle for Nathaniel, a weak man with no real power in the organization. The man I truly wanted was obsessed with her memory. She stole everything from me, and Connor too. I had plans to merge our operations through marriage, but she interfered even from the grave. At least I have one satisfaction - you'll never know every detail about how you ended up in my custody."

"Claire, we already know everything. I know who my mother was and exactly what you did to steal my birthright. Your godmother's sister told my father everything when we traced the hospital records. Remember her?" I watched Claire's face contort with rage as the last of her secrets crumbled. "Of course you do. I came here to tell you it's over. You'll spend your remaining years behind bars, and if you ever get out, you'll have nothing. All your schemes gained you was temporary access to a house and car - hardly enough for someone with your expensive tastes and delusions of grandeur."

Claire's hatred was almost tangible, radiating from her like the toxic energy that had poisoned my childhood.

"This isn't over, Lila," she hissed desperately. "I've hired an excellent lawyer with connections to judges who owe favors. I won't be locked up for long."

"Actually, Claire, I don't believe that's accurate," Inspector Ezekiel interjected with a knowing smile that spoke of deeper machinations. "You might not have legal representation at all anymore."

Claire stared at him, confusion washing over her face as the reality of her complete isolation began to sink in.

Chapter 583: Touched By Angels

Lila’s POV

Inspector Ezekiel’s smile carried the dangerous confidence of a man who controlled information in both the legitimate and shadow worlds. I had been puzzled by his earlier remarks about Claire’s financial situation. After all, I knew she possessed substantial holdings from her marriage into the Sullivan family—properties and assets worth considerable fortune in our underground empire.

"Ah, but she no longer controls any of that wealth, Lila," Inspector Ezekiel revealed, his voice cutting through the interrogation room like a blade. "Justin arrived with a notary from our network. She signed documents authorizing him to liquidate the Sullivan family safe houses and luxury vehicles to secure the finest legal representation our organization could provide. However, my investigation through our family contacts revealed that Justin sold everything through our underground channels and vanished without compensating the attorney a single dollar."

"That’s impossible!" Claire erupted, her carefully maintained dignity crumbling like a house of cards. "A vicious lie! My son would never betray family blood like this!"

The inspector calmly rose from his chair, walked to the reinforced door, and signaled someone from the corridor. He closed the door behind the visitor, whom I recognized as one of our family’s most trusted legal advisors.

Claire’s eyes brightened with desperate hope. "Counselor, where is Justin? I instructed him to liquidate the family assets, secure a smaller residence within our territory, and use the remaining funds to secure my release through our connections," she pleaded, her voice trembling with the weight of her situation.

The lawyer’s expression remained professionally detached, the kind of cold professionalism that defined our world. "I regret to inform you, Claire, but Justin has liquidated all Sullivan family assets under your name and disappeared completely. Upon investigating through our underground network, one of his associates informed me that he took the money and fled the country. According to this source, Justin stated—and I quote directly—’as far as he was concerned, you could rot behind bars.’" He delivered the devastating news with the clinical precision of a family executioner. "I came personally to notify you that I’m withdrawing from your defense. You’ll need to request representation from the public system." Without further ceremony, he departed, leaving behind the bitter taste of abandoned loyalty.

"No!" Claire wailed, her composure disintegrating completely. "No, my own flesh and blood couldn’t abandon family like this!" The realization that her son had violated the most sacred code of our world—family loyalty—seemed to shatter the very foundation of her identity.

Inspector Ezekiel observed her breakdown with the detached interest of someone who had witnessed countless family betrayals in our shadow empire. "Well, Claire, this appears to be the end of your reign within the Sullivan organization. Lila, is there anything final you wish to say to her?"

I gathered my thoughts, knowing this would mark the closing of a dark Chapter in my life. "You'll never see me again, Claire." The words carried the finality of a family verdict. I turned toward the inspector, who immediately ordered her return to the maximum-security wing reserved for fallen family members.

A corrections officer approached, whispering something urgent to Inspector Ezekiel, whose expression shifted to serious concern as he faced me.

"Lila, Connor has requested an audience with you. He learned through our prison network that you were here," he explained, waiting for my decision.

"Absolutely not!" Daniel interjected with protective authority, his voice carrying the commanding tone of a senior inspector.

"I'll meet with him," I countered, turning to address Daniel's concern. "It's the final time. There's something I need to understand about our family's history."

Daniel fell silent, though his disapproval remained evident in the tension of his powerful frame. The inspector arranged for Connor's transfer, who entered the room and settled into the chair across from me with an unsettling smile that belonged to our dangerous world.

"I'm relieved you survived the ordeal," he began with the smooth confidence of a casino empire boss.

"No thanks to your organization," I replied with cold precision.

"Lila, I am what our world made me, but I would have provided you with a life befitting underground royalty," he asserted with the disturbing confidence of someone accustomed to taking what he desired.

"Connor, tell me the truth—why me? Why this dangerous obsession?" I pressed, finally confronting the question that had haunted me since my abduction.

"Because you're her perfect reflection!" His smile softened, eyes clouding with the reminiscence of someone lost in memories of our family's hidden past.

"Who?" I questioned, reaching toward the heart of what I desperately needed to understand.

"Alice Jewell Sullivan. Your biological mother," Connor revealed with a deep sigh. "The most exquisite and compassionate woman ever to grace our underground empire. Meeting her drove me to complete madness. I was allied with Claire's faction then, but ended that partnership because of Alice. I desperately craved her affection and approval."

He leaned forward, intensity building in his voice like gathering storm clouds. "For a brief period, Lila, I concealed my true nature within our world, presented myself as honorable and protective, and she responded with her radiant smile that could illuminate our darkest dealings. We courted briefly within family protocols, but truth always surfaces in our world, doesn't it? Through careless moments, my facade cracked, and she glimpsed the real predator beneath. Her disappointment was devastating when she walked away from our arrangement."

Connor's gaze drifted toward painful memories. "Then she met your father. I stood no chance against their connection after that. She told me she loved him instantly and would forever, with the kind of devotion that defines our family bonds. So I loved her from the shadows of our empire. I searched desperately for someone comparable to marry within our network, but my wife wasn't Alice and couldn't erase her from my heart. Even monsters within our world can love deeply, Lila. When Alice died, my grief consumed me—I never stopped loving her memory."

His focus returned to me with laser intensity. "Then I spotted you at your university. You're her absolute duplicate in every way. I foolishly hoped to recapture those precious moments with her, to sustain that beautiful illusion. But that was impossible, wasn't it?" He shook his head with genuine regret. "You embody her spirit completely, her strength and compassion. I want you to know I'll never pursue you again through our networks. You deserve the peace our world rarely grants."

"Thank you for your honesty," I said, surprised by my own capacity for understanding. "And thank you for stopping Claire that day—she might have killed me in her rage. Thank you for sending me to Estelle, who genuinely cared for my wellbeing." Understanding dawned within me, illuminating many shadows of my family's hidden history.

"You’re Alice incarnate!" Connor marveled with something approaching reverence. "After everything our world put you through, you express gratitude. I don’t deserve your thanks, Lila. I should be thanking you. Alice was heaven’s messenger in our hell, and she once touched my blackened soul. When an angel touches you in our world, the impression never fades. Be happy, Lila."

Connor signaled to the inspector that he was ready to return to his cell in the family prison system. Afterward, Daniel and I bid farewell to Inspector Ezekiel, expressing appreciation to him and his team for their support within our complex world.

"See you Monday at headquarters, Gideon," Daniel called out as we departed. He had successfully arranged Gideon’s transfer within the police department, which delighted our loyal ally immensely.

I left ready to embrace the future awaiting me within our empire. Like Connor, I felt marked by something transcendent—as though I too had been touched by an angel who once walked among our shadows.

Chapter 584: Love Unremembered

Lila’s POV

Life had settled back into its familiar rhythm between Thorne Corporation’s legal department, my law school lectures, and the fortified penthouse Daniel insisted I call home. Everything seemed normal except for one maddening detail: Daniel still refused to touch me. Despite showering me with the kind of protective devotion that made other mafia wives envious, he maintained his stubborn stance about waiting until I was completely healed from the injuries inflicted during my captivity. The sexual frustration was consuming me; I craved the weight of his powerful body against mine with increasing desperation.

"I need to do something about this situation, Sybil," I sighed, leaning back in my leather chair at Thorne’s executive floor. "He’s treating me like I’m made of glass."

Before Sybil could offer any seduction strategies, the secure line on my desk rang, cutting through our conversation.

"Thorne Corporation, Executive Legal Division, good afternoon," I answered with genuine warmth, grateful to be back at my mahogany desk handling the intricate web of legitimate business that concealed our family's true operations.

"Is my little Lila holding down the fortress?" The familiar voice made me break into an instant smile.

"Opal! I've missed you terribly! When are you returning to us?" My excitement was completely unguarded.

From my peripheral vision, I caught Sybil's dramatic transformation. All color drained from her face at the mere mention of Xavier's name. She rose from her chair with deflated shoulders and retreated to her office like a wounded soldier. Very interesting reaction.

"Soon, Lila. Has everyone been mourning my absence?" Xavier's rich laughter carried through the encrypted connection.

"Absolutely! The consigliere's chair feels empty without you. Tell me everything - how are you surviving and where in the world have you vanished to?" My curiosity was genuine.

"Better than expected, considering recent events. Currently exploring the ancient paths of Old Europe, little Lila. Right now I'm in Galicia, absorbing all its historic magnificence." His enthusiasm sparked a sharp pang of wanderlust in my chest.

"Please tell me you're walking The Camino de Santiago?" My eyes widened with excitement.

The legendary pilgrimage route had captivated my imagination since I first heard about it. My brother Beckett had completed the spiritual journey with Katarina during their courtship, and their stories painted vivid pictures of transformative beauty and inner awakening.

"Precisely why I'm here! This marks my second pilgrimage, yet somehow it feels entirely different this time. You should experience it yourself, Lila. Perhaps we could undertake it together during your next vacation?" Xavier's voice lifted with sincere enthusiasm.

"I would absolutely cherish that, Xavier! It’s been on my bucket list forever. When you return, I want every single detail," I replied, mentally calculating the vacation days I’d accumulated while navigating Thorne’s complex legal maze.

"I’d be honored to share everything!" Xavier paused momentarily, his tone shifting. "Daniel mentioned what happened to you. Are you truly recovered, Lila?"

His genuine concern touched something deep inside me. Xavier always revealed his tender side at precisely the right moments.

"Stronger than ever, actually. No more threatening calls from rival families, no more contracts on my head. Everything is peaceful, and it feels absolutely divine," I assured him.

"That’s exactly what I needed to hear. You deserve that tranquility, Lila." Another pause. "Now, shifting topics, I require a small favor."

"Anything for you. What do you need?"

"My new assistant... is she still employed, or has she already fled?" He sounded genuinely uncomfortable.

"Why would she quit? She hasn’t had time to discover what the rest of us know - that you’re actually the most reasonable boss in this entire organization." I could sense his smile through the secure line. Something prevented me from revealing Sybil’s true identity, especially since he clearly hadn’t connected the dots yet.

"Well, I was absolutely terrible to her. She began working, and I completely disappeared - never properly welcomed her, didn’t discuss her duties, never even conducted a basic introduction meeting. Between us, Lila, I can’t even recall her face or name." I couldn’t suppress my laughter at his confession. This level of distraction was completely unlike Xavier.

"Don’t laugh! I had significant mental preoccupations."

"I understand completely, Xavier. And I'm certain she will too," I said reassuringly.

"I purchased her a small gift as an apology, but I can't address the card properly. Could you assist me? And please don't reveal I forgot - I bought something for you as well, naturally." His shameless bribery made me laugh again.

"It's Sybil. And your secret remains safe with me, but only because you're bribing me with presents." His hearty laughter echoed through the receiver.

"You're absolutely the best!" He paused thoughtfully. "Isn't that peculiar though - identical name to your sister-in-law."

"What an odd coincidence, right?" I couldn't believe how oblivious he was being. For such a brilliant strategist and consigliere, he was being remarkably dense.

"Very strange indeed..." He seemed to be contemplating this. "And speaking of important people, how's that detective of yours doing?"

"Devastatingly handsome as always, wonderful, and I fall deeper in love with him every single day," I replied with a dreamy smile.

"Lucky bastard, that friend of mine. Well, sweetheart, I'll see you soon."

After disconnecting, I immediately marched to Sybil's office. She was pretending to review case files, but sighing like a lovesick teenager. That's when all the pieces clicked into perfect place.

"You're in love with him!" I declared, pointing an accusatory finger directly at her.

"What are you talking about? You've been spending too much time with Zoe." Sybil attempted desperately to redirect the conversation.

"Absolutely not. Don’t try to deflect this. You have feelings for Xavier!" I approached her desk while she looked increasingly panicked.

"Please, don’t tell anyone! He despises me, and if Daniel discovers..." Her voice trailed off into something resembling a pathetic whimper.

"Tell me absolutely everything," I demanded, leaning forward eagerly.

"Look who’s here! Coffee break time for my favorite ladies?" Jude’s voice interrupted as he strolled confidently into the office.

"When is he returning?" Sybil asked, not even attempting to disguise her interest.

"When is who returning?" Jude glanced between us with confusion.

"Xavier. Soon," I replied, watching Sybil’s defeated expression and hearing her audible sigh.

"Oh, Sybil, still convinced Xavier’s planning to terminate your employment?" Jude rolled his eyes dramatically. He’d repeatedly assured her to stop being paranoid about her job security.

"Because he absolutely will, Jude! How will I survive without you people?" Sybil groaned dramatically, making us both laugh.

"Don’t be ridiculous, you’re permanently stuck with us," Jude chuckled warmly. "Come on, coffee time."

"Lila, has he remembered my existence yet?" Sybil asked, and I could detect more desperate hope than genuine fear in her question.

"No, Sybil, he hasn’t. But remember, he was navigating an extremely difficult period when you started working here." I tried to offer reassurance, hoping she wouldn’t construct elaborate conspiracy theories. "You go ahead for coffee. I can’t join today. Sybil, we’ll absolutely finish our conversation at home." I pointed meaningfully at her before returning to my executive desk.

"Ooh, sounds serious and juicy. What's the topic?" I overheard Jude asking as they walked away, while Sybil mumbled something about her terror of being fired.

Chapter 585: Blood Proves Truth

Lila's POV

I returned to my desk at Thorne Group contemplating strategies to convince Daniel that the tensions between us had finally dissolved and we could resume our intimate connection. The ache for his touch consumed my thoughts completely. Just as I settled into reviewing legal documents for one of our money laundering fronts, my phone vibrated. My detective's name appeared on the screen.

"Hey, handsome! I was just thinking about you," I answered with forced cheerfulness.

"My little one, that's exactly what I needed to hear. Been missing your detective?" His voice carried a lightness I hadn't detected in weeks.

"You couldn't possibly fathom how desperately," I breathed dramatically, earning his rich laughter.

"Little one, you never cease to amaze me!" Daniel chuckled warmly.

"It's merely love consuming every rational thought," I responded, triggering another burst of his laughter.

"You know my devotion to you runs deeper than blood loyalty. Listen, I need you home earlier today. Can you abandon your evening law classes?" His request immediately elevated my spirits. Had my punishment period finally concluded?

"For you? I'd abandon the entire Thorne legal department!" I flirted without restraint.

"That's reassuring to know," he laughed heartily. "I'm grateful the semester concludes soon. Having you home earlier for an extended period will be extraordinary."

"I’m equally thrilled about that prospect. Though law school feels like an endless sentence," I complained, frustrated by consistently arriving home after midnight.

"Time moves faster than anticipated when you’re building something meaningful," Daniel assured me.

After exchanging brief endearments, we disconnected with his promise of something crucial awaiting at home. I couldn’t suppress my eagerness to reconnect with my formidable detective.

After completing my shift coordinating legal documents for the family’s legitimate enterprises, I found it peculiar that Sybilla hadn’t mentioned visiting Xavier’s private office, especially considering Friday evenings. We traveled home together in the armored vehicle Daniel insisted upon, and upon entering the penthouse, I detected an intoxicating aroma of expertly prepared cuisine that triggered immediate hunger pangs.

"Something smells absolutely divine!" I announced while crossing the threshold.

"Is Daniel actually cooking? His culinary skills are exceptional, though I can’t comprehend his obsession with ordering from those exclusive restaurants," Sybilla observed just as Daniel emerged from the kitchen.

"Because I work long shifts tracking down the city’s most dangerous criminals, little sister!" He playfully ribbed his sibling while drawing me close by my waist. "But tonight demands something extraordinary, and I’ve prepared perfection for my little one."

"Exclusively for her? Remarkable, it’s as if I’m merely decorative furniture here!" Sybilla protested with theatrical indignation.

"You’re simply intruding on our intimate evening," Daniel continued his teasing. "If you’re planning to freshen up before dinner, move quickly. Shortly, we’re convening a family council."

I studied him with growing curiosity. Family council? What significance could that hold? He simply smiled mysteriously, delivered another lingering kiss, and vanished back into the kitchen. A short while

later, the three of us occupied the Italian leather sofa with Daniel’s encrypted laptop positioned before us.

"What’s transpiring, Daniel?" I inquired, finding the atmosphere increasingly enigmatic.

"Patience will reward you shortly," came his cryptic response before a secure video call notification materialized. It was Beckett.

"Lila!" My brother’s face radiated unprecedented excitement. "We’re already experiencing homesickness and considering visiting you all."

"That would be absolutely perfect, Beckett!" I beamed at my brother through the screen. "Hello, Katarina! Dad! I’m desperate to see everyone again."

"Lila, we’ll arrange a visit soon, but Katarina wants to orchestrate a holiday gathering at the family compound, bringing together our bloodline, your associates, and Daniel’s relatives. She’s planning this for the year-end celebrations. What’s your opinion?"

"Nathaniel, that sounds incredibly appealing! It would be absolutely flawless! I’ve missed you all terribly." Sybilla and my father had cultivated a genuine affection for each other, interacting with remarkable warmth despite their different family allegiances.

After discussing our holiday arrangements, Beckett updated us about Rafael excelling in the legitimate business operations and Justin’s complete vanishing act. I noticed profound sadness shadowing my father’s expression. Despite Justin never being his biological son and consistently demonstrating disrespect and ingratitude, my father still harbored concern—simply because his heart remained fundamentally compassionate.

"Dad, don’t torment yourself. He’s probably squandering the money from liquidating Claire’s assets and vehicles," I attempted consolation, but received only a melancholy smile in response.

"Justin’s DNA analysis returned, Lila. He genuinely isn’t my biological son," my father stated with grave solemnity, clearly wounded by this harsh reality.

"Thank providence that worthless parasite isn't our blood!" Beckett interjected sharply, and I struggled to suppress inappropriate laughter.

"Beckett revealed everything he and Claire orchestrated against you. I'm profoundly sorry for being so foolishly blind, sweetheart."

My father blamed himself for failing to detect Claire's manipulations earlier. He lamented that every warning sign had been visible yet ignored, and if he'd investigated Claire's supposed connections to trace her sister sooner, he could have spared me considerable suffering.

But my perspective had evolved—what occurred was destined to unfold, and I'd achieved peace with that reality.

"Dad, let's bury this permanently in the past where it belongs!" I insisted with finality.

"You're absolutely right, sweetheart. But I have one more critical matter to share." My stomach immediately clenched with anxiety.

"What is it?" Tension invaded my voice completely.

"Your DNA results have arrived. We know the truth already, but I understand these results carry immense significance for you, so I wanted us to examine them together," my father explained, holding up an official envelope.

"But..." Confusion overwhelmed me since this was unexpected news. Yes, the DNA confirmation mattered tremendously—it would verify everything we'd discovered and allow me to change my mother's name on all official Sullivan family documents. Then Daniel placed a pristine white envelope in my trembling hands.

"We're here supporting you completely," Daniel kissed my forehead with infinite tenderness.

"Alright dad, let's face this together." My palms were damp with nervous perspiration, my hands visibly shaking.

My father counted down and we tore open our envelopes simultaneously; inside mine were multiple comprehensive reports. I hadn't anticipated such overwhelming emotion, but tears flowed freely as I carefully examined each document.

"The alleged father, Nathaniel Sullivan, demonstrates a probability exceeding ninety-nine percent of being the biological father of Lila Sullivan," I read the first report with a quivering voice. "I truly am your daughter!" Pure joy overwhelmed every fiber of my being.

"I never questioned it for a single moment!" My father's voice resonated with unwavering conviction.

My love for him felt infinite and unconditional. I retrieved the second report with even greater reverence.

"The alleged mother, Claire Ward Sullivan, shows no genetic maternal connection to Lila Sullivan," I exhaled with profound relief before moving to the final document. "The alleged mother, Alice Jewell Sullivan, demonstrates a probability exceeding ninety-nine percent of being the biological mother of Lila Sullivan." Emotion overwhelmed both my father and me simultaneously—it was confirmed that I was Alice's beloved and long-awaited daughter. Peripherally, I noticed Daniel producing a champagne bottle.

"Ready, Beckett? This moment belongs to us," Daniel announced as my brother nodded and counted down.

They uncorked champagne bottles simultaneously and distributed crystal glasses. We shared an emotional toast, celebrating the beginning of a new existence filled with promise and authentic happiness. The sensation of being genuinely loved and belonging somewhere completely was indescribable—perhaps few could comprehend the overwhelming feeling of discovering your true place, being accepted wholly for your authentic identity. I was a Sullivan.

I felt like the protagonist from a fairy tale; for years, I couldn't find my place or establish my identity. Now, finally, I'd discovered my true heritage—I had found my rightful family.

Chapter 586: Best Laid Plans

Lila's POV

Daniel had orchestrated the perfect evening with those DNA test results, confirming my true heritage as a Sullivan family blood heir. His attention to detail never ceased to amaze me, whether he was conducting a high-stakes operation for the police department or planning intimate surprises for me. Tonight, however, I had my own carefully laid plans. I was determined to seduce my powerful inspector. We hadn't been intimate since returning from the Connor family compound where he'd rescued me from that forced marriage scheme. He'd been treating me like delicate porcelain ever since, worried about my fading bruises and minor injuries from the ordeal. Nothing serious enough to warrant his excessive protection, but Daniel had always been fiercely protective of what belonged to him.

That afternoon, while he was handling some Thorne family business with Caleb, I slipped into an exclusive boutique in the diamond district that catered to discerning wives of prominent families. I selected a scandalously short cherry-colored silk nightgown with a dramatic cutout along the spine and matching barely-there panties that would leave little to his imagination. Before bedtime, I made Daniel promise to stay awake, claiming I needed to discuss something important about the Sullivan family's legal restructuring now that my true parentage had been confirmed.

After locking myself in our marble bathroom, I took my time preparing. The shower was long and luxurious, followed by applying the expensive French perfume he'd bought me to all the places I knew would drive him wild. When I slipped into my scandalous purchase, I knew my detective wouldn't be able to resist. The Martinez family men were known for their appetites, and Daniel had never been able to keep his hands off me once he saw me in something enticing.

When I emerged from the bathroom with only the soft amber glow of our bedside lamps creating atmosphere, I called his name in the sultry voice that usually had immediate effects. Nothing. Thinking he was playing games, I crawled across our king-sized bed and touched his muscled arm. Complete stillness. Daniel lay there like a statue, eyes closed, his broad chest rising and falling with the deep, rhythmic breathing of someone in profound unconsciousness.

"You have got to be kidding me right now," I whispered in disbelief. "The man is completely dead to the world."

I gave his shoulder a gentle shake, but he didn't even twitch. My supposedly foolproof seduction strategy had crashed and burned spectacularly. For a moment, I considered creating enough commotion to wake him, but then I remembered how he'd spent the entire day coordinating with various family allies and still managed to prepare an elaborate dinner for me. The responsibilities of maintaining his position in both the legitimate police force and the underground network of family alliances were exhausting, even for someone as formidable as Daniel.

With a frustrated sigh, I admitted defeat. I switched off the lamps and settled into bed with my back turned to him. While I understood his exhaustion, I couldn't suppress my irritation that he'd fallen asleep after I specifically requested he wait up for me.

I woke unusually early the following morning. Despite it being Saturday when I could indulge in sleeping late, I felt too restless and annoyed to remain in bed. As I carefully extracted myself from the sheets, inspiration struck like lightning. I'd show him exactly what he'd missed out on. I peeled off my nightgown and arranged it deliberately on the bed, positioned so he'd immediately recognize it wasn't just any garment when he woke. Then I slipped off my panties and placed them provocatively on my pillow before padding to the bathroom.

I was nursing my coffee and brooding over my failed romantic ambush when Sybilla bounced into the kitchen wearing designer workout attire, her dark hair pulled back in a perfect ponytail, radiating more energy than should be legal at this ungodly hour.

"Good morning, gorgeous Lila!" she chirped, settling across from me at the granite island. Even without makeup and fresh out of bed, she possessed the kind of effortless beauty that ran in the Martinez bloodline.

"Morning," I mumbled into my cup. "What's with all the boundless enthusiasm?"

"Meeting Jude at the private gym in his building."

"And you're this animated because of Jude or because of the workout?" I asked with undisguised dryness.

"Because it's Saturday, Lila! A beautiful Saturday! Plus, I still have employment for the foreseeable future."

Sybilla couldn't shake her persistent anxiety that Xavier might terminate her position at Thorne Group. Working directly under the family's chief strategist was both a privilege and a constant source of stress for her.

"He’s not going to fire you," I assured her, taking another bite of my toast with imported apricot preserves.

"Who’s getting terminated?" Daniel appeared in the kitchen doorway, looking devastatingly handsome even in casual weekend attire. "Good morning, beautiful ladies." He approached and planted a quick kiss on my lips. "Mmm, that apricot preserve is incredible."

I didn’t return his smile. My mood hadn’t improved overnight, but he seemed completely oblivious to my displeasure. I waited expectantly for some acknowledgment of my lingerie display upstairs, but he simply sat down and poured himself coffee from our expensive machine.

"So, who’s getting the axe?" he repeated casually. Sybilla kicked me sharply under the table.

"Nobody, big brother," she lied smoothly. "Just my usual paranoia about making costly mistakes and getting dismissed."

"Little sister, that’s never happening. You’re incredibly capable. Caleb mentioned you’re proving to be an invaluable addition to our operations." He smiled warmly at her, still apparently unaware of my simmering mood.

"That’s wonderful news!" Sybilla finished her fresh juice with forced brightness. "My darlings, I need to leave. Don’t wait up tonight, Jude and I have extensive plans."

"Hold on there, young lady. Where exactly are you two heading?" Daniel caught her wrist with practiced authority.

"Gym session with Jude, then lunch and spending time together." She pulled free and blew him a playful kiss.

"Just exercise caution, Sybilla. You two are practically attached at the hip lately, and he’s still navigating his divorce proceedings. The legal separation isn’t finalized yet. I don’t want you getting emotionally wounded." It was the same protective warning he’d delivered repeatedly. If only he knew the complete truth about their relationship.

"Daniel, Jude and I are simply friends," she insisted before blowing another kiss and making her exit. The front door slammed moments later.

"Now it’s just us, young lady." Daniel crossed his powerful arms, studying me with intense focus.

"I’m not involved with Jude," I replied with deliberate provocation.

"Excellent, because your boyfriend happens to be extremely possessive." He reached into his pocket and tossed something onto the marble surface before me. "I discovered this on our bed, along with a tiny scrap of fabric that might qualify as a nightgown, assuming nightgowns came in microscopic proportions."

I fought to suppress my smile, still determined to maintain my annoyed facade.

"You know what’s amusing? I’ve never encountered these items before. Care to enlighten me?" His dark eyes sparkled with mischief.

"Perhaps they’re intended for your personal use," I replied with feigned indifference.

"I don’t believe cherry is particularly flattering on me. However, I know someone who would look absolutely breathtaking in it."

"Really? Then deliver it to her."

"Brilliant suggestion."

In one fluid motion, he swept me into his arms as if I weighed nothing and carried me toward our bedroom. He continued directly into the bathroom and set me down gently. I noticed the nightgown placed strategically on the marble vanity, and when I turned back, he dangled the panties from one finger with a wicked grin.

"Now, my little one, you’re going to model these for me. I’ll be waiting in bed."

"Oh really? Will you fall unconscious again?" I challenged, raising one eyebrow.

"Such a defiant little thing." His smile was absolutely sinful. "I'm waiting to cure that rebellious attitude of yours."

He departed, closing the door behind him. I stood there staring after him, indignant but secretly thrilled. If he thought I'd make this easy for him, he was gravely mistaken.

Chapter 587: Flannel and Fire

Lila's POV

I ransacked my closet in Daniel's fortified penthouse, searching for the most unseductive sleepwear I could find. My fingers located what I needed at the bottom of my dresser drawer - a shapeless flannel nightgown decorated with tiny flowers. The garment had buttons running down the front and two ridiculous pockets positioned at thigh level, falling modestly past my knees. Exactly what I was looking for. I paired this disaster with the most unflattering undergarments I possessed - oversized cotton panties that prioritized practicality over any hint of seduction. The finishing touch was an absurd pink sleeping cap I hadn't touched in ages, complete with an enormous bow positioned directly on my forehead. I studied my reflection in the mirror with grim satisfaction. No man in his right mind would find this ensemble appealing. Let the notorious Martinez family heir try to charm his way out of trouble now. After witnessing this spectacle, he would probably volunteer for extended surveillance shifts at the precinct for weeks.

When I entered our bedroom, Daniel's dark eyes swept over me from head to toe. I bit down on the inside of my cheek to suppress my laughter, reminding myself that I was genuinely upset with him for falling asleep when I had specifically asked him to stay awake and wait for me.

He rose from the king-sized bed and began circling me like a dangerous predator evaluating his next move. After completing his thorough inspection, he positioned himself directly in front of me, muscular arms folded across his broad chest.

"Impressive attempt, little one, but you would manage to look irresistible even if you were wearing a garbage bag." In one fluid motion, he seized me and deposited me onto the mattress, positioning his

powerful frame above mine. "Now I find myself debating whether to methodically unfasten each of these buttons or simply tear them all away in one motion."

I could not suppress the involuntary sigh that escaped my lips, secretly hoping he would select the more aggressive approach. It was completely futile attempting to maintain my anger toward him. He possessed an uncanny ability to dismantle my emotional defenses every single time.

"That sigh reveals everything I need to know. The second option wins."

He positioned himself strategically over me, his hands caressing the sensitive skin of my neck before gripping the neckline of my ridiculous nightgown. With one forceful tug, he split the fabric open down to my waist, sending buttons scattering across the hardwood floors of his secure apartment. His hands traveled methodically down my body before hooking into the material once more, pulling with controlled strength until the remaining buttons surrendered completely. I swallowed nervously, feeling completely exposed in my deliberately unflattering undergarments. I anticipated him to either laugh at my appearance or perhaps lose all interest, but instead he simply removed the destroyed nightgown and flipped me onto my stomach. His fingers traced the outline of my cotton panties before turning me back over to explore the front seam.

"It reminds me of unwrapping an unexpected gift," he murmured, his voice carrying that husky tone that always made my pulse race. "One you have been anticipating but cannot decide whether to tear open immediately or savor the process." The man was an absolute master of seduction. "I believe I will take my time unwrapping my precious package."

He hooked his thumbs into the sides of my underwear and began pressing kisses against my stomach. With deliberately torturous slowness, he slid the fabric downward while his mouth traced a burning path along my skin. He did not pause between my legs but continued his kissing journey down to my ankles as he removed the garment entirely. After dropping it carelessly to the floor, he quickly shed his own clothes and returned to hover over my naked form.

"I absolutely loved your surprise," he whispered before capturing my mouth with his.

His kiss was filled with passionate intensity, our lips molding together with perfect compatibility. A burning sensation spread rapidly through my entire body as his tongue glided across my lips before delving deeper into my mouth. The heat radiating from his naked body barely touching mine caused me to moan without any conscious control.

"Daniel, please!" I heard myself begging, genuinely surprised at how quickly he had reduced me to pleading with nothing more than a single kiss.

"Patience, little one. We have all the time we need, and today we are going to savor every moment," he replied, his lips barely separating from mine.

Gradually, his body made complete contact with mine, his chest sliding against my sensitive nipples. He pressed his hips firmly against me, pushing me deeper into the expensive mattress. My legs parted instinctively, but instead of entering me immediately, he chose to tease by rubbing his hardness against me, creating perfect pressure in exactly the right location. I found myself teetering dangerously close to the edge of release from this intimate contact alone.

"I could be buried inside you right now, make you come with your legs wrapped around my waist while I take you hard and fast," he whispered, his voice sending electric shivers down my spine. "But that is not my plan. Not right now. I have different ideas in mind."

He reached toward the bedside table and retrieved a small jar of strawberry preserves. "You are obsessed with this stuff," he said, dipping his finger into the sweet contents and tasting it. "It tastes good, but not like this." He scooped more preserve onto his finger and spread it across my nipple with deliberate care.

His mouth descended immediately, sucking with controlled intensity while offering his preserve-covered finger to my lips. I tangled my hands desperately in his dark hair, holding him close as I sucked his finger with matching fervor, loving the sensation of his lips, tongue, and teeth against my increasingly sensitive skin.

"Absolutely delicious," he murmured before applying preserves to my other breast and repeating the entire process with methodical precision.

His hands roamed everywhere while his mouth systematically drove me toward insanity. Each calculated touch brought me closer to the release I desperately craved. He unhurriedly spread the sweet preserves across my skin, savoring every single inch with his tongue, leaving a trail of fire in his wake. When he grew tired of the preserves, he set the jar aside but kept his mouth pressed against my skin.

"You taste incredible any way I have you," he said, returning his attention to my breasts with renewed focus.

His hand found its way between my thighs, and I arched completely off the bed at his first deliberate touch. He slid two fingers inside me, discovering that I was completely ready for him. My hips began moving frantically beneath his skilled hand while he pinched my nipple with his other hand. My moans grew progressively louder as he created absolutely exquisite sensations throughout my body. When his hands moved to hold my thighs apart and his mouth replaced his fingers, I was completely lost. His tongue, lips, and the gentle scrape of teeth quickly pushed me over the precipice.

My hips moved frantically against him as I called out his name repeatedly, wave after wave of intense pleasure washing over my entire body.

He continued his ministrations, his lips tracing the inside of my thighs before returning to my center, deliberately building my arousal once again. When he finally moved over me, he kissed every available inch of skin – my stomach, breasts, neck – before finding my lips again, allowing me to taste the mingled flavors of myself and the sweet preserves on his mouth.

"What you do to me, little one..." he groaned with genuine emotion.

"Make love to me, Daniel, please!" I begged desperately.

Unable to resist any longer, he aligned our bodies perfectly and entered me with ideal pressure and speed, creating delicious friction that drew his name from my lips involuntarily. His movements were simultaneously smooth and vigorous, making me lose all semblance of control as he went deeper with each calculated thrust.

"Come with me, little one!" Our lips met again as I clung to him desperately.

My back arched dramatically off the bed as an intense climax struck me like lightning, resembling fireworks exploding behind my closed eyes. At that exact same moment, I felt him lose complete control, his own powerful release pouring into me. Being held securely in his strong arms was absolutely perfect – always perfect in every possible way.

Chapter 588: Betrayal Revealed

Daniel's POV

Finally, life was returning to normalcy within my carefully guarded domain. Lila was safe, content, and constantly finding creative ways to seduce me—something I thoroughly enjoyed. With Sybilla staying at Thorne territory for the weekend under Xavier's watchful eye, I had the perfect opportunity to spend uninterrupted time with my little one. Throughout our time together, she wore nothing but that stunning red silk nightgown that accentuated her beauty in ways that left me breathless, reminding me why I'd risk everything to protect what was mine.

Despite my personal happiness, concerns about Sybilla lingered in my mind. Her growing closeness with Xavier troubled me—they had become practically inseparable during her work at Thorne headquarters. Though she insisted they maintained professional boundaries, I remained skeptical. What worried me most was knowing Xavier was still healing from his complicated past with intelligence operations. Deep down, I suspected he harbored feelings he wouldn't admit, and if Sybilla developed feelings for him, the delicate balance between our families could shift. Unfortunately, my warnings about mixing family politics with emotions fell on deaf ears.

My father presented another source of frustration. Since severing ties with the Martinez family patriarch, he'd made it his mission to disrupt my peace, bombarding me with calls through intermediaries I deliberately ignored. I had been crystal clear—they were not to interfere with Lila or my jurisdiction. Yet my father had chosen to align himself with Claire's schemes against my woman. Even though he eventually abandoned the plan to separate me from my little one, his motivations were far from paternal. As always, territorial expansion and family honor were his primary concerns. The damage to our relationship was done, and forgiveness seemed impossible.

Today, however, I refused to let anything dampen my spirits. Beyond the wonderful weekend with Lila, I had just completed my final training session at the police academy. The Commissioner had finally agreed to replace me as instructor, freeing me from what had felt like punishment duty. Teaching required a patience I simply didn't possess, especially with those rookie female officers who crossed professional boundaries with their constant attempts at seduction. One had even cornered me in the training facility after hours, making aggressive advances. I'd been forced to restrain her and call security. Despite receiving disciplinary action, her inappropriate behavior continued. For these reasons and more, I was ecstatic to be done.

My determination to maintain a positive mood was challenged immediately upon arriving at my office when Adler followed me in, his expression more serious than usual.

"Daniel, what's with that rare smile? Finally eliminated some troublesome competition?" he asked with his typical dark humor.

"Better than that, Adler. I just finished my final academy obligation."

"Managed to escape that bureaucratic punishment, huh? That's excellent news for all of us."

Adler settled into the leather chair across from my desk, his movements deliberate.

"What's brewing in our territory? You never visit my office without significant intelligence—usually the kind that requires immediate action."

"Come on, Daniel. What do you take me for?" Adler laughed, but tension remained in his voice.

"A strategic advisor who typically summons me to his domain when he wants to discuss operations, only gracing mine with his presence when serious complications arise." I fixed him with the challenging stare that had broken countless suspects, which made him chuckle nervously.

"Accurate assessment, as always. First, I took the liberty of introducing Gideon to our extended network. Bella is showing him the intricate workings of our legitimate operations."

"Appreciated. He and Bella seem to complement each other's skills effectively."

"Indeed, I'd say their partnership might extend beyond professional collaboration. But we should let such alliances develop naturally within our structure."

I hadn't considered it before, but now that Adler mentioned it, there did seem to be a connection forming between Bella and Gideon that went beyond their shared commitment to our cause. They were both seasoned operators I respected, and their combined expertise could strengthen our position considerably.

"They’re experienced adults who understand the complexities of our world. But you didn’t come here to discuss personnel romance, Adler. What’s the real intelligence you’re carrying?" I pressed, knowing unpleasant revelations awaited me.

"Inspector Adrienne called through secure channels. She’s en route to deliver her findings personally." Adler’s hesitation revealed the gravity of the situation.

"Finally some resolution on the investigation into my marriage fraud case?" I asked with keen interest.

"She’s concluded her investigation into the judicial corruption."

"Stop dancing around the details, Adler. Tell me what her probe uncovered."

"Better to wait for her arrival. She conducted this shadow investigation; she can answer all your questions with proper documentation."

"You’re testing my patience with this suspense."

"She indicated she wouldn’t be long."

A knock interrupted our tense conversation, and Gideon entered with Bella. Gideon thanked me again for facilitating his transfer from the corrupted precinct. He was proving to be a valuable addition to my carefully selected team, and from initial reports, he was making a strong impression on both legitimate and shadow operations. After a brief strategic discussion, they departed to handle the surveillance assignments I’d delegated. Shortly thereafter, Inspector Adrienne arrived.

She commanded respect with her imposing presence and uncompromising professionalism—a stark contrast to the compromised officials I’d encountered throughout this investigation. Her reputation for integrity in a system riddled with family influence made her invaluable.

"Inspector, Adler mentioned you’ve concluded your investigation into the judicial manipulation," I said, anticipation evident in my controlled voice.

"Yes, Daniel. I've completed the probe and submitted my classified findings to the federal oversight committee. Sasha, your former wife, paid substantial sums to a corrupt attorney to obtain forged legal documents. This lawyer hired professional document specialists and orchestrated the delivery through compromised court channels. We apprehended the forger during an active operation while he was completing similar falsifications for another powerful client. The attorney also bribed the judge to expedite the nullification of your divorce without proper legal scrutiny. The judge was interrogated and released pending trial, but faces both federal charges and disciplinary proceedings. If convicted, he'll lose his position and pension."

"And what about Sasha's fate?" I asked, leaning forward with predatory interest.

"She orchestrated the entire scheme, but we couldn't trace the source of the substantial offshore funds she utilized. She refuses to reveal her financial backer despite intensive questioning, insisting she acted independently. She'll face prosecution and could receive significant prison time if convicted. She remains free during proceedings, but her legal situation is precarious."

"I suspected as much, but I'm certain she didn't finance this operation alone." I sighed, confident I knew which family had masterminded Sasha's desperate gambit.

"Indeed. The corrupt attorney claimed Sasha approached and compensated him directly with unmarked cash. However, our financial investigation revealed this lawyer maintains extensive business relationships with Reid Sawyer, your father's longtime business associate." She observed my reaction carefully before continuing. "I probably shouldn't share this classified intelligence, but the Sawyer organization is under federal investigation for sophisticated money laundering and international currency violations. I hope this doesn't implicate your family's legitimate enterprises. This attorney has performed numerous illegal services for their network."

"So the divorce fraud was merely the opening move in a larger power play?" I realized the conspiracy was far more extensive than I'd initially calculated.

"Precisely. And there's additional intelligence—we discovered Sasha maintained an intimate relationship with Grant Sawyer—Reid's heir—throughout your marriage. From surveillance evidence we've gathered, their affair continues discreetly through secure locations. While I lack definitive proof, I'm confident Grant recommended this specific attorney to facilitate the judicial fraud." Hearing this revelation, I realized my initial suspicion about my father's direct involvement might have been misdirected.

"She was his mistress during our marriage? You're absolutely certain of this intelligence?"

"Completely verified. I'll transmit the surveillance documentation through encrypted channels. Fortunately, their meeting locations maintain comprehensive security archives, and the facility manager who's worked there for many years positively identifies them both."

This intelligence shocked me profoundly. I had expected the investigation to directly implicate my father's machinations. Sasha had always suggested his involvement, and I believed her because my father typically operated through morally questionable channels when family interests were threatened.

Despite having severed ties with my father over his manipulative methods, learning he wasn't directly orchestrating this particular fraud brought unexpected relief, though he had pressured me to maintain the marriage for political advantages. However, discovering Sasha's ongoing deception and betrayal during our marriage was jarring. The time had come for a final conversation with my treacherous former wife, one that would end her schemes permanently.

Chapter 589: Confronting the Betrayal

Daniel's POV

Detective Adrienne's clandestine meeting at the warehouse today had set my mind spinning with revelations that cut deeper than any blade. Sasha had orchestrated a web of deception so intricate, so calculated, that it could only have been conceived by someone raised within the twisted politics of our world. The matter of the terminated pregnancies still burned in my chest—secrets I'd temporarily shelved while handling Lila's crisis. But the truth about Sasha's betrayal remained like a splinter lodged in my thoughts, impossible to extract.

The entire situation was so monumentally twisted that my mind struggled to process the scope of her duplicity.

"Father, I've made myself crystal clear—I'm not getting involved in your power games. Daniel has every right to sever ties with the Martinez empire!" Sybilla's voice carried across the penthouse as she paced with her phone pressed to her ear. "No, Father, I refuse to be your messenger—not even if you promised to restore everything you stripped from me when I chose independence over your arranged marriage. I don't even want that blood-money car anymore. Those tokens of control mean nothing to me."

My sister moved restlessly through the living space, her frustration palpable as she listened to whatever manipulation was being fed through the line. "No, Father, I won't be your intermediary. If your remorse is genuine, face him yourself. And don't expect me to coach you because I can't guarantee he'll show mercy. No, I have no interest in speaking with Mother either. Fine, I'll contact you later when I'm not busy cleaning up family messes. Goodbye."

She terminated the call with visible relief and collapsed onto the leather sectional beside me. I studied her profile, waiting for her to break the silence.

"What's with the staring contest?" she asked, catching my gaze.

"Did you ensure my little one reached the university safely?"

That was my immediate priority. Everything else could wait.

"Seriously, Daniel? Of course Lila made it to campus without incident. I even stayed for coffee with her and MP in the dormitory lounge."

"You've been unusually agitated lately. What's eating at you?" I'd observed her growing tension over recent days.

"Me? Agitated? Absolutely not. You're projecting your own stress."

"Father's attempting to manipulate you into becoming his peace broker, isn't he?"

"Precisely, and he's not limiting his efforts to me—Gregory, Sloane, anyone with access to your inner circle. I wouldn't put it past him to approach Lila directly through university connections."

"He wouldn't dare cross that line."

"You underestimate his desperation. He won't accept this separation without exhausting every avenue of influence. What's consuming your attention there?"

"Investment portfolios require analysis, but concentration eludes me."

"Lila occupying your thoughts?" Sybilla smiled, and I found myself mirroring her expression despite my darker mood.

"She’s a constant presence in my mind. But something else is demanding resolution."

"Need backup?"

"Not this time, sister." I paused, recognizing that dwelling on these revelations would only intensify my rage. "Actually, you can assist me. Would you collect Lila from campus?"

"Consider it handled. Always happy to help."

"Inform her that urgent family business required my immediate attention, but I’ll provide complete explanations upon my return."

"Ooh, mysterious family intrigue! Care to share what operation you’re launching?"

"Later, Sybilla. Time is critical."

I shut down my encrypted laptop, changed into more formal attire suitable for what was essentially a diplomatic mission, and departed. Soon after, I was boarding a private jet bound for Greenleaf, grateful for the Martinez family’s aviation resources. During the flight, my mind churned through recent discoveries—the layers of betrayal and deception that had been systematically exposed. I’d reviewed Detective Adrienne’s complete intelligence file and studied the photographic evidence. Nothing could have prepared me for such comprehensive treachery from someone who’d shared my name and bed. The terminated pregnancies remained another mystery requiring resolution. Given Sasha’s documented affair, I questioned whether those pregnancies had even carried Martinez blood. Regardless, her actions were unforgivable, and answers were non-negotiable.

After landing in Greenleaf, I secured a black sedan and drove directly to the Mendez estate. Their shock at my unannounced appearance was immediately apparent.

"Daniel?" Mr. Mendez approached cautiously. "What brings you to our doorstep, son?"

"Nothing pleasant, sir. Consider this the calm before a devastating storm. I require an immediate audience with Sasha." My tone conveyed the gravity of my visit.

"Please, make yourself comfortable. May I offer refreshments?" Mr. Mendez attempted hospitality, clearly sensing the dangerous undercurrents of my presence.

"Daniel, darling! What a delightful surprise! Have you finally recognized your error and come to reclaim your rightful wife?" Mrs. Mendez swept into the room with her characteristic air of entitled superiority.

"She ceased being my wife years ago, legally and personally. I recognized my mistake the day I signed those divorce papers." I made no effort to soften my contempt.

"Don’t you dare address me with such disrespect, young man!" she snapped, as though I were still some subordinate requiring discipline.

"Frankly, you’re the last person I intended to engage with today." Her expression transformed to stunned outrage. I redirected my attention to her husband. "Mr. Mendez, where is your daughter?"

"She’s away from the house, Daniel. Her whereabouts are unknown to me—you know she rarely shares her movements with family. I’ll contact her immediately and explain your urgent arrival."

He placed the call, informing his daughter of my unexpected visit and the obvious urgency. "She’s en route. Should arrive shortly. What exactly has transpired?"

"Are you claiming complete ignorance? You’re unaware of the chaos your daughter orchestrated? The forged legal documents invalidating our divorce through judicial corruption? The multiple terminated pregnancies at an underground clinic? The blackmail payments she made to silence potential witnesses? Her extended affair with Grant Barlow?" When I mentioned the abortions, his eyes widened with

genuine shock—clearly this information was new. However, his wife attempted to retreat quietly from the room. I wasn't permitting her escape. "Your wife, however, possesses comprehensive knowledge of every sordid detail."

He seized her arm, fury blazing in his eyes as the scope of the deception became clear.

"Remain seated. We will await Sasha's arrival together. Please, Daniel, take a seat. I learned of the divorce complications only when she returned from Boston, but I swear on my family's honor—I knew nothing about terminated pregnancies, blackmail schemes, or illicit relationships with rival family members."

Studying his face, I detected genuine shock beneath his controlled exterior, though every instinct warned against trusting anyone connected to this poisonous bloodline.

Chapter 590: Bitter Confessions

Daniel's POV

Sasha strolled into her father's private study a short while later, draped in a purple designer dress that clung to every curve. Her heavy makeup couldn't mask the flush of alcohol on her cheeks, and the scent of expensive whiskey and imported cigarettes lingered around her like a toxic cloud.

"Well, well, look who remembers I exist," she purred with false charm as I rose from the leather armchair. "My devoted husband has finally graced me with his presence in the Mendez family mansion."

"I'm not your husband anymore, Sasha. I was once, just like I was the fool who believed your family's promises of loyalty. You played me like a mark—lying, scheming, and betraying me while our families' alliance crumbled around us. I just need to know why. Why did you give me nothing but deception when I gave you everything the Martinez name could offer?" The words tasted bitter, but I had to say them. Though she meant nothing to me now, she had once been central to my family's political strategy.

"What are you rambling about, Daniel? Please don't tell me this is about those divorce papers again." She crossed her legs as she settled into the chair across from me, her gaze defiant and calculating.

"That’s part of it. But I’m here about the terminated pregnancies, Sasha. Four of them. Though I’m only concerned with the three that happened while our families were bound by marriage contracts."

"Four?" Her father, Don Mendez, shot up from his position beside the window, his face draining of color.

"Indeed. For the first one, she was still underage when your wife arranged for a back-alley doctor with connections to our medical network."

"Sasha?" Don Mendez’s voice carried the weight of a man whose family honor had been questioned.

I fixed my attention on her again. "Tell me, Sasha. Were those children mine or Grant Barlow’s?"

"I have no idea what fantasy you’re spinning." Her attempt at innocence was pathetic, especially coming from someone raised in our world.

"I’m talking about your ongoing affair with Grant Barlow that continued throughout our entire marriage alliance. Don’t bother with denials—I have everything. Surveillance photos, recorded conversations, witness statements from our security detail, medical records from the private clinics. Everything."

"That’s enough, Daniel! Get out of my father’s house!" Panic flickered across her features as she realized I wasn’t operating on assumptions.

"No. First, you’re going to explain everything properly. I deserve that much respect. Actually, forget respect—I deserve the truth our families built this alliance on. Tell me, Sasha, what drives the daughter of a respected family to betray a marriage contract? What makes someone eliminate three potential heirs without consulting her husband? What compels a woman to manipulate a man who honored every term of our arrangement?"

"DANIEL, SHUT YOUR MOUTH! GET OUT!" Sasha screamed, but I remained planted. I wasn’t leaving without closure.

"I’M NOT MOVING! SPEAK UP, SASHA!" I matched her volume, unconcerned about disturbing the peace of another family’s territory.

Don Mendez approached his daughter, grasping her elbow and pulling her up from where she'd been throwing her tantrum like a spoiled child instead of a mafia princess.

"ENOUGH, SASHA! I'm demanding answers too! Stop disgracing our family name! You're in your thirties—take responsibility for what you've done to our alliance!" He shook her firmly, and genuine shock crossed her face at her father's intervention.

"You want the truth? Fine, I'll give it to you," she snarled, jerking away from Don Mendez's grip. "I never loved you, Daniel. You were just the most advantageous match—the wealthiest family, the most respectable connections, the best political protection. Do you know who I've always loved? Grant Barlow. But his family's always been reckless with their territory and not nearly as influential as yours. He was my first, Daniel, and it was his child I terminated first. My mother knew everything. She always told me you were the perfect political husband while Grant was the perfect lover. So that's exactly what I did—married for family advantage and kept my real passion on the side."

She laughed coldly before continuing. "The other three terminations happened because I couldn't determine paternity. Since you and Grant have such different builds and coloring, I couldn't risk bearing a child when I wasn't certain if it belonged to my contracted husband or my chosen lover. Besides, I never wanted to be tied down with children—I have zero patience for that domestic nonsense. I only pretended to want heirs to make you think I was fulfilling my role perfectly. And you bought every word of it, didn't you? You actually worshipped me for a while."

"You're worthless, Sasha," I said, disgust washing over me in waves.

"Oh, I'm not finished yet! You wanted complete honesty, so here it is: whenever you worked those long surveillance shifts for the department, I'd bring Grant to our penthouse. He had me in every room of that place. You still own that property, don't you?" Her crude language didn't surprise me anymore—it matched her character perfectly.

"What a disgusting person you've become. You sicken me."

I stared at this woman before me, watching her physical beauty transform into something repulsive as her confessions spilled out.

"DON'T YOU DARE JUDGE ME IN MY OWN FATHER'S HOUSE!" she shrieked. "But you know what's truly amusing? Now I'm not the advantageous wife—I've become the perfect mistress. Grant is marrying your naive little sister Sybilla because she fits the 'ideal wife' criteria for his family's expansion plans. And I'll continue being his secret indulgence. I almost pity her! Grant is going to destroy her spirit, make her suffer constantly, all with your demented mother's enthusiastic approval."

"Don't concern yourself with that, Sasha. Grant won't get within a mile of my sister. He's completely yours now!" I shook my head slowly. "You know, I came here enraged about your betrayal, your lies, your complete disrespect for our families' agreement. But after hearing all this, I'm leaving with nothing but pity for you. I pity you because happiness will always elude you. Everything you've done will demand payment—and the price will be steep. I pity you because you're incapable of genuine feeling or being genuinely loved. You're like poisoned ground where nothing grows, nothing flourishes, nothing beautiful can survive."

I glanced at her mother cowering on the sofa, knowing she'd have much explaining to do to her husband. Sasha was truly her mother's daughter—two women with hollow souls. I nodded respectfully to Don Mendez and moved toward the door, but paused for one final look at Sasha.

"Goodbye, Sasha. Now you'll face the consequences."

As I walked out, her final screams echoed behind me.

"YOU AND YOUR SELF-RIGHTEOUS JUSTICE! GO TO HELL, DANIEL!" Something expensive shattered against the marble floor as she hurled it.

I left feeling like I'd finally closed this toxic Chapter of my life.

The issue now was that I'd forgotten there were no more flights to Port Harbor at this late hour. Not wanting to return to my old penthouse, I headed to my brother's estate instead. I needed to ask him to help me liquidate that property, and I needed to call Lila to explain where I was and why I wouldn't return until tomorrow. I could only hope she would understand that I needed this confrontation—to finally end my connection with Sasha permanently.