

Exposed to the CEO Behind the Mafia Mask

Chapter 1: Chapter 1 Betrayal and Underground Sanctuary

Ivy's POV

I dragged myself through the front door of our cramped apartment above the auto shop, my body aching from another twelve-hour shift doctoring the books for the local crew's money laundering operation. The acrid smell of motor oil and fear clung to my clothes—a constant reminder of how far my life had fallen since I'd dropped out of college to help my father survive in this neighborhood controlled by rival gangs.

My parents sat waiting in our tiny living room, their faces etched with the same grim resignation that had defined our lives since we'd been forced to move to the South Side after Dad lost his legitimate job.

"Ivy, we need to discuss something," my father said, his weathered hands gripping a cream-colored envelope like it might explode.

I dropped my bag beside the door, exhaustion making me careless. "Can this wait? I've been balancing dirty cash flows for ten hours straight."

"No," Mom replied sharply, waving the elegant invitation. "This arrived by courier today."

The gold-embossed script made my stomach lurch before I could read the names. I already knew whose wedding invitation it had to be.

"Tiffany's engagement party," she announced, as if discussing something pleasant instead of the event that would showcase my public humiliation. "To Brodie Sanchez."

"That manipulative snake isn't my cousin anymore," I snarled, fury instantly burning away my fatigue.

Dad's face flushed red. "Ivy Jane! Watch your mouth. We don't need more enemies in this neighborhood."

"She slept with my boyfriend in our bed!" My voice cracked with rage and pain. "Four years together, and he threw it all away for that social-climbing—"

Mom waved her hand dismissively. "Brodie made his choice. Tiffany was just smart enough to secure her future. The Sanchez family has connections that could protect her."

"Protect her?" I laughed bitterly. "She knew exactly what she was doing when she seduced him."

"This foolish grudge ends now," Mom continued, ignoring the devastation in my voice. "Your aunt called. She's heartbroken that you've been avoiding family gatherings."

"Maybe because watching them together makes me physically sick," I muttered under my breath.

Dad stood up, his frame still intimidating despite years of defeat wearing him down. "You're attending this engagement party, Ivy. That's not negotiable."

"I'm what?" I stared at him in disbelief.

"You heard me. Your mother wants peace in the family, and you're going to help maintain it. We can't afford to burn any more bridges in this city."

"By watching the man I planned to marry celebrate getting engaged to my cousin?" Tears stung my eyes. "Do you understand how humiliating that would be?"

Mom's expression hardened into the same cold mask she'd worn since we'd been forced into this neighborhood. "It's been months. You need to accept reality and move forward."

"I have moved on! Moving on doesn't mean I have to celebrate their betrayal!"

"ENOUGH!" Dad's shout made me flinch backward. "This isn't open for discussion. You'll be there with a smile plastered on your face, or you can find somewhere else to live. And good luck surviving on these streets without family protection."

The ultimatum hung between us like a death sentence. I fled to my bedroom, tears streaming down my face as I slammed the door behind me. My mother called after me, but her voice sounded distant and hollow.

I collapsed onto my thin mattress, sobs wracking my body. After everything Brodie and Tiffany had done to destroy me, my own parents were still choosing their side. The betrayal cut deeper than any knife could.

"They're forcing you to attend the engagement party?" Zoe's eyes blazed with outrage as she pushed a cup of black coffee across the greasy table in the diner where we'd met during my lunch break. "That's vicious, even for people trying to survive in this hellhole."

I'd called her the moment I'd woken up, and she'd immediately agreed to meet me. Zoe had been my anchor since childhood, and unlike my family, she'd shown unwavering loyalty after the Brodie-Tiffany catastrophe.

"Dad threatened to throw me out if I refuse." I stared into the bitter coffee. "I can't survive on the streets alone. Not in this territory."

"Those cowardly—" Zoe cut herself off, her expression suddenly shifting. "Wait. When is this engagement celebration?"

"Next Saturday evening," I mumbled miserably.

A dangerous smile spread across her face. "Perfect. The Thorne Underground Auction is the same night."

"The what?"

"Only the most exclusive and secretive event in the city," Zoe explained, her voice dropping to an excited whisper. "My father received an invitation through his... business associations. I managed to secure two additional entry tokens."

"Zoe, I can't possibly—"

"Yes, you can. Tell your parents it's a high-stakes networking opportunity for your financial skills. Which isn't even a lie—half the city's most powerful players will be there."

"They'll never believe it."

"Leave the convincing to me." She squeezed my hand with fierce determination. "There's no way in hell you're watching Tiffany celebrate stealing your man. You're coming to an underground masquerade auction with me instead."

Several days later, Zoe had somehow managed to convince not only my parents but also her boyfriend Finn to support the plan. She'd presented the auction as a critical opportunity to make connections that could help us escape our current circumstances, even getting her father to speak with mine about the "financial prospects" such an event could provide.

"See? Problem solved," she declared triumphantly as we sat in my cramped bedroom. "You'll stay at my place Friday night, and we'll prepare together Saturday."

For the first time in weeks, I felt a weight lift from my shoulders. "Have I mentioned lately that you're the best friend anyone could ask for?"

"Not nearly often enough," she winked. "Now we just need to find you something that will make every person in that room forget their own name."

The night of the auction arrived with terrifying speed. Standing in Zoe's bedroom, I barely recognized the woman staring back at me from the mirror. My long black hair fell in dark waves down my back, and the deep crimson satin dress clung to my curves like liquid sin.

"The finishing touch," Zoe whispered, presenting an elaborate golden mask that would conceal the upper half of my face.

I positioned it carefully over my eyes, tying the silk ribbon behind my head. The reflection showed someone mysterious and confident—nothing like the broken girl who'd been crying herself to sleep for months.

"You look absolutely lethal," Zoe breathed, adjusting her own silver mask. "If Brodie could see you now, he'd realize what a catastrophic mistake he made."

Finn knocked on the bedroom door. "Ladies? Our ride is here."

As we moved toward the exit, sudden panic seized my chest. What was I doing? I wasn't the type of person who attended dangerous underground events or defied family orders. What if we were discovered? What if I encountered someone who recognized me despite the mask?

"Wait," I whispered, grasping Zoe's arm as my heart pounded against my ribs. "I don't think I can go through with this."

"What's wrong?" Zoe turned to face me, concern flickering in her eyes.

"I'm not... I'm not fearless like you. Maybe I should just remain here." The thought of facing a room full of dangerous strangers made my stomach twist into knots. "Please, Zoe, let me stay?"

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