Mafia Mask 101

Chapter 101 Snake in the Garden

Ivy's POV

The anticipation burning in Ruby's emerald eyes made my pulse quicken beneath the silk blouse I wore to today's family meeting. Whatever question she wanted to pose carried weight that could shift the delicate balance of power within our syndicate, implications I wasn't prepared to confront just yet.

"What kind of question are we talking about?"

Ruby's gaze swept across the other wives gathered in the opulent conference room of Thorne Manor, their curious expressions focused on our hushed exchange. The mahogany table still bore traces of the heated discussion we'd just concluded about expanding our money laundering operations through the luxury boutiques. She leaned closer, her diamond earrings catching the amber light from the crystal chandelier.

"The kind that requires privacy and absolute discretion. Are you available for dinner tonight?"

Before I could formulate a response, my phone vibrated against the Italian leather of my purse. Caleb's name flashed across the screen with a message that read: "Hope the family council went smoothly, tesoro. Cannot wait to have you in my arms tonight."

The timing felt like fate testing my resolve. Here I stood, attempting to navigate the treacherous waters of syndicate politics alongside my husband, and now his most trusted female ally wanted some mysterious conversation that could potentially alter our carefully constructed world.

"I would love to discuss whatever this is, but Caleb and I have plans this evening."

"Perfect." Ruby's smile transformed into something almost predatory, the expression of a woman who had learned to survive in our blood-soaked empire. "He absolutely should be present for this conversation. Actually, I believe his participation is essential."

The weight of her words settled over me like expensive perfume, heady and suffocating. In our world, when someone insisted that the Don himself needed to hear something, it usually meant life or death decisions were on the horizon. The other wives had begun to disperse, their designer heels clicking against the marble floors as they made their way toward the manor's grand entrance, but I caught the way their eyes lingered on Ruby and me.

Ruby waited until we were alone before speaking again. "There are things happening within the organization that you need to understand. Patterns in the financial reports that don't align with what we discussed in today's meeting."

My blood chilled. Financial irregularities in our syndicate could mean only one thing – someone was either skimming from the family or preparing for betrayal. The specter of past betrayals still haunted the halls of this manor, and I had learned to recognize the subtle signs of internal corruption.

"What kind of patterns?"

"The kind that suggest certain members of our inner circle might not be as loyal as they appear." She moved closer, her voice dropping to barely above a whisper. "The kind that could destroy everything Caleb has built if we don't address them immediately."

The conference room suddenly felt too large, too exposed. Even within the heavily fortified walls of Thorne Manor, paranoia was a necessary survival tool. I glanced toward the security cameras discretely positioned in the corners, wondering if our conversation was being monitored by friend or foe.

"How long have you known about this?"

"For some time now. I've been conducting my own investigation, cross-referencing the legitimate business accounts with our underground operations. Someone has been very clever about covering their tracks, but money always leaves a trail if you know where to look."

Her expertise in financial matters rivaled my own, which made her concerns all the more legitimate. Ruby had proven her loyalty during past crises, standing beside me when bullets flew and bodies dropped. If she detected something amiss in our operations, it demanded immediate attention.

"Who else knows?"

"Just me. For now." She straightened, smoothing the fabric of her designer dress. "But secrets like this have a way of surfacing at the worst possible moments. We need to control the narrative before it controls us."

The familiar weight of responsibility settled across my shoulders. As Caleb's wife and the unofficial queen of our criminal empire, protecting our family's interests had become second nature. But the thought of another betrayal, another traitor lurking within our trusted circle, made my chest tighten with familiar rage.

"Tonight then. My private dining room this evening."

"I'll bring the documentation. Everything I've discovered, every discrepancy, every red flag." Ruby gathered her purse, a sleek black creation that probably cost more than most people's cars. "And Ivy? Come armed. If my suspicions prove correct, we might not be the only ones interested in having this conversation."

The casual way she mentioned weapons sent a chill down my spine. In our world, dinner discussions that required guns usually ended with someone bleeding out on expensive carpets. I touched the concealed holster beneath my jacket, reassured by the familiar weight of my Glock.

"I'll inform Caleb. He'll want the others on standby."

"Good thinking. If there's a snake in our garden, it's better to have an army ready when we flush it out."

She moved toward the door with the fluid grace of a predator, pausing only to glance back at me. "One more thing, Ivy. Trust no one completely until we get to the bottom of this. Not even family."

As the heavy oak door closed behind her, I remained alone in the conference room where so many critical decisions had been made. The portraits of Caleb's ancestors seemed to watch me from their gilded frames, their painted eyes holding secrets of their own.

Tonight would bring answers, but in our world, answers often came with a price paid in blood.

Chapter 102 Claiming His Heir

Ivy’s POV

The morning light filtered through the bulletproof windows of our penthouse as Caleb once again insisted on handling both Max’s drop-off at the Thorne family compound’s private childcare facility and my escort to the legitimate front operations of our organization. His need to maximize every moment with his claimed family had become a sacred ritual.

"I want to absorb every second I can steal with my people," he murmured against my ear as we gathered Max’s belongings, his voice carrying that possessive edge that made my pulse quicken.

At the Thorne compound’s secure childcare wing, Mrs. Palmer greeted us with her practiced warmth. Her experienced eyes moved between Caleb and Max with the calculating assessment of someone who had served mafia families for decades. That familiar spark of recognition flickered across her weathered features.

"What a striking father and son pair," she observed, studying their matching profiles with the sharp attention of a longtime family retainer. "The boy has inherited your commanding jawline, Don Thorne. The bloodline resemblance runs remarkably deep."

Before I could formulate any correction to address her assumption, Caleb stepped forward with that trademark confidence that commanded entire territories.

"Grazie, Mrs. Palmer. The family resemblance speaks for itself," he responded smoothly, his hand claiming the small of my back in a gesture that broadcast ownership to anyone watching.

My heartbeat thundered against my ribs. Each time someone drew these connections, Caleb embraced the implications more completely. The way he claimed Max without hesitation should have terrified me, yet instead it sent dangerous warmth coursing through my veins.

The drive to Thorne Group headquarters passed in loaded silence. Caleb's knuckles were white against the steering wheel, his jaw locked in that particular configuration that meant his mind was processing something heavy. I could practically witness the calculations spinning behind those piercing blue eyes.

As we approached the imposing glass towers that housed our legitimate money laundering operations, he finally shattered the tense quiet that had settled between us.

"Ivy, there's something I need to address, and I'm hoping you won't shut down this conversation." His voice carried a weight that made my stomach clench with apprehension. "Last night, when your cousin and her husband were discussing family matters, they mentioned that you don't know Max's father's identity. I've been trying to push it from my thoughts, but it's consuming me."

My breath caught in my throat. Of all the dangerous conversations I'd been dreading within our organization, this one topped every list.

"Caleb, we're literally pulling into Thorne headquarters right now. This hardly seems like an appropriate parking garage discussion," I deflected, buying precious time as panic fluttered behind my sternum.

"I understand the timing is problematic, but it's been devouring me since last night. When I first discovered Max's existence, I asked Heidi if she knew his father's identity. She indicated only you possessed that information because it involved deeply personal territory." His knuckles had gone bone-white against the steering wheel. "I'm planning to give Max my name regardless of blood. As far as I'm concerned, he's already my heir. But I need to understand the truth."

The vulnerability threading through his voice nearly shattered my composure. Here was this ruthless man who commanded fear across the entire eastern seaboard, laying his heart completely bare in an underground parking structure.

"The reality is straightforward, even if it makes me appear foolish," I began, my cheeks burning with embarrassment. "I encountered Max's father during one night. We shared those hours together, then he vanished like smoke in the wind. Some time later, I discovered I was carrying his child."

Caleb's jaw muscle ticked dangerously, but he maintained silence, waiting for me to continue my explanation.

"He has no knowledge that Max exists. Even if I wanted to locate him, I wouldn't know where to begin searching. He disappeared completely, as if our night together held absolutely no significance for him."

"Does he know he has an heir walking this earth?"

"No, and honestly, there's no method for me to track him down. If I could find him, I wouldn't keep Max from knowing his biological father. But that ship sailed long ago." The admission tasted bitter on my tongue.

Caleb reached across the console and captured my hand, bringing it to his lips. The gentle kiss he pressed against my knuckles sent electricity racing up my arm.

"You don't need to carry shame about any of that, Ivy. Max has me now, and that's the only thing that matters."

As he parked before Thorne Group's imposing entrance, Caleb moved with predatory grace to open my door. The moment my feet touched the concrete, his powerful arms encircled my waist, pulling me flush against his chest. His kiss was deep and claiming, the kind that left me breathless and craving more of his dangerous attention.

"When are you returning to where you belong? Working directly under my protection?" His voice was rough against my lips.

I couldn't suppress my laughter, even as desire pooled low in my belly. "You're absolutely relentless."

"Grant me until Friday to make my final decision. But you have to promise that whatever I choose, you'll respect my judgment."

"I can't make promises I might not honor, but I can wait until Friday." That devastating smile spread across his face, the one that made my knees weak with want. "Have the most incredible day, my angel. I'll be counting every minute until I see you again."

"You'll be occupying my thoughts too." I rose on my toes for one more stolen kiss before forcing myself toward the building.

The morning flew by until a delivery arrived at my workstation. An exquisite arrangement of pink and white tulips nestled among delicate baby's breath, filling my workspace with their sweet fragrance.

Lila's round face appeared over our shared cubicle partition, her eyes wide with admiration.

"Ivy, those flowers are absolutely breathtaking! Your man is completely devoted to you. Do you think I'll ever find someone who loves me like that?"

"Lila, you're still so young. You have endless time to find your person. Just focus on enjoying your freedom right now," I said warmly.

Ruby's perfectly styled head emerged from the opposite side, her expression mischievous.

"Lila, darling, I could introduce you to some genuinely sophisticated men. I know plenty of successful gentlemen who would appreciate a sweet girl like you."

"Right, like any high-class guy would spare me a second glance," Lila said, her self-doubt evident.

"Are you serious? You're beautiful, Lila. You just need to recognize it yourself," I insisted firmly.

"Why don't you join us after work? We could give you a complete transformation. Gemma has an incredible eye for style," Ruby suggested enthusiastically.

"But wouldn't your friends mind having a stranger crash your plans?" Lila's voice carried hope mixed with uncertainty.

"Trust me, the girls would love to have a new project. They'll treat you like their favorite makeover doll," I assured her with a grin.

"Okay, if you're certain they won't mind, I'd love to come," Lila said, her excitement bubbling over.

"Perfect! Now let's grab some coffee before the afternoon chaos hits," Ruby announced.

Walking toward the break room, I pulled out my phone to text Caleb.

"The tulips make my entire day brighter. I love you more than words can express."

His response arrived within seconds.

"You'll be receiving fresh tulips every week for the rest of our lives together. I love you beyond all measure."

Reading his message sent warmth flooding through my entire body. How had this dangerous man become so essential to my happiness in such a short time? The thought of existence without him felt impossible now. Maybe soulmates really did exist, and maybe I'd finally found mine in the most unlikely place.

Chapter 103 Return to Power

Ivy's POV

By the end of the workday, I needed to call Caleb and break the news that our evening plans were officially canceled. As the Don of the Thorne Syndicate, he expected to be informed of any changes to our carefully coordinated schedules, especially in our current volatile territory situation.

"Tesoro, perfect timing. I was just thinking about you. Everything secure on your end?"

His voice, that familiar blend of authority and tenderness reserved only for me, always made my heart skip a beat even through the encrypted phone line.

"Hey, handsome. Everything's locked down, but I have to cancel tonight."

"My queen is standing me up? This requires a detailed explanation."

I could practically hear him leaning back in his leather chair at syndicate headquarters, that dangerous smile playing at his lips.

"It's girls' night. We're hitting the luxury district and then everyone's staying at my safe house for the evening."

"So I'm condemned to spend the night missing you instead of having you in my arms? I'm starting to think your ladies are conspiring against me," Caleb complained with exaggerated drama, though I detected the genuine possessiveness underneath.

"Use this as an opportunity to strategize with your capos. They're probably dealing with the same domestic situation. We'll make up for lost time tomorrow," I laughed.

"Fine, but only because I'm smart enough not to cross your female enforcement unit."

"Enforcement unit?"

"Absolutely. You syndicate wives operate like a precision strike team with flawless coordination and lethal efficiency. I'm not foolish enough to challenge that kind of organization," he said, making me burst into laughter.

"Just promise me you won't let Parker and his crew attempt any territorial moves during your poker night."

"Relax, tesoro, it's strictly a family operation tonight."

After we disconnected, his usual afternoon security delivery arrived right on schedule. He'd started including Lila in these protective gestures ever since she joined our inner circle and became part of our tightly-knit family network.

At the exclusive shopping complex, we introduced Lila to Nora, but surprisingly, Gemma already knew her well from their previous encounters in the luxury retail world.

"Wait, how do you two know each other?" Zoe asked, clearly intrigued by this unexpected connection.

"Lila used to work at that high-end cosmetics boutique, and Dominic was constantly patrolling that area, supposedly conducting security sweeps while actually watching Gemma at the designer store next door," Lila explained with a knowing grin.

"Then she convinced him to purchase this incredibly expensive beauty collection with everything imaginable - treatments, fragrances, the premium line. He presented it to me recently like it contained the crown jewels. It must have cost him substantial territory earnings," Gemma said, shaking her head in amused disbelief.

"You should have seen his expression when the sales associate calculated the final total," Lila added with a mischievous smile. "But now I've secured this amazing position with excellent compensation, and I absolutely love the work environment."

"Dominic has absolutely no shame," Ruby declared, laughing. "But listen carefully, ladies, Lila is our new project now that Ivy has forgiven our dangerous Don. We're going to transform this beauty completely. I've already committed to introducing her to someone from our syndicate circle - you know, devastatingly attractive and dangerously sophisticated like our men."

"And you already have someone specific in mind, don't you?" Nora asked knowingly.

"Definitely," Ruby's eyes practically sparkled with strategic mischief.

"So Lila, do we have complete creative authority over your transformation?" Gemma asked with barely contained excitement.

"Just don't interfere with my orthodontic treatment," Lila replied. "Everything else is completely negotiable."

"Lila, sweetie, can’t your dental specialist switch you to removable appliances? Your teeth already look perfectly aligned," Zoe said, gently lifting Lila’s chin to examine her smile with professional assessment.

"My next evaluation appointment is scheduled for soon," Lila explained.

"Not anymore. We’re rescheduling that appointment for this week," Zoe announced with the authority of someone accustomed to making things happen in our world.

When Zoe mentioned rescheduling Lila’s appointment, something nagged at the back of my mind, like I was forgetting something important about our syndicate operations. But that thought vanished completely when Gemma dragged us into the designer boutique.

Our girls’ night exceeded all expectations and proved absolutely magnificent. "Operation Lila" had evolved into a full-scale mission guaranteed to succeed spectacularly. We conquered the couture salon, luxury lingerie boutique, Italian shoe department, and premium cosmetics counters. We scheduled appointments for professional nail treatments, hair styling, facial treatments, and comprehensive beauty services. Zoe would handle the dental appointment and personally accompany Lila to insist on switching to removable orthodontics.

We left the shopping complex practically buried under designer shopping bags, but we were transforming this girl into an absolute knockout, as Nora proudly declared. Back at my secure apartment, we turned Lila into our personal makeover subject, experimenting with different looks. It was the perfect evening of female bonding filled with laughter and sisterhood.

The following day, Caleb appeared at my office to escort me to lunch, flanked by his usual security detail.

"I couldn’t handle being separated from you any longer, my angel," he said, wrapping me in his arms with that possessive embrace that always made me feel simultaneously protected and claimed.

"I missed you desperately too."

"How was your evening with the ladies?"

"Absolutely fantastic. What about your strategy session?"

"The typical routine. The capos, premium whiskey, and high-stakes poker at Xavier's secure location."

"I found it fascinating that you guys included my brother and his associates in your game night, Caleb," Ruby said, appearing behind him with a knowing smirk.

"What exactly do you mean?" I asked, genuinely surprised by this revelation.

"We invited Parker and his entire crew to join our poker game. All to keep that particular group occupied and away from our women! The guys are actually decent enough, the only problem is they want what belongs to us," Caleb replied with a dangerous grin, making us laugh at their obvious territorial jealousy.

"You're telling me you invited them specifically to keep them away from us?" I asked in complete disbelief.

"You know the expression, my angel, better to control the threat than react to it!" Caleb's grin widened considerably.

A few days later arrived, and we ladies headed to the exclusive beauty sanctuary during our lunch break, which triggered immediate protests from our men who wanted to take us out for romantic meals. But we explained that we wanted to look even more stunning for them, which immediately pacified their complaints.

The entire week had been absolutely perfect. Everything was progressing smoothly with syndicate operations, Caleb spent every night at my secure apartment except for girls' night, which was incredible. Max was becoming increasingly fascinated with Caleb, practically attaching himself to him whenever possible, sensing the familial connection he couldn't yet understand.

But by the end of the week, I had finally reached my decision. I had already discussed everything with the ladies earlier in the week, and they completely supported me. Then I had serious conversations with our financial advisors and security coordinators.

When Caleb arrived to collect me, I suggested dinner, and he was immediately enthusiastic about the idea. We chose an incredibly romantic restaurant with dim lighting, flickering candles on every table, and soft instrumental music creating the perfect intimate atmosphere for serious syndicate business discussions.

We finished our main course, and Caleb ordered our signature chocolate dessert. Before the waiter could bring the cake, I decided to speak.

"I've reached a decision."

"Really? About what specifically?" He asked with genuine interest, though I could see the dangerous intensity building behind his ice-blue eyes.

"I promised I would give you my answer today."

His eyes immediately lit up with recognition, and I could see a hint of nervousness creeping into his usually unshakeable composure. He looked directly into my eyes and asked:

"Are you returning to syndicate operations?"

"Yes, I'm going to work alongside you again," I said with a smile.

His eyes overflowed with pure satisfaction and possessive joy. He leaned over and gave me a passionate kiss that tasted like victory and promises.

"You've made me the most powerful man alive. When do you start?"

"Soon." I watched his smile grow even more predatory. "Now, ask the waiter to package that dessert for transport, because we're going to enjoy it at your fortress," I said in my most seductive tone.

He immediately signaled the waiter, followed my instructions, and requested the check. We left the restaurant with him pulling me close by the waist, walking with obvious urgency and territorial satisfaction.

"I want to celebrate my queen's return as soon as possible," Caleb whispered in my ear as he secured my seatbelt, his voice promising exactly the kind of celebration I was craving.

Chapter 104 Rooftop Sanctuary

Ivy's POV

The drive to Caleb's fortified penthouse passed in charged silence. His hand never left my thigh, fingers tracing patterns that sent electricity through my veins while his other hand gripped the steering wheel with white knuckles. Every few blocks, he would lift my hand to his lips, pressing dangerous kisses to my knuckles while his ice-blue eyes scanned the mirrors for potential threats.

I studied his profile in the dim glow of passing neon signs from the underground district. The fire that had blazed in those deadly eyes during our meeting with the rival families still simmered beneath his controlled facade. His jaw was set with the tension of a man who ruled through fear, and I could feel the coiled violence radiating from his powerful frame.

In the secured underground garage beneath his tower, Caleb moved with the calculated precision of a predator. Every gesture felt measured as he disabled the car's security system and helped me from the vehicle. His arm encircled my waist possessively, pulling me against the solid warmth of his body as we walked toward the private elevator that only responded to his biometric scan.

The silence stretched between us, heavy with unspoken promises and the constant awareness that we lived in a world where enemies could strike without warning. I could hear my pulse thundering as we ascended past floors filled with his soldiers and enforcers.

Inside his private domain, Caleb disappeared into the kitchen without explanation. I heard the soft sounds of preparation and watched him return carrying our interrupted dessert, silver forks, and a bottle of imported chocolate syrup that made heat pool low in my belly.

He took my hand with that same maddening control and led me toward a steel door I had never dared to explore.

The rooftop sanctuary stole my breath. The city sprawled below us in a glittering web of territory he controlled through blood and intimidation. I had never seen his empire from this vantage point. A pristine pool reflected the stars, while elegant furniture created intimate spaces where he could conduct the most sensitive family business. He guided me toward a massive mahogany table, activating only subtle lighting that cast everything in golden shadows.

"Time for dessert, my queen," he murmured against my ear, his breath making me shiver with anticipation. "I want mine with chocolate and submission."

His teeth grazed my earlobe and I couldn’t suppress the soft sound of surrender that escaped my throat.

Caleb gathered my hair in his powerful hands, sweeping it over one shoulder with reverent possession. I felt the whisper of my zipper descending, each tooth releasing with deliberate slowness. The emerald silk pooled at my feet like spilled blood, and his hands steadied me as I stepped free from the expensive fabric.

When he moved to face me, his expression was pure masculine conquest.

"Ivy, you are the most dangerous temptation I have ever claimed."

The lingerie had been selected for this moment of power and seduction. Black silk and Italian lace adorned with ribbons the exact shade of my discarded dress. The corset molded around my curves like armor, delicate bows trailing along the shoulder straps. Matching garters held up silk stockings that ended in intricate lace at my thighs.

Caleb approached like a don surveying his most precious acquisition. His fingers found the garter clips with expert precision, releasing them one by one with the same care he used when cleaning his weapons. Then came the corset hooks, each one freed with methodical attention. He barely touched me, but every calculated brush of his knuckles against my skin sent dangerous currents through my bloodstream.

The corset fell away and he traced one finger from my navel to my throat, following the path where silk had surrendered to bare flesh. His smile held the satisfaction of a man who owned everything he desired as he cupped my breasts, thumbs circling until I arched into his commanding touch.

Fire consumed me from within. These calculated torments were driving me toward madness, and I could feel my arousal dampening my thighs with evidence of my complete surrender.

Caleb stepped back, fingertips finding the ribbons at my hips. His grin turned predatory as he paused with deliberate cruelty.

"Tonight, I think I will be gentle with my most precious possession." The ribbons came undone with a whispered pull, and my panties slipped to the floor like a defeated enemy.

Part of me missed his usual ruthless urgency, the primal dominance that made him destroy barriers between us without mercy. But this worship held its own intoxicating power.

"Perfect," he breathed, circling me with the slow appreciation of a conqueror.

One finger traced my spine from base to nape, light as a blade but scorching in its possession. When he faced me again, his gaze consumed every inch of surrendered territory.

"I want you wearing nothing but those stockings and those lethal heels, tesoro."

The black stilettos had been chosen for their weapon-like elegance, their razor-thin heels adding dangerous beauty to my exposed legs.

"Sit on the table," he commanded, his voice dropping to that tone that brooked no resistance from soldier or enemy. "Use the bench for leverage."

I obeyed without hesitation, hyperaware of his burning stare as I positioned myself on the smooth wood. He settled himself on the bench between my parted thighs, pulling the dessert plate within reach with calculated patience.

The first taste of decadent cake melted on my tongue, but Caleb was already leaning in to claim it from my lips. His kiss was thorough, consuming, as if he wanted to own every sensation I experienced.

I heard the plate scrape across wood as he pushed it aside with decisive force.

"This can wait. I have something infinitely sweeter to devour."

His shirt came off with maddening control, each button a separate act of seduction. The fabric hit the floor, followed by his pants and everything else until he stood before me in magnificent, dangerous nakedness.

He was fully aroused, the evidence of his desire gleaming at the tip. My mouth watered with the need to worship him, but he caught my reaching hands and pressed me back against the unforgiving surface.

His mouth mapped a path of conquest across my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake. Every kiss and calculated bite drew sounds of complete submission from my throat.

The chocolate syrup was warm against my flesh as he painted abstract patterns of possession across my body. Throat, breasts, the vulnerable hollow of my stomach. Then his mouth followed with devoted attention, claiming every drop as tribute.

Caleb climbed onto the table with predatory grace, settling between my spread legs like a king claiming his throne. More syrup drizzled across my belly and lower, coating my most intimate places with liquid temptation.

"You are the most exquisite addiction in existence," he murmured against my heated skin. "And covered in chocolate, you are absolutely irresistible, my queen."

His mouth returned to its worship with renewed hunger, tongue and lips working devastating magic on my trembling flesh. His hands found my breasts, rolling and pinching until I writhed helplessly beneath his masterful touch.

When he reached the apex of my thighs, I felt his sharp intake of breath like a victory. Then his mouth was on me with consuming hunger, devouring both chocolate and the evidence of my complete surrender.

His tongue worked miracles, alternating between broad sweeps and targeted precision that had me crying out his name like a prayer. Two fingers joined the exquisite assault, sliding deep and curling to find that perfect spot with expert knowledge.

My climax crashed over me like enemy fire, my body convulsing around his fingers as pleasure obliterated my vision completely.

"Perfection," he groaned, withdrawing his fingers to taste my surrender. "So wet, so ready for your don."

He surged upward, burying himself completely in one powerful thrust that had us both gasping with the intensity. His rhythm was demanding, relentless, as he leaned down to capture my breast with his mouth like a man claiming territory.

The dual sensations sent me spiraling again, my inner muscles clenching around him as I screamed his name into the dangerous night.

"If you keep squeezing me like that, I will not last," he warned through gritted teeth. "You feel incredible around me, so tight and perfect."

He withdrew suddenly, flipping me onto my hands and knees with commanding strength. His tongue traced intimate patterns before he filled me again, one hand gripping my hip while the other explored forbidden territory with calculated precision.

The initial burn gave way to overwhelming sensation as he possessed me completely, moving within me in ways that shattered every defense. I pushed back against him, wordlessly begging for more domination.

When the next climax took me, it was with an intensity that left me shaking like a conquered enemy. Caleb followed with a harsh cry, spilling himself deep inside me with powerful pulses of complete possession.

We collapsed together on the table, hearts racing and bodies slick with the sweat of battle. He pulled me against his chest, lips finding mine in a kiss full of dangerous tenderness.

"Do you understand how completely you belong to me?" he whispered against my hair. "Sometimes the depth of my obsession frightens even me."

"Then you know exactly how completely I have surrendered to you," I replied, meaning every word of my submission.

Later, as I sat curled in his lap sharing bites of forgotten cake, Caleb grinned with wicked satisfaction.

"Not as sweet as you, but chocolate and Ivy together might become my new addiction."

Monday morning arrived wrapped in dangerous contentment. Caleb had stayed the night, and I watched him adjust his midnight blue tie while applying my makeup. The charcoal suit fit his powerful frame perfectly, transforming him into every woman’s fantasy of lethal corporate power.

I stared so openly that he noticed, approaching with that knowing smile that had conquered empires.

"Something wrong, tesoro? You look like you want to strip me naked immediately."

"Because I do. I want to tear that suit off you right here."

"You do not like it?" he asked with mock wounded pride.

"I love it too much. You were already devastating, but in this you are completely unfair to every woman alive."

His laugh was rich and warm as he pulled me close with possessive strength.

"I could let you have your way with me, but I am genuinely excited about family business today."

"Oh really? Why is that?"

"My new personal assistant starts today, and she happens to be absolutely stunning."

"Planning to seduce your assistant during business hours, Don Thorne?"

"Absolutely. Right on my desk, then in my chair while she rides me like the queen she is."

"Sounds like you have a very interesting day of operations planned."

"You have no idea, my dangerous angel," he said, sealing the promise with a kiss that left me breathless and ready to rule his empire beside him.

Chapter 105 Return of the Queen

Caleb's POV

My grip on the steering wheel tightened as we approached the Thorne Group headquarters, the legitimate front for my family's operations. The tension in my shoulders hadn't eased since we left the safe house, and the entire drive passed in loaded silence. Ivy kept glancing at me from the passenger seat, but I couldn't find words to explain the knot of anxiety twisting in my chest.

When I opened her door in the underground garage, I pulled her against me and crushed my lips to hers with desperate hunger.

"Christ, I'm so relieved you're finally coming back where you belong," I growled against her mouth.

She smiled and kissed me back, her fingers threading through my hair, and for a moment the weight of running the most powerful crime family on the East Coast lifted from my shoulders.

I had instructed Xavier to gather the core lieutenants in the main conference room so I could formally announce Ivy's return to the organization. The office renovation that Gemma had orchestrated over the weekend exceeded even my expectations. She had an incredible eye for detail, and I was eager to see Ivy's reaction to the transformation of her workspace.

As the private elevator climbed toward the executive floor, I noticed Ivy's hands were ice cold and trembling slightly. When the doors slid open, I squeezed her fingers reassuringly.

The small group of trusted associates erupted into spontaneous applause when they spotted Ivy. Their faces lit up with genuine relief at seeing her back where she belonged in the family hierarchy. All except one person. Monica stood frozen in place, her face contorted with barely concealed rage. While everyone else rushed forward to embrace my woman, Monica remained rooted to the spot, radiating hatred that made my trigger finger itch.

Once the initial excitement died down, I knew they deserved some explanation, even if I couldn't reveal the complete truth about the betrayal network.

"Everyone, thank you for welcoming Ivy back to the family," I began, my arm sliding possessively around her waist. "I know you all heard about the security breach involving the offshore accounts that resulted in her temporary exile. However, our tech specialists conducted a thorough investigation and determined that Ivy was not responsible for the leak. They discovered her systems were compromised by an external source, and the actual perpetrator has been identified and dealt with accordingly. What matters is that Ivy has returned to us. She's invaluable to this organization." I lifted our joined hands. "And since you've all noticed how close we've become, I want you to know that this incredible woman has forgiven my unforgivable treatment of her, and we're now together. We'll be making it official very soon."

The room erupted in cheers and congratulations. Jude and Xavier let out appreciative whistles while Gemma shouted, "Here's to the boss and his queen!" Ivy's cheeks flushed deep red as she smiled bashfully. As the associates gradually dispersed after offering their loyalty and well-wishes, only Xavier, Jude, Gemma, and Monica remained.

"Aren't you going to welcome me back, Monica?" Ivy asked with a sweet smile that didn't reach her eyes. I recognized that look - she was deliberately baiting the traitor.

"Of course, Ivy. It's wonderful to have you back, especially after you've chosen to overlook the humiliation you endured here," Monica replied with a saccharine smile, moving in for a hug. As she

embraced Ivy, I saw her lips move close to Ivy's ear. "But you've met the new girl, haven't you? Don't trust her. She's a fraud who's been chasing after Caleb."

"Not at all, Monica. Gemma is family now, and I have complete faith in her," Ivy responded, emphasizing the word before turning to hug Gemma warmly. Monica's composure cracked, fury flickering across her features.

"Come here, tesoro. Let me show you to your rightful place," I said, extending my hand and guiding her toward her office.

I opened the door and watched her face transform with wonder. Gemma had replaced the heavy dark furniture with elegant pieces that made the entire space feel brighter and more welcoming. The desk, which had previously faced the door with its back to the window, was now positioned at an angle so Ivy could enjoy the city view while managing our financial operations. A cream-colored area rug anchored the space, complemented by chairs with sleek black leather seats. Behind the desk, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves covered one wall while matching filing cabinets for sensitive documents lined the other. On the opposite side, two contemporary armchairs in soft neutral tones flanked a small table holding a stunning arrangement of multicolored tulips, with floating shelves creating visual interest behind them. The office struck the perfect balance between professional and feminine, befitting the woman who would help me launder millions.

"Do you love it?" I whispered against her ear.

"I absolutely love it," she breathed.

Ivy walked to the tulip arrangement and picked up the accompanying card, reading aloud:

"White tulips represent forgiveness. Purple ones symbolize peace and tranquility. Yellow ones represent prosperity and success. Orange ones symbolize energy and enthusiasm. Blue ones represent trust and loyalty. Ginger ones symbolize our perfect love. And the black ones are the rarest and most precious, just like you. You have my solemn oath that I won't make another mistake, that I'll love you for eternity, and that I'll be grateful every single day for your forgiveness. Loving you is the greatest privilege of my life."

Tears streamed down Ivy's cheeks as she finished reading. She came to me and kissed me with such passion that I felt my knees weaken. Behind us, my lieutenants applauded and cheered, and I smiled against her lips while brushing away her tears.

"Come with me, there's something else I want to show you," I said, taking her hand and leading her into my office, closing the door behind us.

"Caleb... what have you done?" she asked, her face glowing with delight.

"You said you didn't want any reminders of what happened, and Gemma mentioned you wanted to burn that old couch where I... where I hurt you. So I asked her to redesign both our offices, though I suspect she might have already torched that couch herself," I said with a sideways glance.

"It's absolutely stunning! It doesn't even look like the same room!" Ivy launched herself into my arms and kissed me hungrily.

Gemma had outdone herself. My desk now occupied the opposite wall where the old couch had been, positioned near a large window that flooded the space with natural light. Where my previous desk had stood, she'd placed a new couch - an oversized, plush piece in charcoal gray fabric. Art adorned the walls, shelves were strategically placed throughout the room, and a floor-to-ceiling alcove filled with lush green plants that she claimed would help reduce my stress levels from running a criminal empire. Various decorative objects added personality while maintaining the professional atmosphere.

I kissed Ivy deeply, her legs wrapped around my waist, and whispered in her ear:

"I'm going to take you on my new desk and watch you ride me in my chair, but first I'm going to make love to you on that couch."

I carried her across the room and settled onto the couch with her straddling my lap, kissing her with growing intensity. The phone on my desk began ringing, but I ignored it completely - whatever crisis it was could wait. Just as I started sliding my hands up Ivy's thighs and between her legs, my cell phone buzzed with Xavier's distinctive ringtone. We both burst into laughter and said simultaneously:

"Cockblocker consigliere!"

But Xavier understood how significant Ivy's return was to both the organization and me personally, and wouldn't interrupt our moment without urgent cause. I reluctantly reached for my phone from my jacket pocket and answered with amused irritation.

"Damn it, Xavier, not again!"

Chapter 106 The Setup Complete

Caleb's POV

The encrypted phone buzzed just as Ivy settled onto my lap in the executive office, her warmth distracting me from the money laundering reports scattered across my mahogany desk.

"Don Thorne, we need backup at the warehouse right now," my lieutenant's voice crackled through the secure line, urgency cutting through the static.

Damn it. I terminated the call with a sharp exhale, pressed a quick kiss to Ivy's lips in apology, and helped her slide off my lap. The moment we stepped out of my office into the Thorne Group's main floor, pandemonium greeted us like a slap across the face.

"What the hell is happening here," I roared, fury exploding through my chest like molten steel.

The scene before me resembled something from a blood feud in Little Italy. Monica had Gemma pinned against the marble floor, straddling her like some deranged enforcer collecting a debt. Her manicured claws raked through Gemma's hair while her other hand delivered vicious slaps. Gemma writhed beneath the assault, arms raised defensively as she screamed for mercy. Two of my soldiers flanked them, pulling uselessly at Monica's shoulders, but she had locked her legs around Gemma's torso like a vise.

"You scheming witch. You worthless piece of garbage. I will destroy you completely. I will tear your eyes from your skull, you demon spawn," Monica shrieked like a woman possessed by vendetta itself.

"Congratulations, you psychotic harpy, now crawl back to whatever sewer spawned you after this pathetic display," Gemma shot back from beneath the brutal attack.

"Xavier, Jude, get Monica off Gemma immediately," I barked at my stunned subordinates.

Finally snapping into action, they joined the soldiers and me in restraining Monica while Xavier carefully unwound Gemma's hair from her death grip. Only then could we pry Monica away as Xavier and Ivy helped Gemma to her feet, guiding her to a reception chair.

"You waltz in here acting like you own this territory. Learn your place. I have earned my position here, I am the valued operative," Monica snarled, still struggling against our iron hold.

"Want respect? Visit a church where they pray to delusional saints," Gemma fired back, Ivy and Xavier steadying her trembling frame.

Ivy had already summoned security, who formed a human barrier between the two combatants while we maintained our restraint on Monica.

"You jealous snake. You want my position, but you will never succeed in this family," Monica continued her tirade.

"Honey, this roach thinks she rules the underworld. Looking at your face, we can confirm the devil works overtime, cannot we, his faithful servant," Gemma responded with venom.

"Don Thorne, Don Thorne, this witch is destroying me, sir. She wants you to eliminate me from the family. She told me she will make you cast me out," Monica began sobbing dramatically.

"Even pathological liars show more restraint. Reality check, you delusional scarecrow, your paranoid fantasies would not convince a desperate fool," Gemma blazed with righteous anger.

"Silence. Both of you stop talking immediately. This is not some street corner turf war," I completely lost my composure and bellowed. Finally, blessed quiet descended. "Everyone stay quiet. Did anyone witness how this bloodbath started?"

"I observed everything, Don Thorne," Jude stepped forward. "Gemma was informing Monica that tomorrow the reception area would be restructured for your requested security modifications. Monica became aggressive because she believes she should be implementing changes and making decisions due to her longer service to the family."

"You despise me, Jude. That is complete fabrication. You are manufacturing lies. This will not end here, Jude," Monica seeethed.

"Listen, Monica, I will finance your one-way ticket to nowhere, understood?" Jude replied with exasperation.

"I stated that is sufficient, Monica," I spoke with mounting irritation.

"I witnessed it also, Don Thorne," Katelyn raised her hand tentatively. "Jude described it accurately, and Monica has been targeting Gemma from her first day. I have observed Monica being hostile to Gemma repeatedly and physically grabbing her arm aggressively."

I examined Gemma carefully. She was shaking, hair disheveled, clothing wrinkled, with angry scratches marking her arm, red handprints blazing across her cheek, and a thin cut splitting her lower lip. I turned to Monica, who appeared merely tousled but bore no visible injuries.

"Gemma, did you strike Monica?" I asked with forced calm.

"No, Don Thorne, I only attempted to protect myself by blocking her attacks, but my defense proved inadequate," Gemma answered, gesturing toward her battered face.

"Do you want me to contact our lawyers? Will you press charges through our legal channels?" I questioned Gemma directly.

"Don Thorne, this is ridiculous..." Monica began protesting.

"Silence, Monica," I snapped, cutting her off instantly. "No, Don Thorne," Gemma declined.

"Monica, you are terminated from this family for cause, specifically for physically assaulting a fellow operative. Since we have multiple witnesses, I trust you will not challenge this decision. Collect your belongings. Security will escort you to Human Resources for immediate termination processing," I declared without hesitation.

"Don Thorne, you cannot treat me this way after years of loyal service," Monica pleaded through streaming tears.

"Absolutely I can, this is my organization. I refuse to tolerate such behavior within my ranks, and I maintain complete authority over hiring and firing. I want you removed from my territory permanently," I stated with finality.

Monica clutched her purse while I contacted HR with termination instructions. I requested Jude and Katelyn accompany her as official witnesses, and directed security to escort Monica from the building completely, establishing that her access to all Thorne properties was permanently revoked.

Sasha brought ice for Gemma’s swollen face while Ivy retrieved the first aid kit to treat her lip wound.

After they disappeared into the elevator, I leaned against the reception desk, folded my arms across my chest, and studied Gemma, who sat beside Ivy as she rubbed her back soothingly.

"Now, Gemma, explain exactly what transpired here," I requested, knowing she had deliberately provoked Monica.

"You needed justification to eliminate her, correct? I provided that justification," Gemma stated matter-of-factly. "No chance I was allowing that serpent near Ivy. The moment you arrived, she grabbed her phone and called Rossi to report our every move."

Laughter bubbled up from my chest, and Gemma joined in.

Everyone stared at us with complete bewilderment.

"Gemma has been deliberately provoking Monica since starting here. Our plan was exactly to create grounds for termination. We expected Monica to lose control and reveal too much, but I never anticipated physical violence. How do I explain this to Dominic? He will want my head on a platter," I clarified our scheme while still chuckling.

"I cannot believe you orchestrated this. Pure manipulation worthy of the old country," Xavier began laughing. "I wondered why Gemma never retaliated physically."

"The temptation was overwhelming, Xavier, but retaliation would have given her ammunition against the family," Gemma explained.

"Gemma, take the rest of the day off," I offered.

"Absolutely not. I have substantial work, and Ivy returned today. I am thrilled to collaborate with my partner," Gemma responded enthusiastically.

"You realize I must inform Dominic before you tell Mandy, and he will arrive here shortly, correct?" I asked, knowing my capo's inevitable fury.

"I will handle Dominic, Don Thorne. I should visit the restroom to repair myself," Gemma decided.

"Take whatever time necessary, Gemma. Thank you tremendously. Today I am treating you ladies to lunch at the finest establishment in Little Italy," I told her and Ivy with genuine gratitude. "Come on, Xavier, let us brief Jude on what happened." Jude had returned from HR and was watching me with obvious curiosity.

Chapter 107 Trapped in Venom

Ivy's POV

My return to Thorne Syndicate headquarters felt like stepping into a war zone. Between Gemma's explosive confrontation with Monica, Dominic's rage over Gemma being attacked, and the venomous whispers circulating that I was sleeping my way to power within the family, the day had been utterly draining.

At least Monica’s elimination brought some relief. Working alongside someone who clearly wanted to destroy me would have been impossible. The executive floor felt lighter without her toxic presence, and Caleb and I were so buried in laundering operations that our usual flirtation took a backseat to deadlines and damage control from the recent family conflicts.

That afternoon brought a different kind of tension. Gemma and I were returning from a meeting at one of our front businesses, chatting about weekend plans as we stepped into the private elevator that serviced the family floors. The familiar ding announced another passenger, and my stomach dropped when Rossi slid through the closing doors.

The confined space suddenly felt suffocating. As the elevator began its ascent, Rossi shifted closer, invading my personal space with deliberate intent. His proximity made my skin crawl.

"Feeling pretty confident now that you have Caleb wrapped around your finger, aren’t you?" His voice dripped with contempt.

I pressed my back against the elevator wall, fighting to keep my voice steady. "That’s not your concern, sir."

"Oh, but it absolutely is my concern, you manipulative little parasite." The hatred in his eyes was palpable. "Caleb belongs to my daughter, and I won’t let some street trash ruin what’s meant to be."

Gemma stepped forward, her protective instincts kicking in. "Sir, you need to step back. This is completely inappropriate behavior."

Rossi’s laugh was cruel and sharp. "Look, the other opportunist has something to say too. Let me make something crystal clear to both of you. Your days in this family are numbered. Start planning your exit because you’ll be back in whatever gutter you crawled out of soon enough."

Heat flooded my cheeks as anger overrode my fear. "You have no right to speak to us this way."

"Rights?" Rossi’s mock amusement was sickening. "He’ll use you until he’s bored, then toss you aside like yesterday’s garbage. Your little friend here will go down with you when that happens. And trust me,

it won’t take long." He leaned closer, his voice dropping to a poisonous whisper. "Did you know he was quite intimate with my daughter? Oh yes, they have history. Real, passionate history."

My throat constricted. I’d heard whispers about Caleb’s past with Yara, but hearing it delivered like a weapon made bile rise in my throat.

Gemma’s voice shook with fury. "Enough. I’m calling for backup right now. This harassment ends here." She fumbled for her phone with trembling fingers.

The elevator chimed as we reached our floor. Rossi straightened his tie with smug satisfaction. "Consider this friendly advice, Ivy. Walking away with dignity beats getting carried out in pieces." The doors began to slide open, but he couldn’t resist one final blow. "Yara mentioned how wonderfully passionate Caleb can be in bed. Such vivid details."

The doors sealed shut, trapping us with his lingering malice. My knees buckled as the full impact of his words hit me. Gemma caught me as tears spilled down my cheeks, her arms wrapping around me protectively.

When the elevator opened again, I was struggling to compose myself. We stepped onto the executive floor to find Caleb, Xavier, and Dominic clustered in the reception area, their conversation halting when they saw my tear-stained face.

"Tesoro, what happened?" Caleb was on his feet instantly, concern etched across his features.

I couldn’t form words. The humiliation and hurt had stolen my voice.

Gemma’s anger blazed as she spoke for me. "Rossi cornered us in the elevator. He called us street trash, told us to go back to whatever gutter we came from, and made sure to mention how passionate you were with his precious daughter. He described it in detail."

Caleb’s face transformed, rage replacing concern in seconds. "That bastard." His voice was deadly quiet. "Tesoro, you know none of that matters. You know I love you. The only reason I haven’t put a bullet in him yet is because I need to be strategic about it."

"But you did sleep with her." The words tasted bitter as I spoke them, stepping away from his reaching hands. "That part is true."

I escaped to my office with Gemma close behind, leaving Caleb to deal with Dominic's explosive reaction.

"That piece of garbage won't keep attacking my woman," Dominic's voice carried through the walls. "And he sure as hell won't keep tormenting Ivy. If you don't handle this, Caleb, I will."

"I'll take care of it," Caleb's response was grim with promise.

The remainder of the day passed in a fog of hurt and frustration. Despite Gemma's logical arguments that Rossi was deliberately trying to manipulate my emotions, I couldn't shake the images his words had planted in my mind.

As closing time approached, Caleb summoned us to his office. A burly man in a dark suit stood beside his desk, the telltale bulge of a shoulder holster visible beneath his jacket.

"Ladies, meet Caleb from our security team. He'll be stationed at the elevator entrance. Whenever you need to leave this floor, he'll escort you and ensure no one can trap you like that again."

I shifted uncomfortably. "Caleb, having a bodyguard feels excessive."

"It's about protection, not surveillance," he countered firmly.

"It does seem a bit much," Gemma agreed hesitantly.

Caleb's expression softened slightly. "Gemma, Dominic demanded immediate action. I can't remove Rossi from the equation yet, but I can prevent him from poisoning your mind with his lies. Look at how upset you are, angel. I can't stand seeing you like this."

"Just in the elevator?" I needed clarification.

"Exactly. The elevator is where you're most vulnerable. Throughout the rest of the building, we have soldiers I trust watching out for you. He won't get another opportunity to corner you."

I considered the compromise. "Alright, if it's just elevator duty."

"I agree," Gemma nodded reluctantly. "Rossi clearly has it out for Ivy specifically. Better safe than sorry." Her mood brightened suddenly. "I should get back to work. The safe house renovation is almost complete, and Xavier's new office is coming along beautifully. I'll call you when it's ready for inspection."

After Gemma left, bubbling with excitement about her design project, Caleb stood and moved to lock his office door. When he turned back to me, his eyes held a familiar heat that made my pulse quicken despite everything.

"We have some unfinished business on that couch," he said, his voice dropping to that low register that never failed to affect me.

Despite the day's turmoil, I felt myself responding to his magnetic pull, anticipation replacing the lingering hurt in my chest.

Chapter 108 Behind Closed Doors

Ivy's POV

I rose from where we stood in Caleb's private office, the city lights of our territory gleaming through the bulletproof windows. My Don guided me toward the Italian leather sofa where he conducted his most sensitive family business. His powerful arms wrapped around my waist, pulling me into a kiss that ignited every nerve in my body. Those calloused hands that had pulled triggers and signed death warrants now explored my curves with reverent skill, bunching my dress around my hips. The silk whispered against my skin as he positioned me on the cushions with the same commanding authority he used to rule his empire.

Caleb dropped to his knees before me, those mesmerizing ice-blue eyes burning with the same intensity I had seen when he eliminated traitors. His tongue traced his lips in anticipation as his palms glided up my thighs, fingertips finding the delicate lace that separated us. Even through the thin fabric, his touch

sent electricity coursing through my veins like the adrenaline rush of a successful heist. This was how it always happened with him - a single caress and everything else faded away, leaving only this magnetic pull between the mafia prince and his queen.

His mouth traced a path of fire along my inner thighs, while his lips moved higher. When he reached that sensitive junction, his teeth grazed my skin before his tongue soothed the spot with the same precision he used to plan territorial takeovers. Both hands gripped my thighs now, spreading me wide as his mouth found me through the gossamer fabric.

"Always so ready for me, tesoro," Caleb murmured against my core, his voice thick with the same appreciation he showed when examining flawless diamonds from our smuggling operations.

Each stroke of his fingers sent waves of heat radiating outward, my body responding with embarrassing eagerness to the man who controlled half the East Coast underworld. Caleb hooked the lace aside and his mouth claimed me directly, his tongue circling that bundle of nerves until I was writhing beneath him like a captive begging for mercy. My voice escaped in breathless gasps as I moved against his skillful mouth, my fingers tangling in those dark locks that had once been stained with enemy blood.

He had not even fully undressed me when my initial climax crashed over me, my legs trembling as they locked around the shoulders that had carried the weight of our criminal empire. The sounds I made would have mortified me with anyone else, but Caleb only encouraged my abandon the way he encouraged loyalty from his soldiers.

His mouth never left me, tongue delving deeper to taste every drop of my surrender. He continued his sweet torture until I was burning with need all over again, my hips moving restlessly against the face that struck terror into rival families.

"Caleb, I need you inside me now," I pleaded shamelessly, beyond caring how desperate I sounded to the most dangerous man in the city.

"Is that what my queen wants?" His eyes glittered with dark promise like the surface of the Hudson where bodies disappeared. As I nodded frantically, he smiled with predatory satisfaction. "Then that’s exactly what you’ll receive."

His hands worked quickly at his belt, freeing himself in fluid motion with the efficiency of drawing a concealed weapon. He was magnificently hard, and rather than removing my ruined underwear, he simply held the fabric aside. The blunt head of him pressed against my entrance for a torturous moment before he surged forward, filling me completely in a powerful thrust that tore a cry from my throat louder than gunfire in our warehouse district.

Caleb set a punishing rhythm immediately, each stroke driving deeper as my pleas for more grew louder and more incoherent than the screams in our interrogation rooms. Suddenly his hands caught my legs, pushing them up and back until I was completely open to him like a vault he had finally cracked. His palms braced against my thighs as he drove into me with renewed force and speed, the angle allowing him to reach places that made stars explode behind my eyelids like muzzle flashes in the dark.

My next orgasm built quickly under this delicious assault, my inner walls clenching around him rhythmically like the recoil of automatic weapons.

"God, the way you grip me," he groaned through gritted teeth, his own control fraying like it did during the most intense family negotiations. "So tight and perfect."

In a swift movement he flipped me over, positioning me on hands and knees with the same decisive action he used to restructure our money laundering operations. The sound of tearing lace filled the air as he destroyed what remained of my underwear, his hands gripping my hips as he entered me again from behind. This angle was even more intense, allowing him to set a pace that was beautifully ruthless like his business dealings.

His hand remained anchored on my hip while the other found that sensitive bundle of nerves, stroking in time with his thrusts like synchronized clockwork in a perfectly planned heist. The dual sensation was overwhelming, and I buried my face in the cushions to muffle my cries as another climax tore through me with devastating force that rivaled the explosions in our demolished rival territories.

Caleb’s rhythm faltered as his own release approached, and with a deep thrust he buried himself completely, his teeth finding my shoulder as he filled me with liquid heat. His muffled groan vibrated against my skin as we both struggled to catch our breath like survivors after a successful raid.

Still joined, he pulled me back against his chest as he settled onto the Persian rug where million-dollar deals were negotiated, his arms wrapping around me protectively. His mouth found the spot where his teeth had marked me, pressing gentle kisses there with surprising tenderness.

"Forgive me, angel. I lost myself and marked you harder than I intended," Caleb said softly, genuine regret in his voice as he examined the evidence of his passion like assessing collateral damage.

"Don’t apologize for that," I replied with a satisfied smile, feeling his quiet laughter rumble through his chest. "I love when you lose control with me."

"My beautiful queen enjoys when I’m rough with her?" he asked with amusement as I shifted teasingly in his lap. "You’re going to be the death of me, woman."

"I love everything you do to me," I whispered, turning to face him and sinking down onto his already hardening length. My lips found his as desire sparked between us once more, ready to lose ourselves in each other again in the sanctuary of our dangerous kingdom.

Chapter 109 The Baby Bombshell

Ivy’s POV

The past weeks had passed like a fever dream I never wanted to break from. My return to Thorne Group had been seamless, with financial auditing keeping me busy and fulfilled in ways I had never imagined. Caleb and I had settled into a dangerous rhythm that made my pulse race every morning when I woke up beside him. True to his word, he had claimed me on that polished mahogany desk of his more times than I could count, pressed me against the floor-to-ceiling windows of his executive office while the city sprawled beneath us like his personal kingdom, and made me forget my own name on that leather couch where we first crossed the line from business to something infinitely more perilous.

Most nights found us tangled together in my modest apartment, and weekends were spent at his penthouse fortress where Max would join us for elaborate breakfasts and movie marathons. The domesticity of it all should have terrified me given the violence that surrounded Caleb’s world, but instead it felt like coming home to a life I never dared imagine for myself.

My happiness felt almost too dangerous to be real. Caleb treated Max like the son he never had, my friends had embraced our relationship despite their initial terror of the Thorne name, and professionally I was exactly where I had always dreamed of being. Even Yara Rossi’s persistent attempts to corner me around the Thorne Group offices had been thwarted by Caleb’s watchful security presence.

Evening found us walking toward the private executive garage, both exhausted from another demanding week managing the family's legitimate operations but already planning our evening. Chinese takeout, animated movies with Max, and probably falling asleep on my couch while Caleb's fingers traced lazy patterns on my skin.

"I'm thinking we skip the fortune cookies tonight," Caleb murmured against my ear as we approached his armored Mercedes, his hand warm and possessive on the small of my back. "I already know my future."

The intimate promise in his voice sent heat spiraling through me, but before I could respond, a sickeningly familiar voice cut through the underground quiet like nails on glass.

"Well, well, if it isn't my future husband with his little office pet."

Yara stepped out from behind a concrete pillar like some designer-clad predator, her smile sharp enough to draw blood. My stomach dropped to my feet as Caleb immediately moved to shield me with his body, his hand instinctively moving toward the concealed weapon at his hip.

"What the hell are you doing here, you deranged woman? How did you even get past building security?" Caleb's voice carried a dangerous edge that made me shiver.

"Oh, darling, is that any way to speak to your future bride?" Her voice dripped false sweetness that made my skin crawl. "Daddy's the underboss, remember? I simply borrowed his executive access card. Amazing how easily I can get to you when I really want to."

The casual way she invaded his space, his territory, our sanctuary, made rage build in my chest like a living thing.

"You're completely unhinged," Caleb snarled, his hand reaching back to keep me close. "Stay away from my woman, Yara. I'm warning you."

"Your woman?" Yara's laugh was like breaking glass. "Oh, honey, I don't think she'll be holding that title much longer."

Something cold and premonitory settled in my stomach. This wasn't just another one of her dramatic scenes. There was triumph in her eyes, a certainty that made my blood turn to ice.

"Get the hell out of here right now," Caleb commanded, pulling out his phone. "Ivy, call Caleb. I want this lunatic removed from the premises immediately."

My hands shook as I fumbled for my phone, but Yara's next words stopped me cold.

"Oh, sweetheart, you really shouldn't treat the mother of your heir so harshly."

The parking garage fell silent except for the distant hum of fluorescent lights. Caleb went completely still beside me.

"You're out of your goddamn mind," he said slowly, each word precise and deadly. "I would never, ever have a child with you."

"Funny thing about that night you were so drunk you could barely stand after the family meeting," Yara purred, producing a folded paper from her designer purse with theatrical flair. "Turns out our little encounter was more productive than either of us realized. Congratulations, Don Thorne. You're going to be a father."

She held out what looked like a medical document, her smile victorious and cruel. "I'm pregnant, Caleb. With the next Thorne heir."

The world tilted sideways. Caleb's sharp intake of breath seemed to come from very far away, and suddenly I couldn't feel my legs. The parking garage became a tunnel of echoing voices and shifting shadows as my vision blurred at the edges.

Strong arms caught me before I hit the concrete, lifting me against a familiar chest. I heard Caleb's voice, tight with panic, calling my name, but it sounded like he was underwater. Everything became fragments after that - the elevator's metallic hum, fluorescent office lights, the soft leather of Caleb's executive couch.

When awareness finally returned, I was back in his office with Jude sitting beside me, pressing a warm cup into my trembling hands.

"Drink this, Ivy. It'll help," Jude said gently, his usual humor replaced by genuine concern.

"What happened? Where's Caleb?" The words came out broken, punctuated by tears I couldn't seem to stop. "Jude, what's happening to me?"

"Caleb's handling the situation. He'll be back soon," Jude assured me, rubbing soothing circles on my back. "Just breathe, sweetheart. Everything's going to be okay."

The tea was chamomile and honey, but it tasted like ash in my mouth. Gemma burst through the office doors, her face pale with worry.

"I called Lexi and Kinsley. They're on their way," she said, immediately coming to my other side. "Jesus, Ivy, you're ice cold."

I couldn't stop shaking. The tea cup rattled against my teeth as I tried to drink, but the tears kept coming in waves that left me gasping. Then Caleb exploded back into the room like a man possessed, dropping to his knees in front of me and taking my face in his hands.

"Tesoro, look at me. Are you alright?" His eyes were wild with fear and something else I couldn't identify.

"Caleb, what she said..." I couldn't finish the sentence. The words stuck in my throat like broken glass.

"Give us a minute," Caleb said tersely to Jude and Gemma, never taking his eyes off me. Once we were alone, he gripped my hands like a lifeline. "Listen to me, Ivy. Whatever she claims, it changes nothing between us. Caleb's taking her to get tested at a lab I trust. We'll have results soon, and I guarantee you she's lying."

"But what if she's not?" The question tore out of me like a physical wound. "Caleb, if she's pregnant with your child, everything changes. You know it does."

His jaw clenched, a muscle ticking beneath the surface. "If she’s pregnant. If the child is mine. Then yes, I’ll take responsibility for the child. But not for her, Ivy. She won’t trap me into a family alliance because of a pregnancy."

I searched his face, seeing fear behind the determination. This was his deepest desire - to be a father. And despite everything, Caleb was fundamentally a man who would never abandon his responsibilities to the family.

"You say that now," I whispered, touching his cheek with trembling fingers. "But we both know it’s not that simple."

Chapter 110 Honor Above Love

Ivy’s POV

The reinforced steel door to Caleb’s private office exploded inward as Zoe stormed through, leading a formidable pack of Thorne family wives behind her. The security detail stationed outside had clearly been no match for these determined women.

"What kind of bloody mess have you dragged my friend into this time, Don Thorne?" Zoe’s voice sliced through the tension like a switchblade, her eyes blazing with protective fury.

"Zoe, not now. Please," Caleb’s voice carried the weight of exhaustion that even the most ruthless crime boss couldn’t hide.

"Oh, absolutely now! I warned you what would happen if you destroyed her again." Zoe dropped onto the leather couch beside me, her arms wrapping around my shoulders like armor. "Get out. Your capos are waiting in the lobby. We’ll handle Ivy from here. Move!"

The lethal authority in her tone made even Caleb Thorne, feared Don of the most powerful crime family on the East Coast, take an involuntary step backward. He ran both hands down his face, the weight of his empire suddenly visible in every line of his body. He pressed a tender kiss to my forehead before retreating through the bulletproof door. Through my tears, I saw my circle of protection: Zoe, Gemma,

Nora, Ruby, and Lila forming an impenetrable wall around me like the wives of soldiers preparing for war.

"Gemma called the moment the news broke through the family channels. We abandoned everything to get here," Nora explained softly, her voice carrying the kind of gentleness that only emerged in the safest of sanctuaries. "Jude briefed us on what happened with that manipulative mafia princess."

The loyalty of these women, bound together by blood oaths and shared survival in this violent world, wrapped around me like a bulletproof vest, though it couldn't stop the trembling in my chest.

"Everything's collapsing again," I whispered, fresh tears cutting tracks down my cheeks.

"Ivy, breathe. Caleb made the smart tactical decision sending Xavier with that manipulative mafia princess for proper medical verification. We wait this siege out together, capisce?" Ruby's hand found my knee, steady as the steel in her voice.

We remained barricaded in Caleb's fortress-like office while the hours crawled by like a stakeout. Caleb had ordered food delivery from the family's trusted Italian restaurant, passing containers through Gemma at the reinforced door with strict instructions that we needed to maintain our strength for whatever battles lay ahead.

"Zo, we should go. Max needs us. Carmen's been watching him since the lockdown started," I said, my maternal instincts suddenly overriding everything else.

"Relax, tesoro. I already spoke with Carmen through encrypted channels. She's staying at my safehouse for now. Even ordered from that pizzeria Max loves because you know how that little soldier goes crazy for real Brooklyn pizza," Zoe soothed me with the efficiency of someone accustomed to managing crisis logistics.

"I don't know what I'd do without all of you," I said, my voice thick with emotion that had no place in our brutal world. "Without this family."

"Oh, you'd probably be wandering the streets like some lost civilian," Zoe quipped, trying to inject some dark humor into the suffocating tension. "Now eat something. Whatever happens in this war, you can't fall apart. Max needs his mother strong and ready for anything."

The thought of my son gave me the steel I needed to continue. I managed several bites of the sandwich, though it tasted like sawdust. The women filled the silence with carefully chosen conversation, working to ease the crushing pressure that threatened to break us all. I'd finally stopped the tears when we heard the unmistakable sound of violence from the reception area followed by raised voices that carried the edge of impending bloodshed. I forced myself not to flinch.

Caleb returned looking like he'd survived a firefight. His dark hair was disheveled, his eyes were shot through with red, and his usually pristine shirt bore the wrinkles of a man whose empire was under siege.

"Ladies, I need a moment with Ivy. Alone. And Zoe, before you start your rebellion, this isn't negotiable," his tone carried the absolute authority that had built his criminal empire, brooking no argument even from my fiercest defender.

Each friend embraced me with the solemnity of soldiers heading into uncertain battle before filing out. Caleb settled beside me and captured my hands in his, scarred from countless acts of violence in defense of family honor.

"My queen, this changes nothing between us," he began.

"She's carrying your child," I stated without room for doubt.

"Yes, but that proves nothing. DNA testing during pregnancy is too dangerous for family operations, and she's refusing cooperation anyway. We'll have to wait until after the birth for confirmation," Caleb explained with the cold precision of a man accustomed to strategic patience.

"I understand," I said, meeting his desperate gaze.

"But nothing changes, Ivy. You're my queen," he insisted with the fierce possessiveness of a man who'd killed to protect what was his.

"Everything changes, Caleb. A child creates permanent blood ties with that woman. She'll never grant us peace. She'll constantly interfere and use that infant to maintain her hold on you because that's the nature of ambitious mafia daughters. Our love wouldn't survive the constant warfare," I told him with the brutal honesty this world demanded.

"Ivy, I won't allow that to happen," he protested.

"There's more. I'm a single mother. I understand how desperately a child needs their father's protection in our world. Despite all my efforts and all the love surrounding Max, I know he misses having a don's strength behind him. I won't steal you from your blood, Caleb," I said firmly.

"What are you telling me?" His voice cracked like breaking glass.

"We're finished. Permanently this time. You won't hunt me down again. You'll step up because you're an honorable don. You'll provide protection and legitimacy for your heir." I kept my voice level even as I shattered internally.

"You can't destroy me like this," Caleb whispered, tears streaming down the face that had struck terror into countless enemies.

"I'm saving your honor. It's the only choice. You'll never find true peace with me while your child remains under that unstable woman's control," I said, leaning in to kiss his lips one final time. "I'll love you until my last breath, but our story ends here." I stood and walked toward the door. "I'll ask Dominic for my position back at Zenith Systems. Working together would only torture us both."

When I opened the door, our extended family sat in the reception area looking as devastated as we felt. I approached Dominic directly.

"Dominic, you said I could return if circumstances changed."

"Absolutely, Ivy. The door's always open," Dominic took my hand with a weak smile that didn't hide his concern. "Take some time to recover from this battle. I'll reactivate your contract soon, but you should give yourself space to heal."

"Absolutely not, Ivy," Xavier interrupted with the intensity of a seasoned consigliere. "The family needs you here."

"Xavier, I can’t continue working alongside Caleb," I said without wavering.

"But you could work with Xavier instead," Jude suggested with tactical precision. "We restructure operations. You assist Xavier, I handle Caleb. You’d barely cross paths during family business."

"Jude, that’s not fair to you," I protested.

"Ivy, it’s the perfect strategic solution. Please consider it," Xavier urged with the persuasive power of a man who’d negotiated countless criminal enterprises.

"Ivy, my company would welcome you back gladly, but staying here with Xavier’s crew offers better protection than anything I can provide," Dominic admitted with honest assessment.

"Girl, don’t sabotage your position in the organization because Thorne screwed up his personal life," Zoe said bluntly. "Staying and switching with Jude makes the most tactical sense."

"She’s right," I said, looking at my friend. "But Jude shouldn’t have to sacrifice his preferred assignment for my complications."

"Don’t be ridiculous, regina. I don’t mind babysitting Caleb and making his existence appropriately miserable," Jude said with a grin that actually made me smile despite everything.

"You all believe this is the best strategy?" I asked, and every head nodded with military precision. "I trust your judgment. You only want what protects the family. I’ll start with your crew soon, Xavier."

"Ivy, take some recovery time," Xavier suggested gently.

"No. Not even one day. I'll be here at my usual time," I said with the determination of a woman who'd learned to survive in the most dangerous world imaginable.

"By tomorrow morning, I'll have your office relocated and secured next to Xavier's operations," Gemma promised, and I squeezed her hand gratefully.

"Now we're going to my safehouse for an emergency sisters' council to rebuild your armor," Nora announced as we headed for the armored elevator. "Jude, you're on Caleb supervision duty at Xavier's tonight."

"No problem, Nora. Even a don needs backup when his world's falling apart," Jude agreed with the loyalty that bound our deadly family together.