Mafia Mask 111

Chapter 111 Drawing the Line

Caleb’s POV

I slumped into the leather chair in my private office at the back of the social club, feeling like someone had ripped my heart from my chest and fed it to the wolves. The pain was suffocating, each breath a struggle as tears carved burning paths down my face. This devastation felt familiar - the same hollow ache I’d experienced when my parents were blown to pieces in that car bombing. The kind of loss that leaves you gutted and bleeding inside. Without Ivy, I was slowly dying.

"Boss, those vultures are waiting downstairs in the main hall. I know you’re destroyed right now, but they ain’t budging," Xavier said, his voice cutting through the haze clouding my mind.

"Xavier, she walked away. Said there’s no future for us now. She won’t rip me away from my boy, and she’s going back to work Dominic’s crew," I said, the words tasting like poison on my tongue.

"Hold up, Caleb. We managed to fix part of this nightmare - she’s staying in the family." I looked at Xavier, struggling to understand what he meant. "She’ll report to me, and Jude stays with you, starting soon. Not perfect, but it keeps her close. Jude’s idea, and I gotta say, it’s genius."

"Thanks, brother. At least I’ll still see her," I said, clinging to this fragile thread of hope. "Tell the soldiers to escort that snake and her old man to the downstairs meeting room. Time to handle this mess. You coming with me?"

"Always, Caleb. We’re blood - I got your back no matter what goes down. After this, you’re crashing at my place. The whole crew’s rallying around you," Xavier said, squeezing my shoulder while the other capos nodded their support.

"What about Ivy, Xavier? And my son?" I asked, anxiety clawing at my throat.

"Easy, the wives organized a girls’ night at my place and they’re taking care of her," Jude said reassuringly. "And Carmen’s watching Max."

"Alright then, let’s go deal with these parasites," I said, forcing myself to stand.

I pushed through the meeting room doors to find those two leeches practically celebrating. Roman Rossi and his spawn looked like predators savoring their victory.

"Why’s he here? This is family business," Roman snarled, jerking his chin toward Xavier.

"Cut the garbage, Roman. This is syndicate business. Xavier’s my consigliere and my brother," I said coldly. "Sit down."

"Darling, aren’t you excited about the baby? I just know they’ll have your beautiful blue eyes." That viper slithered toward me, reaching for my neck.

"Don’t you dare touch me. Sit," I commanded with ice-cold fury. Her smug smile flickered but didn’t disappear as they took their seats.

"Let’s get straight to business. I seriously doubt this kid is mine..." I started, but Roman cut me off.

"How dare you disrespect my daughter, you arrogant piece of work!" Roman shot to his feet, jabbing his finger at me.

"Sit down and keep your mouth shut!" I roared. "We’re doing a DNA test."

"I won’t let anyone endanger my baby. While they’re growing inside me, I refuse that test. It could harm them!" Yara screeched like a banshee.

"Perfect, that just confirms what I suspected. No problem, when this kid shows up, we’re testing, even if I need to drag a judge into this," I replied with deadly calm. I was managing to stay rational despite the rage burning in my veins.

"Caleb, you will not dishonor my daughter. You have an obligation to marry her," Roman demanded.

"What era are you living in, Roman? Nobody does shotgun weddings anymore," Xavier interjected.

"My daughter deserves respect, and you won't treat her like some street whore," Roman said. "I demand you marry her, Caleb."

"I'm not marrying her. If the child is mine, I'll provide for the baby, but I won't marry your daughter. I love Ivy and I always will - she's the only woman I'll ever take as my wife," I stated firmly.

That fraud Yara burst into theatrical tears and collapsed dramatically across the table. Roman panicked, frantically trying to revive the creature sprawled before us.

"Look what you've done. You've made my daughter sick. Quick, get water, help me!" Roman barked orders.

Xavier filled a glass from the pitcher on the table and handed it to Roman. He patted his daughter's face gently, calling her name. Gradually, the pest stirred, accepted the water, sipped it, then resumed her wailing performance.

"You can't abandon our child, Caleb. You must marry me, give our baby a proper famiglia. They need both parents under one roof."

Yara looked absolutely hideous while crying - mouth gaping, drooling, snot streaming down her face. The sight mesmerized me for a moment, and I felt hellfire coursing through my veins. It actually made me shudder. I seriously needed to start attending Mass more often.

"Don't kid yourself, Yara. These days, co-parenting works just fine," Xavier said, snapping me from my dark thoughts.

"My decision is final, Yara, and you should accept it with dignity. I'm not marrying you. Soon, my lawyer will contact you to establish terms for the pregnancy, child support, medical appointments I'll attend, and everything else," I said, laying down the law.

"Lawyers, Caleb? I'm carrying your child - you should be celebrating. This isn't some business contract," Yara raged.

"Oh, but it absolutely is a contract, everything properly documented. I'm not celebrating having a child with a woman I despise," I said harshly.

"Don't say that - our baby will feel rejected by their father," the harpy protested.

"I'm being honest. We're finished here. Xavier, call the soldiers to remove these two," I said, completely done with their presence.

"This is ridiculous, Caleb. I'm part of this organization. And she's carrying the future heir to this empire," Roman protested.

"Yeah, Roman, unfortunately you do work for me, but you're off duty now. And this creature might be carrying my child, but inheriting anything in this famiglia is entirely different," I said, standing and turning away. At the door, I faced them one last time. "Oh, one more thing - you no longer have access to the back entrance, Roman." I left them both sputtering indignantly.

Chapter 112 Chocolate and Thorns

Ivy's POV

The weekend dragged by in a suffocating haze of well-meaning friends and endless conversations about my impossible situation. Everyone tried their best to convince me to fight for Caleb, to stay and weather the storm that Yara Rossi would unleash. But they couldn't grasp the deadly reality I was living in. I refused to become the catalyst for a war between a Don and his potential heir through marriage. Yara would turn my existence into a living hell, using her father Roman's influence and her own vicious cunning, and I knew I wasn't ruthless enough to survive that kind of systematic destruction.

Monday morning arrived like an execution date. I steeled myself for another day of pretending normalcy while everything inside me felt shattered by the weight of leaving the only man I'd ever truly loved. As I approached the Thorne Group building, a familiar figure blocked my path like a predator stalking wounded prey. Roman Rossi stood there with the cold calculation of a man who'd built his power on others' misery.

"What the hell are you still doing here, you worthless little whore?" His voice sliced through the morning air like a switchblade. He positioned himself directly in my path, making escape impossible. When I attempted to sidestep him, his fingers clamped around my arm like a steel trap. "I'm talking to you, you pathetic street trash."

"Get your hands off me." I wrenched my arm free, my skin burning where his manicured fingers had dug in. "I have every right to be here. I work for this organization."

"Not for long, you don't." His eyes gleamed with malicious satisfaction, the look of a man who enjoyed watching others squirm. "I'm going straight to Caleb to demand he throws you back into whatever gutter he dragged you from."

"Go right ahead." I turned my back on him, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing how his threats affected me.

Roman lunged forward to grab me again, but Fisher, our head of security, materialized between us like an avenging angel. His hand rested casually on the concealed weapon beneath his suit jacket.

"Step away from the lady, sir. You've been explicitly instructed to keep your distance from her." Fisher's voice carried the quiet authority of a man who'd seen combat in darker places than corporate lobbies.

"Thank you, Fisher." My voice barely rose above a whisper as we stepped into the elevator together.

"No need to thank me, miss. It's what Mr. Thorne pays me for." Fisher's expression softened slightly, though his vigilance never wavered. "But even if it wasn't my job, I can't stomach that snake or the way he treats you. That's no way to handle a lady." He paused, studying my face with the keen eyes of someone trained to read danger. "I'll be waiting for you at the entrance every morning from now on, and I'll escort you out every evening. He won't get near you again."

His protection nearly broke through the walls I'd built around my heart. I managed a grateful smile, overwhelmed by this unexpected shield when I felt so vulnerable in the crossfire of mafia politics.

The executive floor hummed with a different energy, charged with the tension that always surrounded high-stakes power plays. Gemma rushed toward me the moment the elevator doors opened, wrapping me in a warm embrace before guiding me toward my new workspace under Xavier's protection. She'd worked miracles over the weekend, transforming the space and even relocating my familiar furniture from Caleb's office to ease the transition.

A stunning bouquet of blood-red roses sat on the small table near the armchairs, their dark beauty a stark reminder of the dangerous world we inhabited. The card tucked between the thorny stems made my hands tremble as I read:

"You will always be my only love. My perfect love. I cannot accept losing you."

The tears came without warning, and Gemma held me as I crumbled under the weight of loving a man whose world could destroy me.

"Ivy, I understand why you think you have to do this. But he's destroying himself." Her voice carried gentle urgency. "Dominic told me Caleb refused the arranged marriage with Yara. His consigliere is working on alternative arrangements for securing the alliance." She pulled back to meet my eyes directly. "Maybe there's still hope."

"There isn't, Gemma." The words tasted like ashes and blood. "She'll never let us be happy. She'll use that potential alliance as a weapon for the rest of our lives, and Roman will back her every move." I wiped my eyes, forcing myself to focus on survival. "Is Xavier ready for me?"

"Yes, he's waiting. He said to come in whenever you're ready, no ceremony required." Gemma's smile carried warmth, but I could see the worry in her eyes.

I thanked her for everything she'd done to make this transition possible, then gathered my files and headed toward Xavier's office, leaving my broken heart behind as best I could manage.

"Good morning, Xavier."

"Ivy, my dear, good morning." Xavier's warm greeting felt like sunlight breaking through storm clouds. As Caleb's most trusted consigliere, he possessed the rare gift of making even enemies feel at ease. "Please, sit down. How are you holding up under the circumstances?"

"I'm devastated, Xavier. But life doesn't pause for heartbreak in our world." I attempted a smile that felt more like a grimace. "Shall we discuss our working arrangement? I hope you won't miss Jude's assistance too much."

"Miss Jude? Hardly. You're much easier on the eyes, and far more intelligent." Xavier's charming grin was infectious, and I found myself smiling genuinely for the first time in days. "Let me have Katelyn bring us some espresso."

The morning disappeared in strategic planning and intelligence briefings. Xavier had an incredible talent for reading people and situations, and he used it masterfully to keep my mind occupied with complex money laundering operations and territorial negotiations that required my full attention.

Lunch with Jude and Gemma was carefully orchestrated to avoid any encounters with Caleb. Gemma had been strategically helping me navigate the building's maze of power dynamics, and I was grateful for her protection. When we returned from the restaurant, I found a slice of chocolate torte waiting on my desk - the same dessert from our first dinner together. My heart clenched painfully. Even when I couldn't see him, Caleb made sure I knew he was thinking of me, fighting for us in his own way.

The afternoon flew by as quickly as the morning, buried under intelligence reports and financial projections. When I finally shut down my computer, Gemma appeared in my doorway like clockwork.

"Ready to go?"

I nodded, grabbing my purse and following her to the elevator. Fisher was waiting for us in the lobby, and he summoned one of our secured vehicles while keeping a watchful eye on Roman, who lurked nearby like a vulture waiting to feast on carrion. True to his word, Fisher was shielding me from harassment I wasn't equipped to handle while navigating this dangerous transition.

Several days passed in this carefully constructed routine. I still hadn't seen Caleb, but every afternoon brought another slice of chocolate torte to my desk - his way of reminding me he was still there, still fighting for us, even when I couldn't bear to see him.

Thursday arrived with the same relentless schedule. Xavier kept me buried in territorial disputes and money laundering operations, and I was grateful for the distraction from my shattered heart. Jude wouldn't be joining us for lunch since he was in a strategy meeting with Caleb about the escalating situation with the Rossi faction, so it would just be Gemma and me.

We settled into our usual restaurant and placed our orders. Gemma was excitedly telling me about Heidi's upcoming visit the following week, and for the first time in days, I felt genuinely happy about something. Heidi had been my lifeline during our secure video calls, offering wisdom and support from her years as a mafia wife, but I missed her physical presence desperately.

I was just responding to Gemma's plans when an unpleasantly familiar voice cut through our conversation like nails scraping against concrete.

Chapter 113 The Princess Begs

Ivy's POV

The last thing I expected during lunch at one of the Thorne family's legitimate front restaurants was to see Yara Rossi's face in the doorway. The daughter of our underboss stood there scanning the dining room with those calculating eyes until they locked onto mine across the crowded space.

"You've got some nerve showing up here to harass my friend, you spoiled princess," Gemma immediately bristled, her voice cutting through the ambient chatter of the upscale Italian establishment. Her hand instinctively moved toward her purse, where I knew she kept her piece.

Yara approached our corner booth with what she probably thought was a humble expression, though her eyes held the same manipulative gleam I'd seen countless times before. The other diners continued their meals, oblivious to the deadly undercurrent flowing between our tables.

"Ivy, I wouldn't be here if it wasn't absolutely necessary. Please, I'm begging you to just listen to what I have to say." Her voice carried that practiced vulnerability she'd perfected over the years as daddy's little princess.

"Absolutely not. Get lost and leave Ivy alone before I make you disappear permanently." Gemma's protective instincts were in full force, and I could practically see her calculating the best angle to slide a blade between Yara's ribs.

I placed a restraining hand on Gemma's arm, feeling the tension coiled in her muscles like a spring ready to snap. "Let it go, Gemma. I'll hear her out. I'd rather deal with this pest once and for all than have her stalking me around the family's territory."

Yara wasted no time sliding into the booth beside me, uninvited. The audacity of this mafia princess never ceased to amaze me, even after all the schemes she'd pulled.

"Look, Ivy, I want to speak to you mother to mother," she began, pressing her manicured hand dramatically to her chest. "You understand how difficult it is to raise a child without a father in our world. I know you're struggling with the same thing since you don't even know which soldier fathered your son."

My blood turned to ice. Only Monica could have fed her that piece of information before her unfortunate accident.

"Keep my son out of your mouth," I warned, my voice dropping to the deadly quiet tone I'd learned from watching Caleb conduct business. "Whatever poison you came here to spill, leave him out of it."

She had the nerve to look wounded, like I'd struck an innocent lamb instead of a viper. "I'm here to ask you, to beg you if I have to, to step away from Caleb. He has a responsibility to marry me and give my baby the protection of the Thorne name. Please, Ivy, don't force my child to grow up without the family's protection. Remove yourself from Caleb's life completely."

The crocodile tears started flowing right on cue, just like her father had taught her during their years of scheming together.

"Yara, I'm not standing in the way of your little domestic fantasy. I broke things off with Caleb the day you announced your pregnancy. If he's not rushing to put a ring on your finger, that's between you and the Don," I said, fighting to keep my own emotions locked down tight.

"But you're still working in his organization, still in his orbit," she whined, her voice taking on that petulant edge that made grown men want to slap her. "You haven't really removed yourself from his world."

"I'm not abandoning my position. You know perfectly well that I work for Xavier's crew now, not directly under Caleb's command. So there's no valid reason for you to keep harassing me. If you think you can guilt me into leaving the family business entirely, you're more delusional than your father."

Her mask slipped completely, revealing the calculating predator beneath. "You're heartless, Ivy!" she shrieked, loud enough for half the restaurant to hear. "You want to steal my baby's father and leave us with nothing!"

Every head in the place turned toward our booth. I wanted to disappear into the leather upholstery. The way she was carrying on, anyone listening would think I was some opportunistic outsider trying to destroy a legitimate family arrangement.

"You've made your little scene, and I've given you my answer. I'm not in Caleb's personal life, but I'm not sacrificing my place in this family either." I stood up, my chair scraping against the polished floor. "Don't contact me again, or I'll have Xavier's boys pay your father a visit."

I walked to the hostess station and arranged for our order to be delivered to the compound. Gemma was right behind me, doing the same with barely contained fury radiating from her small frame. We left that toxic atmosphere and returned to the Thorne Group offices, where I finally allowed myself to collapse into my chair and let the tears fall.

When our lunch arrived, Gemma called me to the break room in the back of the building. We ate in relative silence, my appetite completely gone despite the excellent lasagna.

"She's never going to leave me alone, Gemma. Never." The words came out between sobs.

"Oh yes, she will. Even if I have to risk my clean record with the family to make it happen permanently." Gemma's fierce loyalty almost made me smile despite everything.

After lunch, I returned to find the slice of tiramisu I'd ordered still sitting on my desk. I devoured it immediately, hoping the sugar would provide some comfort, however temporary.

I was just finishing the last bite when Caleb appeared in my doorway, then dropped to his knees beside my chair like a penitent seeking absolution.

"My angel, please don't cry." His ice-blue eyes looked haunted, stripped of their usual predatory intensity. "We'll face this together. I promise you. Gemma told me what happened, and I swear she won't bother you again. I'll find a way to handle this situation."

"The only way to make her and her father stop is for you to go through with this arrangement." The words tore at my throat as I spoke them.

The thought of him with someone else was agony, but I couldn't keep living under this constant threat from Roman's faction. I reached out and touched his face, trying to memorize the feel of his skin under my fingers.

"This is torture for me too. But it's the only way they'll leave me in peace. You have to marry her, Caleb."

"This will destroy me, Ivy." He captured my hand and pressed his lips to my palm with desperate reverence. "But I can't bear to see you suffering like this. Let me try to find another solution first. I'll speak with my consigliere. I love you."

He stood, kissed my forehead with heartbreaking tenderness, and walked away. I crumbled the moment he was gone, sobbing like a child, feeling like my chest was being ripped apart by invisible claws.

Gemma rushed in as soon as Caleb left, wrapping me in her arms. Xavier appeared in the doorway, took one look at my tear-stained face, and left again, his jaw tight with lethal frustration. Jude came over and pulled me into one of his bear hugs.

"Pretty woman, just tell me whose throat needs cutting first," he said in that deceptively casual way that always managed to coax a smile out of me.

Katelyn insisted on making me tea, hovering over me like a concerned sister. I excused myself to the bathroom to wash my face and pull myself together.

When I returned to my desk, I buried myself in financial reports, trying to lose myself in numbers and correspondence. The girls all checked in throughout the afternoon, each one assuring me they wouldn't let that manipulative princess anywhere near me again.

The rest of the week crawled by in a haze. I went through the motions of living, pretending everything was normal for my son's sake, but inside I felt like I was watching my life from a distance, unable to fully participate in my own existence.

Chapter 114 Cornered Like Prey

Caleb's POV

I cannot comprehend the catastrophic mess I've orchestrated. What possessed me during Heidi's farewell gathering that cursed night? The whiskey transformed me into someone unrecognizable, and now I face consequences that feel like eternal punishment in the family's deepest dungeon.

Days of grueling territorial negotiations, days attempting to extract myself from this nightmare with Yara's faked cartel assassination attempt, and every avenue has been systematically blocked by her father's network. Roman Rossi has cornered me like a wounded animal with nowhere to flee, using his daughter as the ultimate weapon.

"Boss?" Xavier's voice cuts through my spiraling thoughts like a blade through flesh.

"Up here," I call back from the penthouse rooftop that overlooks our territory.

The city sprawls beneath me like a battlefield of glittering lights, and I find myself contemplating whether falling might be preferable to the alternative fate Roman has designed. The thought chills me more than any rival family's threats ever could.

"What's the emergency, Don?" Xavier's face shows genuine concern as he emerges onto the rooftop with Dominic, Finn, and Jude flanking him like the loyal soldiers they are. When I summoned them, my voice cracked like a teenager's, desperately pleading for their immediate presence.

"I’m drowning in concrete boots, and every struggle pulls me deeper into Roman’s trap," I say, embracing each of my most trusted capos.

"Then we break out the good bourbon until the world makes sense again," Dominic suggests, already reaching toward the outdoor bar like he’s preparing liquid courage instead of simple refuge.

"Absolutely not." My voice carries more authority than intended. "Drinking created this disaster. One night of too much whiskey, and now Roman owns me through his daughter’s fabricated assassination attempt."

"Smart thinking. I’ll prepare something without the poison," Finn offers, moving toward the bar setup like he’s mixing salvation instead of simple sodas.

"I’ll still be drinking because dealing with Nora while sober is impossible," Jude mutters, earning dark chuckles from everyone except me. Nothing feels amusing when your empire hangs in the balance.

"Talk to us, Don. What’s consuming you alive?" Xavier settles into one of the chairs, his expression deadly serious.

"I’m getting married." The words taste like ash mixed with blood. "Roman’s set my execution date, and I’ve already been forced to agree."

"Like hell you are," Dominic explodes with the fury of a true soldier. "We won’t let you sacrifice yourself over one drunken mistake."

"It’s not that straightforward," Finn interrupts, handing me a glass of ice-cold Coke. "This is about protecting Ivy from Roman’s network, isn’t it? They’re using her as their primary leverage."

"Exactly." The admission burns my throat worse than any bullet wound I’ve endured. "I’ve offered them everything - the entire shipping operation, my personal fortune, territorial concessions. But the Claremonts have one non-negotiable demand."

"Hold on." Dominic looks confused like he’s missing crucial intelligence. "What am I not seeing here?"

"Gemma hasn’t briefed you?" Xavier asks with surprise.

"Gemma’s been shadowing Ivy constantly since this war began. The women have established rotating security shifts," Dominic explains with military precision.

"Same with Ruby. She’s barely returned to our apartment," Xavier adds grimly. "And Jude’s practically established permanent residence in my guest room to avoid his own domestic battleground."

Jude raises his glass in a mock salute to that accurate assessment.

"The Claremonts are waging psychological warfare against Ivy," Finn explains, his voice tight with suppressed violence. "They’re stalking her through the territory, cornering her in public establishments, telling her she’s destroying a family alliance and needs to disappear so I can honor my obligations to Yara’s protection."

"They’re what?" Dominic’s face flushes with the kind of rage that usually precedes bloodshed.

"Yara ambushed Ivy at her regular cafe recently," Jude continues with dangerous calm. "Created a public spectacle, weeping about how Ivy was destroying her safety and stealing her family’s protection. Ivy was humiliated before every civilian witness."

"Roman’s been more direct with his territorial threats," Finn adds with barely controlled fury. "He’s made it crystal clear that if I don’t submit completely, they’ll systematically destroy everything Ivy values. They understand exactly how to weaponize her conscience."

My chest constricts as I relive every failed negotiation session. "I brought in our best lawyers, mediators, even neutral family representatives who might broker another solution. I offered Roman enough tribute to live like royalty for generations. But they don’t want money or territory concessions. They demand my absolute submission, and they’re willing to torture Ivy psychologically to achieve it."

"This is extortion by any definition," Dominic states, pacing across the rooftop like a caged predator. "It's criminal harassment within our territory. We can eliminate this threat through traditional channels."

"While they systematically destroy Ivy in the process?" I shake my head violently. "Roman threatened to ensure the cartel threat becomes real and ensure Ivy understands it's her direct fault. You know Ivy - she'd carry that guilt until it killed her."

"She's already blaming herself for everything," Finn says quietly, his words hitting me like physical blows. "When Brodie betrayed her years ago, she recovered her strength quickly. This situation is fundamentally different. She's fragmenting from within."

"What about when Max's father abandoned her?" I ask, desperately seeking perspective on her resilience.

Finn gives me a strange look filled with information I'm missing. "You don't know the complete story, do you?"

When I shake my head, he continues with careful precision, "Max's father wasn't some boyfriend who fled responsibility. He was a one-night encounter at an underground masquerade auction. Ivy isn't the type for casual encounters, but she described him as magnetic, completely irresistible. She never expected contact again, and when she discovered the pregnancy, she had no method to locate him."

The revelation strikes me unexpectedly hard. "She never mentioned those details."

"She made peace with raising Max alone because there was no relationship to mourn," Finn explains with brutal honesty. "But with you, she opened her heart completely for the first time in years. She allowed herself to believe in forever, and now that's being ripped away by Roman's manipulation."

"I'm killing her slowly," I whisper, tears blurring my vision of the territory below. "But if I don't submit to this marriage arrangement, they'll systematically annihilate everything she holds sacred."

"Are you certain they possess that level of influence?" Finn challenges with tactical thinking.

"Roman has established connections throughout the legitimate world," Xavier confirms grimly. "Business networks, political contacts, media influence. He could make Ivy's existence unbearable indefinitely."

"When is this nightmare supposed to be executed?" Dominic asks with military directness.

"They're demanding the ceremony soon," I answer, each word feeling like a nail in my coffin. "Yara's already selecting venues and planning our honeymoon like this is some romantic fairy tale instead of elaborate blackmail designed to seize family control."

The silence that follows is absolutely deafening. My most trusted soldiers stare at the city lights below us, each lost in their own tactical assessments of this seemingly impossible situation.

"There has to be another solution," Dominic finally declares with characteristic determination.

"If one exists, I haven't discovered it," I reply with the weight of absolute defeat. "And Roman's deadline is approaching fast."

The rooftop falls quiet again as we all contemplate the impossible choice between my freedom and Ivy's safety.

Chapter 115 Funeral Flowers

Ivy's POV

The days dragged by like a funeral procession through the Thorne territory. I buried myself in laundering accounts and spending every possible moment with Max, but sleep had abandoned me completely. The mirror in my private quarters reflected a ghost with hollow cheeks and purple shadows carved beneath her eyes like battle scars.

Walking into my office within the Thorne compound that morning, I stopped dead in my tracks. A magnificent arrangement of blood-red roses sat on my desk, their dark petals gleaming like fresh wounds in the morning light. A card lay beside them, Caleb's bold handwriting slashed across expensive paper:

"I would spill oceans of blood for you and I’m losing my sanity without you. I would burn down every rival family to spare you this torment."

My breath caught in my throat. Then my gaze shifted to the side table, and ice flooded my veins like a killing frost.

Another arrangement waited there, but this one made my stomach churn with revulsion. The flowers were black and withered, arranged like a funeral wreath that belonged on a grave rather than in a capo’s office. They reeked of decay and malice, nothing like the passionate declarations Caleb would send. My hands trembled as I reached for the accompanying card.

The message inside was typed on cheap paper, cold and clinical as a death threat:

"You should crawl back to the gutter where whores belong. Don Caleb and the Rossi princess are marrying very soon and will rule the families with the heir she carries. He only kept you around for entertainment between family business."

The words struck me like bullets to the chest. A strangled sob tore from my throat before I could suppress it, and I collapsed into the leather armchair behind my desk. The tears came in torrents, each one carrying pieces of my shattered soul. My entire body felt like it was being torn apart by invisible hands.

Gemma burst through my office door without knocking, her face tight with alarm.

"Ivy, honey, breathe! What the hell happened?" Her voice carried the edge of someone ready to reach for a concealed weapon.

I couldn’t form words. Instead, I thrust the vile card toward her with a shaking hand and pointed at those grotesque funeral flowers.

"Which dead man walking sent this garbage?" Gemma’s voice exploded with the fury of a soldato ready for war as she shot to her feet, grabbing the offensive arrangement like evidence.

"What's all the noise?" Xavier's voice cut through the tension as he entered with Jude and Caleb trailing behind him. "Gemma, why are you screaming bloody murder?"

"Why am I screaming? Look at this sick joke! I want to know which piece of street trash left this in Ivy's office, because I know exactly which manipulative bitch is behind it." Her words dripped with the venom of someone who'd grown up in the famiglia.

Caleb's face darkened to thunderous as he examined the flowers, his jaw clenching like steel as he read the card. The temperature in the room seemed to drop twenty degrees as his icy blue eyes turned murderous. Without hesitation, he crossed to me and dropped to his knees beside my chair, capturing my hands in his warm, scarred grip.

"My angel, look at me. Please?" His voice was barely above a whisper, but I could hear the barely leashed violence underneath. "You know I love you more than my own blood. I never used you, not for a single heartbeat. I'm so fucking sorry you're enduring this psychological warfare."

I forced myself to meet his gaze and saw the raw anguish there, matching my own devastation. He was drowning in the same hell I was. I drew a shuddering breath and asked the question that was killing me slowly.

"Are you marrying her?"

"Love, I'm being forced into this alliance!" The words seemed to tear from his throat like a confession under torture.

I couldn't bear it anymore. The walls of the office felt like they were closing in, suffocating me with the weight of famiglia politics and blood obligations. I pushed past him and fled the room, dimly aware of Gemma's heels clicking behind me and Caleb's desperate voice calling out:

"My angel, wait! Let me explain the whole fucking mess!"

I didn't want explanations about territorial agreements or alliance marriages. I wanted the agony to stop consuming me from the inside like acid. Yes, I had told him to secure his heir and strengthen family ties,

but knowing he would actually bind himself to Yara through sacred vows, that I had lost him to the ancient laws of our world, was more than my heart could survive.

I stumbled into the ladies' room with Gemma right behind me. She locked the door and pulled me into her arms as I shattered completely like fine crystal hitting concrete. Time became meaningless as I wept and she held me together with fierce loyalty. When the storm finally passed, my legs felt weak as a newborn calf's.

"Honey, you need to hear what he has to say. He despises that spoiled princess with every fiber of his being. There has to be a compelling reason he's agreeing to this alliance now, especially after he had already decided to break the engagement." Gemma's voice was gentle but insistent, carrying the wisdom of someone born into this life.

"I told him to marry her and give his child legitimate famiglia protection. He's following my advice like a good Don." I wiped my nose with the back of my hand.

"I'm not buying that's the whole story." Gemma frowned, her street-smart instincts on high alert. "But come on, splash some cold water on your face and we'll go get some tea."

"Plain chamomile isn't strong enough for today, girl! I'm brewing you something special with a little extra kick!" Katelyn announced the moment we entered the break room, her weathered eyes filled with maternal concern as she studied my tear-stained face.

After drinking Katelyn's mysterious herbal blend, I dragged myself back to my office and attempted to focus on the money laundering reports spread across my desk. An overwhelming drowsiness began creeping through my system like fog rolling in from the harbor, and my thoughts started becoming fuzzy around the edges, as if someone had wrapped my mind in cotton.

Chapter 116 Drawing Battle Lines

Caleb's POV

"Gemma, how is Ivy handling everything?" I asked, stopping at my secretary's desk outside the Thorne Group executive floor.

"She’s completely shattered, Don. Absolutely broken. But Katelyn prepared some special herbal blend that seemed to calm her nerves. I’ve been drowning in surveillance reports and territory updates, and since I gave her enough financial reconciliation work to keep busy and the crying finally stopped, I haven’t checked on her recently," Gemma reported with concern.

"I need to speak with her. She deserves to understand the reasoning behind this nightmare I’ve created with the Rossi arrangement," I said, heading toward Ivy’s office in our money laundering division.

"Caleb, don’t you dare upset my friend again. I’m starting to question whether this forced engagement can possibly be worth the carnage it’s causing," Gemma warned sharply.

"I understand your concern, but this conversation is unavoidable," I replied, pushing through her office door.

Inside, Ivy was slumped motionless over her desk, eyes closed, surrounded by scattered ledgers from our offshore accounts. I approached carefully and whispered her name softly, but she didn’t respond. I tried again with more volume, but she remained completely unresponsive. Carefully lifting her into my arms, I realized she was unconscious. I carried her to Xavier’s adjoining office, where my consigliere glanced up from reviewing our latest territory expansion plans with raised eyebrows, silently questioning the situation. I gently placed her on his leather couch and pressed a tender kiss to her forehead before motioning for Xavier to follow me outside.

"I didn’t want to bring her to my office in case she panicked waking up there. I came intending to explain everything about the Rossi alliance, to make her understand why I agreed to this engagement charade, but found her completely unconscious at her desk," I explained to my closest advisor.

"Don’t worry about it. I’ll watch over her while she rests. Ruby mentioned she’s been suffering terrible insomnia since the engagement announcement," Xavier assured me.

We quietly exited Ivy’s office, and I approached Gemma’s desk with growing alarm.

"Gemma, what exactly did Katelyn put in that herbal blend she gave Ivy? She’s completely catatonic. I tried rousing her multiple times without success. Should I be calling our family physician?" I asked, and Gemma’s eyes widened.

"Give me one moment." She grabbed her encrypted phone and dialed quickly. "Katelyn, darling, what did you slip into Ivy's tea? Something potent enough to sedate a charging bull?" She grinned at whatever response she received. "Perfect, she desperately needed it. Thank you, Katelyn, she looks so peaceful now." Hanging up, Gemma beamed at me. "She concocted a special blend designed specifically to knock Ivy unconscious. Katelyn insisted she needed proper rest to cope with everything happening with your engagement, and frankly, I completely agree."

"But what ingredients were in that concoction? Will Ivy eventually wake up, or have we accidentally induced a medical coma?" I pressed, my worry intensifying.

"Chamomile, lemon balm, passion flower, and a massive dose of valerian root," Gemma rattled off. "That combination is more powerful than any prescription sedative. I honestly doubt Ivy will regain consciousness at all today. But her body desperately requires this rest."

"Understood," I exhaled heavily.

"What did you decide to do with that appalling floral monstrosity Yara sent?" Gemma inquired.

"It's currently in my office, but I'm about to handle that situation personally. I also kept the accompanying card, which might prove useful for establishing boundaries," I said, already formulating my strategy.

A short while later, I pulled into the circular driveway of the Rossi family compound. I retrieved that hideous floral arrangement from my passenger seat and steeled myself to enter what could only be described as enemy territory.

Stepping into that abominable mansion with its shockingly offensive interior design made my skin crawl with revulsion. The space was absolutely nightmarish. I found myself standing in a room featuring dark forest green walls paired with gaudy gold furniture upholstered in garish leopard print fabric. Christ, what kind of person possessed such appallingly terrible taste? The space overflowed with countless brightly colored ceramic vases, photographs displayed in ridiculously ornate frames, and blood-red velvet curtains that belonged in a funeral parlor. I had genuinely descended into the depths of hell. A cold shiver ran down my spine when I heard the devil's spawn speaking behind me.

"Darling, you came to visit me! I absolutely knew you couldn’t resist my irresistible charm and beauty," Yara Rossi shrieked while approaching me with predatory confidence. As she drew closer, I instinctively retreated several steps and thrust the offensive flower arrangement toward her.

"I’m here solely to return these flowers, which I’ll gladly place on your grave if you and your treacherous family continue terrorizing Ivy," I said, my voice dripping with pure, undiluted hatred.

"Ew, honey, what absolutely revolting flowers," she replied, her face contorting in genuine disgust. "And don’t you dare speak to me in that tone because I’m carrying your child and I’m going to become your wife. Always obsessing over this Ivy woman! You belong to me now, do you understand? MINE!" She screamed so loudly it nearly ruptured my eardrums, making my fury reach dangerous levels.

"Listen carefully, you malevolent creature, I only agreed to this ridiculous engagement arrangement under one specific condition: that you and your entire deranged family stay completely away from Ivy. You shouldn’t even dare speak her name aloud. Either you honor that agreement, or there will be no alliance wedding whatsoever. That’s the deal, and you know it perfectly well. So leave her alone," I snarled, pure hatred coursing through my bloodstream.

"I want that insignificant little woman completely removed from your life, far away from our family operations. You belong to me, and whether you accept it or not, you’ll be permanently bound to me. There’s no escape! I demand her immediate removal," Yara Rossi revealed her true monstrous nature without any pretense. "And I also want complete access to our territory operations starting immediately."

"Those territories belong exclusively to ME! You will not interfere with family business! You will never set foot in our operations! Follow your mother’s example, who never once appeared at your father’s meetings. That’s exactly how things will function with you. Our arrangement concerned this alliance marriage exclusively and nothing beyond that scope. Everything is clearly defined in the contract, so don’t even consider making additional demands, or I’ll terminate this entire arrangement," I said, barely containing my explosive rage. I turned my back and began walking away. "And inform your entire twisted family to stay away from Ivy, or there won’t be any wedding," I shouted before slamming the mansion door behind me.

Chapter 117 Bitter Sweet Confession

Ivy’s POV

Consciousness returned to me slowly in the dim shadows of Xavier's office. A single desk lamp cast amber light across the mahogany surfaces, and through the bulletproof windows, the city's neon glow painted the darkness in shades of blood and gold. My mind felt clouded, struggling to piece together how I had ended up on this leather sofa. The last coherent memory was sitting at my desk earlier, drowning in the endless columns of laundered money while an overwhelming wave of exhaustion threatened to pull me under.

A familiar warmth encircled my ankle, sending electric shivers up my spine. Even before my eyes found him, I recognized that possessive touch. My feet had somehow found their way onto Caleb's lap, and his battle-scarred hands moved in slow, hypnotic circles around my ankles, each stroke a silent claim of ownership.

"There you are, my angel. How do you feel?" His voice carried that dangerous edge that always made my pulse race with equal parts fear and desire.

"Disoriented. What time is it? I don't remember lying down here." The words came out thick with the remnants of whatever Katelyn had given me.

"Well past nightfall. Katelyn brewed you one of her special concoctions to help you rest. She didn't hold back with the dosage, said you needed to shut down completely." A tired smile played at the corners of his mouth, but it didn't reach those ice-blue eyes. "I found you collapsed at your desk and carried you here. Figured you'd prefer waking up in neutral territory rather than in my private quarters."

"You figured right." I pulled my feet from his lap and attempted to stand, but my body felt like it was moving through thick molasses.

"Easy, tesoro. You've been unconscious for hours. Your system needs time to process whatever Katelyn put in that tea," he murmured, his palm moving in soothing circles across my back, drawing an involuntary sigh from my lips despite everything between us.

"Those flowers the Clairemonts sent..."

"Handled with extreme prejudice. But we need to talk, Ivy. Really talk about what's happening here."

"Fine. What is it you want to say?" I surrendered with a heavy sigh. Running wasn't an option anymore, not when the Thorne territory was the only safe haven in a city full of enemies.

"Food first." He reached for a container of Chinese takeout on the coffee table, extending it toward me along with chopsticks. "You haven't eaten since breakfast."

"I need to clean up first."

"Xavier's private bathroom is through there. Your bag's waiting for you."

I took my purse and escaped to the small washroom attached to the office. The harsh fluorescent lights made me wince as my eyes adjusted. When I finally looked in the mirror, I barely recognized the woman staring back. My clothes were wrinkled beyond repair, my eyes swollen from tears I couldn't remember shedding, my hair a tangled mess. After using the facilities, I splashed cold water on my face, brushed my teeth, and did what I could to make myself presentable enough to face whatever confession was coming.

When I emerged, the office lights were fully illuminated, revealing Caleb in the same spot with his arms braced on his knees, head buried in his hands like a man confessing his sins to God. He looked utterly defeated, his usual predatory composure completely shattered. I set my purse on a nearby chair and settled beside him on the leather couch, careful to maintain some distance.

He lifted his head slowly, and our eyes met across the space between us. His reflection of exhaustion matched mine perfectly. Dark shadows beneath those striking blue eyes, the telltale redness of suppressed rage and frustration, hair disheveled from running his fingers through it repeatedly. He'd shed his suit jacket and shoulder holster, rolled his sleeves up to reveal the intricate tattoos that marked him as Thorne family, and left several buttons undone on his shirt. Slowly, he leaned back against the cushions and offered me a smile that held more pain than comfort. Even in this broken state, he remained the most devastatingly dangerous man I'd ever encountered.

"Better?" I nodded in response. "Good. Let's eat, then we'll discuss our situation."

He handed me the container again. We ate in weighted silence, finding an odd comfort in the shared ritual despite the tension crackling between us. When we finished, he produced a box of caramelized dessert that we split without ceremony. After clearing away the empty containers with military

precision, he returned to his spot but turned to face me, one knee drawn up on the couch like he was preparing for battle.

"My angel, I know Roman Rossi and his psychotic daughter have been terrorizing you, making your life a living hell in my own territory. I tried to negotiate with them through my attorney and the Commission. I offered them everything, every legitimate business, every offshore account, all the Brooklyn docks, just to get them to leave you alone permanently. But they refused every offer." His voice cracked slightly, betraying the fury beneath his controlled exterior. "Their only condition for backing off was for me to go through with this godforsaken marriage."

"And you agreed to it."

"I did, tesoro, because I couldn't see any other way to protect you from their madness, and it's eating me alive from the inside out. I despise that unhinged woman. I can't comprehend how I ended up unconscious in her bed that night. I've tried to remember what happened, but there's nothing but blackness. The Clairemonts are poison, and I won't let them continue hunting you through my streets. That's why I signed the contract. I sealed the arrangement with Roman yesterday. I planned to explain everything to you this morning, but they beat me to it with those sick flowers and their twisted message."

"They won't stop targeting me. They'll never leave me in peace as long as I'm breathing."

"Yes, they will. I went to their compound personally, took that vile arrangement they sent, and made it crystal clear to Roman that if they touch one hair on your head, there won't be a wedding. If they want this alliance, they'll keep their distance from you."

"I don't know what to believe anymore about any of this. I don't know if I can survive staying in this world."

"Please, Ivy, don't abandon me. If you promise to stay by my side, I'll burn their entire bloodline to the ground, contract or no contract."

"I can't ask you to do that. I love you too much to watch you destroy yourself. But you're going to have a child with that unstable woman. You can't abandon an innocent baby to her insanity."

"I know." The words came out like they were being torn from his throat, and he dragged both hands down his face in anguish.

"I should go home. You need rest too, and we both need space to think." I stood and grabbed my purse, suddenly desperate to escape the suffocating weight of our impossible situation.

"Let me drive you back."

"Better not. Xavier arranged protection for me. The detail should be waiting downstairs."

"They are. Can I at least escort you to the car?"

"Of course."

We left the office without another word, our footsteps echoing ominously in the empty hallway as we made our way to the underground garage. When the driver opened my door, Caleb suddenly pulled me against him with desperate force, his mouth crashing down on mine like he was drowning. The kiss was hungry and devastating, our tongues dancing together with fierce urgency while our hearts hammered the same frantic rhythm. His arms tightened around my waist as mine wound around his neck, neither of us willing to break this connection that might be our last. Before releasing me, he caught my bottom lip between his teeth, pressed his forehead to mine, and closed his eyes as if trying to burn this moment into his memory. I forced myself to step away from his embrace and slipped into the car, knowing I was heading home to another sleepless night drowning in tears over a love that might destroy us both.

Chapter 118 Taking Chances

Ivy’s POV

The morning after another restless night, I surprisingly felt lighter than I had in recent days. Walking into the Thorne Group offices, Gemma practically bounced toward me with arms wide open.

"There’s my girl! I’ve been counting down the minutes until our coffee meeting. Look what I managed to get from that little Italian bakery on Fifth Street that’s under our protection." She held up a paper bag. "Fresh cannoli, still warm from the oven."

"You know exactly how to lift my spirits," I said, managing my first genuine smile in what felt like forever. "Let me just secure my things."

I slipped into my office, locked my purse in the reinforced drawer, and powered up the encrypted computer system. Before I could even settle in, Xavier appeared in my doorway, reaching for my hand with theatrical charm.

"How is the most stunning assistant this family has ever been blessed with?"

"Much better, Xavier. Really. And I owe you an apology for claiming your office couch yesterday like some kind of displaced refugee." The corners of my mouth lifted slightly.

"Are you kidding me? Having such beautiful company while I handled family business was the highlight of my week," he said with an exaggerated wink. "My couch is available for your recovery needs anytime."

"You're absolutely shameless! I'm having coffee with Gemma, then I'll dive back into whatever territory matters I missed."

"Ivy, breathe. Everything's handled. You're incredibly efficient when you're operating at full capacity, so we're actually ahead on all family accounts. Take your time with Gemma. No urgent business to handle today."

I squeezed his shoulder gratefully and headed to the secure meeting room where Gemma was already setting up our impromptu breakfast. She filled me in on everything that happened after exhaustion finally claimed me yesterday, including her conversation with Dominic about Caleb's impossible situation and how torn apart he was too.

"Ivy, if I were in your position, I'd tell the whole underworld to back off and fight like hell for him. You're both miserable apart. How could facing the families together be any worse?"

"Gemma, it absolutely could be worse. Caleb would never survive being separated from his son, and I couldn't live with myself for causing that. Plus, that woman's family would make our lives a living

nightmare, doing everything possible to destroy us through territory wars. Trust me, this is the only way."

"Oh honey, you do look better today," Katelyn interrupted, entering the meeting room and pulling me into one of her protective embraces.

"Katelyn, I have no idea what magical ingredients were in that herbal remedy, but I actually slept. Thank you for taking care of me."

"Always, sweetheart. You know we're here for whatever you need," Katelyn patted my hand before heading toward the espresso machine.

My secured phone buzzed against the table, drawing my attention. I unlocked the screen and read the incoming message.

"Beautiful Ivy, word through family channels is you've been having some difficult days. How about letting me have the honor of taking you to lunch today? Fine dining, better conversation, and who knows, maybe I can coax out one of those devastating smiles."

I found myself grinning at the screen, already composing my response mentally.

"Who's making you look like that?" Gemma asked, propping her chin on her palm with obvious curiosity.

"Parker. He wants to take me to lunch."

"Obviously you're saying yes."

"I'm not sure, Gemma. The last thing I want is to give him the wrong impression or hurt him. Territory alliances are delicate."

"He’s a grown man who controls his own operations and can make his own decisions. You’ve never led him on or lied about where you stand. If he wants to take this chance, let him. Worst case scenario, you get a few hours with a powerful man who makes you laugh and forget your troubles."

"You really think that’s acceptable?"

"I’m positive."

"Maybe I should check with Ruby first. He is her brother after all, and family protocol matters."

I opened our secure group communication and sent a quick message explaining Parker’s invitation and asking for Ruby’s thoughts. Her response came back within minutes.

"My brother knows you’re completely devoted to Caleb. If he wants to roll those dice, he has my complete blessing. He’s a big boy who can handle himself in family politics. Plus, you should absolutely go and actually enjoy yourself for once. Parker’s incredible company and won’t push you for anything you’re not ready to give."

Zoe jumped in immediately, making everyone burst into laughter with her typical boldness.

"Girl, I would climb that gorgeous redhead like a tree and bite those perfect lips until he begged for mercy."

"Zoe’s not wrong. Sorry Ruby, but your brother is absolutely stunning, and that physique deserves its own appreciation society," Nora added.

"Even I would take a shot at Ruby’s brother. Ladies, that man probably knows exactly what he’s doing behind closed doors," Lila chimed in, adding fuel to the fire.

With my family’s enthusiastic endorsement of Parker’s appeal and potential as a distraction, I decided to accept his invitation.

"Parker, lunch sounds perfect. I have no doubt you'll manage to make me smile."

His response appeared almost instantly.

"You just made my entire day. I'll be there at noon sharp. Fair warning, I'm as nervous as a soldier before his first family initiation right now."

I forwarded his sweet message to the group chat, which sparked another round of comments about how charming and dangerous he was. Returning to my desk, I managed to focus completely on family business for the first time in days. Shortly before noon, Gemma appeared in my doorway.

"Move it, sister. Grab your purse, hit the bathroom, fix your lipstick, and get downstairs. That powerful man should be pulling up any minute."

Her excitement was contagious, and I decided to follow orders without argument. I let Xavier know I was heading out for a territory meeting and did exactly what Gemma suggested. The moment I stepped outside the building entrance, Parker's armored luxury sedan pulled up to the curb. He climbed out and walked toward me with that confident stride that commanded respect from every family in the city.

Chapter 119 Cuban Seduction

Ivy's POV

Parker waited beside his armored black sedan, looking every inch the dangerous Don he was beneath that charming facade. His tailored charcoal suit was cut to perfection, emphasizing his powerful frame while the rolled sleeves and unbuttoned collar gave him that effortlessly lethal appeal that made lesser men step aside on the street. Dark sunglasses masked his calculating eyes, and his auburn hair was styled with military precision. Unlike the battle scars that marked most of our world, his skin remained unmarked by violence. He was devastatingly handsome in a way that could distract from the weapon he undoubtedly carried beneath that expensive jacket.

"Christ almighty, Ivy," Parker pulled off his sunglasses as I approached, his green eyes widening with genuine appreciation. "How do you manage to look more breathtaking every time I see you?"

Heat crawled up my neck at his boldness. In our world, such open admiration was rare between rival factions. "You're being ridiculous, Parker."

He leaned down to brush his lips against my cheek, his cologne mixing with the faint scent of gunpowder that clung to all of us in this business. With practiced gallantry, he opened the passenger door and extended his hand. I settled into the leather seat, watching through the bulletproof windshield as he moved around the front with the confident stride of a man who owned half the neutral territory in the city. When he slid behind the wheel, that dangerous smile was back.

"Ready for something that'll change everything? I'm taking you to a place that exists outside all our family territories, where we can just be ourselves without watching for snipers."

My pulse quickened at his confidence. In our world, such promises usually ended in bloodshed. "That's quite a claim. Now you've got my attention."

The establishment took my breath away the moment our convoy pulled through the gates. Cancun stood like a fortress of elegance amid the neutral zone, its massive iron gates bearing the restaurant's name in elegant script. This was Switzerland in our world of endless territorial wars. Lush gardens surrounded the building, complete with a central fountain where deals were struck and alliances forged in whispered conversations. The architecture spoke of old money and older power, soaring ceilings and wraparound terraces supported by graceful columns that had witnessed decades of clandestine meetings. Heavy wooden doors dominated the terracotta facade, while armed security disguised as gardeners maintained subtle watch over every approach. Inside, the grand hall featured floor-to-ceiling windows and generously spaced tables where conversations could flow without fear of electronic surveillance. The aromas wafting through the air promised cuisine worthy of the most discerning palates in our circles.

We selected a table on the terrace where the afternoon sun cast everything in golden light while providing clear sightlines to all potential exits.

"Latin American culture has always fascinated me, Ivy," Parker's eyes lit up as he spoke. "Their approach to family loyalty, to passion, to the code of honor we live by. This place captures everything I admire about their traditions."

"It's extraordinary, Parker. I feel like I've stepped into a completely different world." I surveyed our surroundings, noting the strategic positioning of his security team. "A world where we don't have to look over our shoulders every moment."

His smile turned boyish with satisfaction. "Have you ever experienced authentic Cuban cuisine?"

"Never had the opportunity."

"Perfect. Allow me to introduce you to something that'll expand your horizons while we discuss business."

"I'm entirely in your capable hands."

The server brought our drinks along with leather-bound menus. Parker raised his glass with ceremonial precision.

"Papa Doble, crafted exactly as Hemingway preferred it in Cancun. White rum, maraschino liqueur, fresh lime, grapefruit juice, served ice cold. Here's to the most captivating woman in the entire syndicate finally giving this old soldier a fighting chance."

The cocktail was revelation, crisp and refreshing with barely detectable sweetness, the grapefruit's bite perfectly balanced by the maraschino's subtle complexity. It was exactly what the warm afternoon called for while discussing potential alliances.

"This is absolutely perfect," I couldn't hide my enthusiasm. "You certainly know how to make an impression."

Parker's eyes sparkled with satisfaction as he signaled the server to place our dinner order.

For a while, he regaled me with stories from his operations throughout Cuba and South America. His passion for the cultures he'd encountered through business was infectious, and I found myself captivated by his descriptions of coastal strongholds, mountain hideouts, and the fierce loyalty of the people who'd earned his protection.

"Picadillo a la criolla with congri rice," he announced as our plates arrived. "Ground beef and pork prepared with olives, onions, peppers, and tomatoes. The rice is cooked with red beans, simple ingredients but flavors that tell the story of survival and resilience."

The first bite made my eyes widen in amazement. The complex seasonings and textures created a symphony unlike anything I'd experienced, even in the finest establishments our world had to offer.

As we dined, Parker shared how he'd built his empire with his lieutenant Brenda, how the neutral zone had become his favorite among all his enterprises. His humor was infectious, telling stories and making expressions that had me laughing despite the weight of our circumstances. Being with him felt effortless in a way I hadn't expected, given the dangerous waters we were navigating.

Dessert arrived as Cuban capuchinos, delicate pastries soaked in syrup that dissolved on my tongue like spun sugar. I couldn't suppress the involuntary sound of pleasure.

"Don't make those sounds, Ivy," Parker's voice dropped to a husky whisper, his green eyes darkening as they fixed on my mouth. "I'm already fighting every instinct I have not to claim you right here, and hearing you respond like that is making it nearly impossible to maintain this gentleman's facade."

My cheeks flushed at the raw desire in his voice. "I can't help it when something tastes this incredible."

He shifted in his chair, adjusting his position as he cleared his throat roughly. "Keep testing my restraint like that, and I won't be responsible for the consequences. And something tells me you wouldn't object."

Before I could respond, he leaned close enough that his breath tickled my ear, pressing a soft kiss just behind it. Every nerve ending sparked to life at the contact.

"Though I suspect you wouldn't mind at all," he whispered with knowing confidence.

We finished with rich Cuban coffee strong enough to fuel a small war. Parker suggested we explore the gardens, which were even more magnificent than I'd imagined. A small artificial lake stretched across the back of the property, with a secluded gazebo positioned at its center, accessible by a charming wooden bridge that provided both romance and tactical advantage.

We walked to the gazebo in comfortable silence. Parker leaned against one of the support posts, hands in his pockets, suddenly looking uncertain in a way that seemed completely at odds with his usual commanding presence.

"Ivy, I need to ask you something important." His voice carried a gravity I hadn't heard before. "Are you and Thorne truly finished?"

"Did someone brief you on what happened between us?"

"I have my sources. I hope you don't mind that intelligence reached me."

I shook my head. "Information flows in our world. And yes, Caleb and I are completely over. I won't come between him and his family obligations, and that psychotic woman will never stop making my life dangerous if I remain in the picture."

"I understand the complexities completely." He took a measured breath, gathering resolve. "Ivy, I've been drawn to you from the moment our paths crossed. I respected your alliance with Thorne, but I made it clear to him from the beginning that if things ended between you, I'd be ready to step in."

My heart began racing as I realized where this negotiation was heading.

"And here I am," he continued, looking almost vulnerable. "I know you still have feelings for him, but I'm hoping you'll give me a genuine opportunity. Let me take you to territory meetings, underground fights, exclusive venues, or simply spend quiet evenings planning the future. I want to know everything about the woman who's captured my attention so completely."

"What exactly are you proposing, Parker?"

"A chance to win your loyalty." His eyes met mine with startling intensity. "I want to court you properly, Ivy. Really court you."

I felt a smile tugging at my lips. "I'd be open to that arrangement. But you need to understand something, Parker. You're incredibly powerful and charming and exceptional company, but I'm still recovering from what happened with Caleb. What I can offer you right now is partnership and the possibility of something deeper developing with time."

"That's more than I dared hope for." His entire expression lit up with genuine satisfaction.

Parker stepped closer, never breaking eye contact. He cupped my face gently with one hand, his thumb tracing my cheekbone before his lips found mine. The kiss was soft and questioning initially, giving me every opportunity to retreat. When I didn't resist, his arms encircled my waist, drawing me closer as his tongue gently parted my lips.

The kiss was a revelation, tender and sensual, completely different from Caleb's consuming passion. Parker kissed me like he was savoring something precious, his tongue moving against mine with patient exploration that sent electricity through my entire body. When he finally pulled back, he sucked gently on my lower lip before soothing the spot with his tongue.

"My apologies, Ivy," he said with a wicked grin, "but kissing you is absolutely irresistible."

I stared at him in shock, my lips still tingling from his touch. The kiss had affected me more than I'd expected. Butterflies danced in my stomach, and part of me wanted to pull him back for more. Maybe Parker really could help me move beyond Caleb.

His confident smile told me he knew exactly what effect he'd had on me.

"Come on, beautiful. Much as I hate to end this, I need to return you to Thorne territory before anyone starts asking dangerous questions."

He lifted my hand to his lips for a gentle kiss, then kept hold of it as we walked back to the car. His security team had the convoy waiting by the time we reached the entrance.

When we arrived at the Thorne Group building, Parker came around to open my door with perfect courtesy.

"That was hands down the most memorable afternoon of my entire career," he said, his eyes bright with satisfaction. "Can I see you again soon?"

"Absolutely. I'm already curious about whatever operation you plan next."

"Music to my ears." He kissed the corner of my mouth, the brief contact sending another wave of heat through me. "Until next time, beautiful Ivy."

I watched his convoy disappear into traffic, my hand unconsciously touching my lips where I could still feel the ghost of his kiss.

Chapter 120 Moving Forward

Ivy's POV

When I reached the executive floor of Thorne Group, Gemma practically launched herself from behind her desk and dragged me toward the private conference room we used for sensitive conversations.

"Tell me everything right now! How did your lunch with the casino boss go?"

"It went well, Gemma, really well. But you'll have to wait until tonight when we're all together at the safe house. I'm not telling this story multiple times."

"You're seriously going to torture us with curiosity until then?" Gemma's face scrunched into a dramatic pout. "But heads up, the Don found out about your lunch with Parker."

My stomach dropped like a stone. In the mafia world, nothing stayed secret for long. "How could he possibly know?"

"Caleb told him."

"That traitor..." I muttered, though I knew Caleb was only being loyal to his Don.

"I heard Caleb telling Xavier that maybe it's better if you move forward. He said the Don doesn't want to see you hurt anymore, and Parker's reputation in neutral territory is solid. But Ivy, Caleb looked completely destroyed when he heard."

The familiar ache twisted in my chest like a knife. "I know he is, Gemma, but I can't keep drowning in this situation. I have Max depending on me. Parker understands we're just friends establishing trust. He knows exactly where I stand emotionally. Caleb's engagement is still pending family approval, and I refuse to be anyone's kept woman."

"You're absolutely right. We should get back to work before the other families start watching our movements."

At my desk, I pulled out my encrypted phone to find it buzzing with notifications. The syndicate wives had bombarded our secure group chat with messages about my lunch with the casino kingpin, complete with ridiculous emojis and animated stickers. I quickly typed that I'd give them all the details tonight at our weekly gathering.

My parents had sent their usual check-in message to my civilian phone. I still hadn't found the strength to tell them about the dangerous world I'd become entangled in. That conversation would have to wait until my next visit to their quiet suburban home, far from the blood and violence that now defined my daily life.

Carmen had sent the most adorable photo of Max completely covered in vanilla gelato from the Italian place in Little Italy, his tiny hands raised in victory with the biggest grin on his chocolate-smeared face. Her message explained that the heat had been unbearable during their walk through the family's protected neighborhood, but Max had been such an angel during lunch that he earned the special treat. I couldn't help but smile. My son would eat anything I put in front of him, but gelato and sweets were his weakness, just like his father's sweet tooth that I'd observed during late-night strategy meetings.

Then there was Parker's message, sent through encrypted channels, which made my smile feel different somehow.

"I can't stop thinking about our time together, and now I'm sitting here grinning like an idiot while my lieutenants think I've lost my edge. I have territories to oversee and gambling debts to collect, but all I

can focus on is you. Don’t be surprised when my next invitation comes very soon. The neutral zone feels too empty without your presence."

My fingers moved quickly across the secure keyboard:

"I had an amazing time too. I’m already looking forward to whatever you have planned next. You definitely know how to make a woman feel safe in dangerous times."

His response came immediately, a cartoon kitten face-down on a pillow surrounded by floating hearts with the caption "completely smitten by the syndicate’s most dangerous woman!" I tucked my phone away, feeling lighter than I had in weeks. Parker had this incredible ability to brighten even my darkest days in this blood-soaked underworld.

After the legitimate business hours ended, Xavier’s armored driver took Gemma and me to the family safe house. The moment I stepped through the reinforced steel door, several sets of expectant eyes locked onto me like snipers.

"Finally! Ivy, we need every single detail about your date with the casino don right now!" Zoe practically shouted, her voice echoing off the bulletproof walls.

"Hold on, I need to see my little prince first." Carmen appeared carrying Max, who immediately reached his arms toward me the second he spotted me, his ice-blue eyes lighting up with pure joy.

"Well, ladies, since you’re all settled in the secure room and this little one is fresh from his bath, I’ll head back to the main compound." Carmen transferred Max into my arms, kissed his forehead, then mine, grabbed her tactical bag, and escaped through the reinforced exit before the interrogation could begin.

The syndicate wives were practically vibrating with curiosity, but I refused to say anything until Max was safely tucked into his armored crib in the soundproof nursery. I kept changing the subject, steering our conversation toward safer topics like weapon maintenance and territory boundaries. Only after I’d read Max his bedtime story about brave knights and he was sound asleep did I return to face the firing squad in the main gathering room.

"Enough stalling, Ivy! My brother won’t tell us anything either, and he controls half the underground gambling in the city!" Ruby threw herself dramatically across the bulletproof couch.

"You actually called Parker about family business?" Their nosiness never ceased to amaze me, even in the mafia world.

"Obviously! When you wouldn’t talk, I went straight to the source through back channels. But all he’d say through his lieutenant was that it was the best afternoon he’s had since taking control of neutral territory." Ruby’s eyes sparkled with dangerous mischief.

"So did that gorgeous casino boss kiss you or not?" Nora blurted out, making everyone lean forward like conspirators planning a hit.

"Yes, he did..." I admitted, watching them erupt into silent cheers and applause, careful not to disturb Max or alert the security monitors.

We talked until late into the night behind soundproof walls, and I found myself sharing every moment from lunch to Parker’s sweet messages afterward. For the first time in what felt like forever, I climbed into my reinforced bed without tears on my cheeks. Maybe moving forward in this deadly world wasn’t as impossible as I’d thought.