Mafia Mask 121

Chapter 121 Poisonous Proposal

Caleb's POV

Discovering that Ivy had shared lunch with Parker sent molten rage coursing through my veins. Every fiber of my being screamed to hunt them down, put a bullet through that smooth-talking casino owner's skull, and drag Ivy back to my territory where she belonged. But I forced myself to maintain control. The day we met at Xavier's safehouse, Parker had been brutally transparent about his intentions. He swore to keep his distance from what was mine, but made it crystal clear that if Ivy and I went up in flames, he would move in without hesitation. True to his word, the bastard wasn't wasting a single second.

Just as the women maintained their weekly book club gatherings every Tuesday at Heidi's mansion, my inner circle held our own sacred tradition of meeting to discuss family business, drink premium whiskey, and relieve stress through high-stakes gambling. Tonight, we had chosen the Crimson Lounge because Xavier insisted the electric atmosphere would help shake off the murderous mood that had been consuming me for days.

Walking straight to the private gaming room upon arrival, I joined my capos for our usual poker tournament. The familiar rhythm of cards being shuffled and chips clicking managed to ease the tension in my shoulders somewhat. For the first time in days, I found myself genuinely laughing at one of my men's crude jokes, engaging in strategic banter with my lieutenants, and sipping club soda while maintaining my commitment to sobriety after the catastrophic incident at Heidi's charity gala.

Then my personal vision of hell materialized. A suffocating cloud of sickly sweet perfume invaded my space before manicured claws wrapped around my neck like a python preparing to strike. I froze in shock as glossy lips crashed against mine in a revolting assault that contaminated my mouth with saliva and sticky red lipstick. This was my worst nightmare incarnate.

"Darling, there you are!" Yara Rossi's voice cut through the room like fingernails scraping concrete, her excitement at cornering me absolutely repulsive.

"Remove your filthy hands from me, you deranged psychopath!" I snarled, desperately attempting to pry her talons from around my throat.

"Oh sweetheart, you're so adorable when you play hard to get like that."

"This isn't playing games. Step back immediately." My voice carried across the gaming room, drawing curious stares from nearby family soldiers and associates.

Yara finally released her stranglehold, but her face flushed crimson with fury. She jabbed her finger inches from my nose and shrieked in an even more unbearable, glass-shattering pitch:

"Listen very carefully, Caleb Thorne. I am carrying your heir and will become your wife. I suggest you start treating me with the respect and devotion befitting your future donna."

Perfect. Just what this evening needed - a public spectacle in front of my own men. I dragged my hands down my face and summoned every last ounce of restraint from my rapidly depleting reserves.

"Yara, we are not marrying for love because frankly, I find you repulsive. We are only discussing this arrangement because you and your manipulative father have attempted to blackmail me with your pregnancy claims. But do not mistake this situation for romance. I will never become the devoted husband you are delusional enough to fantasize about."

"Baby, think rationally about this. Our union is inevitable, so why not embrace it and allow me to prove how perfect we are together? I promise you will develop feelings for me much faster than you imagine."

"You have completely lost your mind. You have failed to accomplish that goal for decades. What makes you believe you can achieve it now?" Xavier interjected with cutting sarcasm, prompting explosive laughter from the rest of our crew. Yara glared at him with murderous intent.

"The real problem, darling, is that you surround yourself with toxic influences," Yara hissed, shooting venomous looks at my capos.

"I actually agree with that assessment, but not regarding them. I should have eliminated your father's business partnership with my organization and removed you from my life years ago," I replied, rising from my chair.

"Caleb!" she screamed in outrage.

"Now do everyone in this establishment a favor and disappear immediately," I concluded with finality.

"Whether you accept it or not, you will become my husband. We have crucial matters to discuss and arrangements to finalize," she persisted with delusional stubbornness.

"Discuss what exactly, you unhinged woman?" I asked, genuinely amazed by her psychological instability.

"The wedding reception, our living arrangements, honeymoon destination, the nursery preparations..." she rattled off as if these were logical priorities.

"There will be no reception and definitely no honeymoon. I have already arranged separate living quarters for you. Is there anything else requiring my immediate attention?" My patience was completely exhausted.

"That is absolutely unacceptable. I am going to inform daddy about your disrespectful behavior," she whined like a spoiled child throwing a tantrum.

"You know what, gentlemen? I have grown tired of this establishment's atmosphere. I have a much superior suggestion," Dominic announced, standing abruptly. "Shall we relocate?"

We all followed Dominic's lead toward the exit. Yara remained behind, stamping her designer heels and screaming like a toddler denied candy. After departing the Crimson Lounge, Dominic sent a coded text message containing the address of our new destination - a location I knew intimately from previous stress-relief visits.

Upon our arrival, the establishment's manager personally greeted our crew and escorted us to one of the exclusive VIP suites. This was the most sophisticated gentleman's club in the entire territory, catering exclusively to made men and their associates. Before we had even settled into the leather seating, two stunning hostesses wearing barely-there scarlet dresses and matching stiletto heels appeared with crystal tumblers and bottles of premium aged whiskey and cognac. Finn and I requested mineral water instead.

"At least in this sanctuary, gentlemen, that insufferable harpy has never managed to track us down!" Dominic declared triumphantly, raising his glass in celebration.

The venue radiated class and sophistication, filled with breathtaking women working as both servers and entertainers. We drank, discussed family business freely, and appreciated the stunning feminine beauty surrounding us without interference. As the evening progressed, the strangling tension that had been consuming me for weeks finally began to loosen its grip on my throat. When closing time approached, I departed with one of the dancers who had provided exceptional service during my previous visits to this establishment. I desperately needed a distraction from the chaos threatening to destroy everything I had worked to build.

Chapter 122 Tactical Agreement

Caleb’s POV

The morning shadows had barely lifted from my penthouse office when my secure line shattered the silence. I answered to hear Gemma’s weary voice cutting through the encrypted connection.

"The snake himself demands an audience with you."

I knew exactly which venomous bastard she meant. There was no avoiding this confrontation. Gemma patched the call through, and Roman Rossi’s grating voice immediately assaulted my ears, launching into what he clearly believed was an intimidating power play.

"How dare you humiliate my daughter in front of the other families like that? She came home devastated, physically ill from the shame and heartbreak your cruelty caused her. Caleb, you’re about to bind yourself to our bloodline. You need to show my daughter the respect befitting a future Syndicate wife."

"What respect, Roman? The respect owed to a scheming viper who drugged a man at a family gathering to get pregnant and trap him into a political alliance? Because that’s exactly what your precious daughter earned." My blood was already reaching a dangerous boiling point.

"You will not speak about my daughter that way!" Roman’s voice exploded through the encrypted line.

"Are you forgetting who controls the family's purse strings and territory assignments?"

"Caleb, you need to sit down with my daughter properly. There's a Syndicate wedding to orchestrate, and countless family protocols to observe. You're coming to dinner at our compound tonight."

"Absolutely not. If you want this discussion, we'll meet for lunch at Romano's." My tone brooked no argument. "Early afternoon, and we'll settle everything once and for all."

I immediately contacted Xavier, who agreed to accompany me without hesitation. At the appointed time, we entered Romano's to find Roman already positioned at a corner table like some self-appointed capo holding court over his diminished territory.

"What's that street rat doing here?" Roman's eyes narrowed with unconcealed hatred as they landed on Xavier.

"You brought your leverage, I brought mine," I replied with a cold smile that promised violence. "If you show Xavier even the slightest disrespect, this negotiation ends before it begins."

Roman grumbled but backed down like the coward he was. A waiter appeared with a bottle of Dom Pérignon, which immediately ignited my fury. There was absolutely nothing here worth celebrating.

"Remove that. We're not toasting anything," I told the waiter with deadly calm.

"Nonsense, we're celebrating your engagement to my daughter and the strengthening of family bonds."

"Like hell we are!" I turned back to the waiter. "Take it away. No alcohol."

The waiter retreated with the champagne. Just as I felt the familiar sensation of manipulation closing around my throat like a garrote, I snapped to full alert.

"Get your hands off me."

Yara stepped back, releasing her grip. Yara had arrived with her mother, both dressed in coordinating designer outfits that made my stomach turn with their obvious calculation. I wanted to disappear through the restaurant floor.

"Sit down! And if either of you even considers insulting Xavier, this entire marriage charade ends right now." I could already read their predatory intentions from their expressions. "So what exactly do you want?"

"Darling, let's order first and discuss family business afterward," Yara purred with fake sweetness.

"Yara, I'm barely tolerating your family's presence as it is, so get to the point." I was ready to snap her neck.

"Sweetheart, I'm planning our engagement celebration and the Syndicate announcement..."

"I already told you there won't be any announcement party!"

"Caleb, she's my only child, and if she's marrying into the Thorne bloodline, there absolutely must be a proper family celebration," Roman interjected with calculated pressure.

"Here's what's going to happen. We'll have a private ceremony with complete financial separation and an ironclad prenuptial agreement protecting Thorne assets. I've secured an apartment where we'll maintain separate territories under one roof." I fixed Roman with a stare that promised retribution. "You and I will simply coexist in this arrangement because of the pregnancy claim."

"But I assumed you'd establish residence in the family estate," Yara's mother finally spoke up with greedy calculation. "That magnificent compound with the fortress-like security. My daughter deserves that level of protection and status."

"Your daughter will never set foot in my family's stronghold or my private penthouse," I replied to the scheming witch.

"Caleb, Syndicate marriages don’t function that way," Yara protested with rising panic.

"Well, that’s exactly how this arrangement will function," I shot back without compromise.

Suddenly, an escalating wail filled the restaurant, sounding like a child’s tantrum. I turned to see Yara sobbing dramatically with calculated manipulation. Christ, it was absolutely revolting. Every time she performed this act, I felt both disgusted and genuinely alarmed by her instability.

"I want a celebration! I want one! Daddyyyy..." she looked at Roman with her mouth hanging open pathetically like a deranged doll.

Xavier discreetly sent me an encrypted message on my phone:

"Agree to the party and buy yourself time. Postpone the ceremony for several months using celebration planning as justification. Maybe we can force the DNA test before any binding contracts?"

Xavier had just thrown me a crucial lifeline. It was brilliant tactical thinking. I hadn’t realized it, but they’d inadvertently given me negotiating leverage and precious time.

"Fine, I’ll agree to the celebration, but strictly under my terms." The spawn of Satan looked at me with some grotesque open-mouthed grin, mascara streaming down her face.

"And what terms are those?" Roman demanded with suspicious calculation.

"The ceremony happens after several months pass. I’ll assign the Syndicate’s event coordinator to organize this circus." I stated with finality.

"Absolutely not, Yara’s pregnancy will be showing by then." The mother from hell complained with obvious alarm.

"As if she wants to hide her supposed condition anyway!" I replied sarcastically. "It’s either this timeline or no celebration whatsoever."

"I accept!" Yara answered before Roman could object, sensing her window of opportunity.

"Excellent! In that case, this meeting is concluded. I'll have our coordinator contact you directly. Ready to leave, Xavier?" I was already standing and adjusting my suit jacket.

"Not so fast, Caleb. We have numerous other family matters to discuss." Roman attempted to reassert his dwindling control.

"I can't imagine what those would be." I remained calm but unmovably firm.

"Your living protocols, the honeymoon expectations, your attitude toward my daughter's status within the Syndicate..." Roman listed desperately.

"My attitude remains unchanged, there won't be any honeymoon, and our arrangement is already established with proper security clearance. Everything's settled! Excuse us."

Xavier and I escaped as rapidly as possible, returned to headquarters, and ordered secure takeout that we consumed in the war room, finally able to breathe freely again without the stench of Roman's desperation polluting the air.

Chapter 123 - Manipulation and Mounting Frustrations

On my drive to the family compound, yesterday's lunch with that bastard Caleb consumed my thoughts. Every arrogant word from his mouth only deepened my loathing for that privileged fool. The condescending way he spoke to me made my blood boil, but I had to swallow my pride. I needed him for my daughter, needed him to put a ring on her finger and give her children with his precious bloodline. The Thorne name was my golden ticket, guaranteeing that his entire empire would eventually flow to my daughter and grandson, and ultimately into my hands.

The most infuriating part was his audacity to push back the engagement ceremony by several months. Every delayed day meant my plans remained in limbo, but my darling Yara had to throw her tantrum about some ridiculous social event. Still, perhaps a grand, newspaper-worthy wedding would serve my purposes better. The whole underworld would witness my daughter becoming the legitimate Mrs. Thorne, mother to the next heir.

There was still the matter of that magnificent estate, his parents' property. What a breathtaking fortress, sitting empty while that fool lived in his cramped penthouse. Now he wanted to stuff my Yara into some mediocre safe house. But my clever girl assured me she would handle that situation perfectly.

Another productive day awaited me at what would soon become my operation. My carefully laid plans were approaching fruition. That idiot believed himself so clever, yet he couldn't identify who orchestrated Ivy's downfall, even after discovering her innocence and bringing her back. He remained completely oblivious to the web spinning directly beneath his nose.

The endless renovation on my floor of the compound continued to irritate me beyond measure. Weeks had passed since construction began, with no completion in sight. Sharing space with those low-level street soldiers severely hampered my operations. I had to exercise extreme caution now, surrounded by unfamiliar faces from outside my crew. Caleb's new security protocols, citing some mysterious system upgrade, had prompted Neil to temporarily halt our money laundering transactions. Well, he was the family accountant and my trusted ally, so I respected his judgment.

Today I planned to pressure Caleb into clearing my floor and lifting that damned security restriction. His prohibition against evening and weekend compound access made document switching considerably more challenging.

Reflecting on recent weeks, numerous strange changes had occurred throughout the family operations. Perhaps he harbored suspicions, though if that were true, he would have eliminated me immediately given his obvious disdain. I would push him to restore our previous operational rhythm. The major downside was losing Monica as my intelligence source within his inner circle. That incompetent woman actually assaulted some newcomer freak. Naturally, he wouldn't tolerate such behavior. Now that useless Monica served no purpose beyond handling my daughter's trivial requests, yet she persisted in calling me constantly like some lovesick teenager.

I parked and walked from the lot toward the Thorne compound, another source of daily frustration. Since losing my family parking privileges, I had to use street parking a block away. What an inconvenient waste of time and dignity.

Approaching the entrance, I spotted that fool waiting for me. I had been successfully avoiding her since her expulsion from the inner circle, but today she appeared here like some desperate stalker. Monica truly lacked basic intelligence. Being seen together could completely destroy my carefully constructed plans.

"Roman, don’t you dare pretend you didn’t see me. Move your ass over here. We need to talk immediately."

"Monica, this location is completely inappropriate."

"I don’t give a damn about appropriate. We’re talking right now. That little coffee shop across the street, nobody frequents it at this hour. Move it."

"Fine." I sighed heavily and crossed the street with mounting irritation.

We entered the quaint coffee shop and ordered coffees. This discreet little establishment had served as our emergency meeting location for months. The elderly owner typically worked alone, completely absorbed in her crossword puzzles, often so distracted she barely acknowledged customers.

"Make this quick, Monica. We cannot be observed together now that you’re no longer part of the inner circle."

"Watch your tone with me, Roman. I possess information that could obliterate you and your precious princess daughter."

"Don’t threaten me, Monica."

"Then don’t abandon me, Roman. If anyone notices us, simply claim I came begging for help getting my position back and you felt charitable."

"Agreed. What do you want?"

"What do I want, Roman? Money, obviously. My position back. And an explanation for why you’ve been avoiding me. It’s been far too long since we met, I miss you, tiger." Her syrupy, seductive voice made my skin crawl. This woman was absolutely pathetic.

"Monica, circumstances became extremely complicated after your departure from Caleb's circle. I'm uncertain about that bastard's current schemes. You must exercise patience."

"Roman, patience isn't in my vocabulary. Figure something out immediately, or I start talking. Don't forget that I arranged for that drugged drink to be served to Caleb at the party. That's the only reason your little princess could make him believe they slept together, though we both know he was unconscious the entire time." Monica displayed that malicious smile I despised. "Besides, your daughter isn't actually pregnant yet, and it was only through my connections that she managed to forge those test results at Caleb's trusted doctor. I had to bribe the nurse who helped us, and you still haven't reimbursed me."

"Alright, Monica." I sighed, calculating my options. This woman had become a genuine liability. "Meet me at the safe house during lunch. I'll give you something special."

"Perfect. I'm heading there immediately."

Monica departed abruptly. What a dangerous woman. I needed to keep her satisfied until my plan reached completion, or perhaps arrange for her permanent disappearance. She still possessed valuable contacts at Caleb's frequent haunts. The underground club receptionist, for instance, always informed us of his presence, making Yara's strategic appearances much easier.

I finished my coffee and headed to the compound. The cafe owner never even glanced up from her crossword puzzle. A rival family could execute a hit right here without her noticing.

Observing all these unfamiliar street soldiers patrolling my floor filled me with rage. These people generated excessive noise, displayed too much eagerness, hardly resembled serious enforcers. I entered my pathetic temporary office, which immediately darkened my mood further. This place was becoming absolute hell.

My phone vibrated with a message from Neil: "Do you know anything about the new security system being implemented?"

Why this inquiry now? I had no knowledge of any system he referenced. Probably another worthless surveillance upgrade. I responded exactly that, and immediately received his reply.

"Better be worthless. Had drinks with a financial contact who mentioned a new tracking system that monitors entire family operations and is completely fraud-proof. One suspicious transaction triggers flags and blocks all operations. The system's developer is Caleb's friend. I pray he hasn't purchased this technology. It costs a fortune."

What the hell was this? I didn't realize such technology existed. But it definitely wasn't that system. I had reviewed the contract and payment order from another source, relatively inexpensive. Neil was simply being paranoid. I messaged him this assessment and told him to relax.

Time to pressure Caleb about my floor situation. I called his direct line and that mysterious secretary answered. After requesting to speak with the boss, she transferred me following some delay.

"Caleb, we need to discuss something important." I snapped impatiently.

"What do you want, Roman?"

"In person. I'm coming upstairs."

"If you want conversation, it happens by phone. I'm not interested in looking at your face." This arrogant bastard would pay for every humiliation.

"Listen here, Caleb, I cannot remain on this temporary floor any longer. It's like living in chaos with undisciplined soldiers. These people lack professionalism, respect for hierarchy. Too much noise, too much disruption. My floor renovation has dragged on excessively and must end immediately."

"Listen here, Roman, show proper respect for MY family's soldiers. MY floor will be completed when I decide, and I'm keeping you with the street crew precisely BECAUSE I WANT TO." This son of a bitch was actually yelling at me. I wanted to put a bullet in his skull.

"Caleb, stop being childish. The underboss has always maintained separate quarters for legitimate reasons."

"Roman, it’s decided. You’ll permanently share quarters with the soldiers." He hung up on me. I was going to destroy this worthless piece of garbage.

Immediately afterward, my insufferable wife called demanding money for Yara’s engagement dress shopping, insisting I accompany them. Obviously I refused, but transferred money to that annoying woman’s account to end the conversation.

I spent the remaining morning in complete irritation. Time to meet that idiot Monica. What a miserable day. I left my temporary office and headed to the safe house. Upon arrival, I found that annoying woman waiting with takeout food.

"What the hell is this, Monica? You couldn’t possibly order something decent for my lunch?"

"Be grateful I ordered anything. I’m not your wife, Roman."

I sighed and consumed that pathetic meal. God, I appreciated fine dining, despised cheap food, and this idiot knew that perfectly. After eating, Monica began her performance.

"You seem extremely stressed, Roman. Come here, I’ll help you relax and forget your troubles."

"Excellent idea. I’ll work out my frustrations until I feel completely satisfied."

I proceeded to the bedroom and used that whore for the remainder of my lunch break. After dressing, I transferred money to her account via phone.

"I sent you something. Save it carefully because family finances are tight. Until the final takeover, everything remains complicated."

"Fine, it’s sufficient for now," she said, checking the amount. "But what about my position back?"

"That’s impossible currently, darling. Only after I assume control. You know we’re together, and you’ll become my personal lieutenant."

"When are you leaving your wife, Roman? You promised to make me your woman. I cannot tolerate my idiot husband any longer."

"Darling, we must endure this situation until everything concludes. I cannot stand that stupid wife of mine either. Once the family becomes mine, we'll be together. Just exercise a little more patience."

"Alright," she sighed. "Your daughter wants my assistance choosing her engagement dress."

"Perfect, select the most beautiful one. My stupid wife has absolutely terrible taste."

I left that whore in the safe house. Very soon, I would eliminate her permanently. I couldn't tolerate her presence much longer.

Chapter 124 Cornered by Desire

Caleb's POV

Roman Rossi continued to be a plague upon my organization. His latest tantrum concerned territory redistribution, yet the bastard remained entrenched in his position like a persistent infection. My patience with this walking liability had evaporated completely. The family's internal investigation was expanding its reach, scrutinizing years of money laundering records with forensic precision. Xavier warned me this probe could stretch on indefinitely. Until then, I was trapped tolerating this insufferable parasite.

The East Coast arms shipment consumed my entire day, confining me to my private office like a caged predator. The deal was progressing smoothly, with our contacts expressing interest in expanding the weapons pipeline. However, their demands for extensive documentation kept Jude and me drowning in falsified paperwork. A trip to the docks loomed ahead, but perhaps escaping this suffocating atmosphere would provide some relief.

"I return from weeks of coordinating Frost Coast operations to find no welcome party? What kind of family are we?" Heidi swept into my office with her characteristic wit. "Though I must admit, this office renovation looks magnificent."

"Heidi! Christ, I've been counting the hours until your return. This place falls apart without you." I abandoned my desk to embrace the woman who had become my surrogate mother after losing my parents.

"Darling, I've missed you terribly. How are you surviving?"

"He's completely destroyed. A hollow shell of a man, stressed beyond recognition, paranoid, and prone to violent outbursts. Basically a unhinged crime boss who lost his woman," Jude announced, rising from his position to join us.

"I can see the truth in that assessment. You look absolutely wrecked," Heidi observed with brutal honesty.

"Heidi, I need your counsel. Help me navigate this nightmare. Xavier suggested delaying tactics, postponing this cursed engagement as long as possible. I've managed to secure additional months, but what purpose does it serve?" Desperation colored my voice.

"Listen carefully, son. Approach this situation like a territorial negotiation. Remain cold and calculating. Emotions will destroy you, just as they created this disaster. You allowed feelings to cloud your judgment, got intoxicated by lust, made catastrophic decisions, and potentially impregnated that manipulative snake," Heidi delivered her assessment with surgical precision.

"Additionally, you absolutely need that paternity test. I refuse to believe this child belongs to you," Jude interjected.

"Exactly my thoughts. But why does she continue refusing the test?" Heidi demanded.

"Yara claims the procedure carries miscarriage risks and won't endanger the pregnancy. Besides, testing can only occur later in the pregnancy anyway," I explained.

"Well, you've bought yourself time. She's in the early stages now. You must persuade her to test," Heidi insisted.

"Xavier and I are exploring every angle because Caleb becomes too emotional and loses control," Jude added.

"Tell me everything from the beginning," Heidi commanded.

We spent considerable time briefing Heidi on every sordid detail of this nightmare with Roman's twisted family, the organization's precarious position, and the ongoing internal investigation. Xavier joined our impromptu war council, and we ordered takeout from our usual contact.

Eventually, I needed to stretch my legs after spending the morning reviewing shipping manifests on my computer screen. My body protested the prolonged confinement. I headed toward the break room for espresso, but paused outside when I heard Ivy's voice. Uncertainty froze me in place as I debated whether to enter. She was engaged in a phone conversation, and I caught fragments of her words.

"Not at all, Parker. I understand you're incredibly busy with your casino operations. How was your trip to Atlantic City? I expected you'd be away longer." Ivy's voice carried genuine warmth. "Really? That's wonderful news." She paused, listening intently. "A gift for me? Oh, Parker, that's so thoughtful of you." Her laughter was musical as she absorbed his response. "Alright, Parker, when would you like to present this mysterious gift?" Another pause stretched between them. "Tomorrow works perfectly for me. Where shall we meet?" She was accepting another date with that casino owner. "No, you always surprise me beautifully, and I adore the places you select. Perfect. I'll see you tomorrow then. Take care." She disconnected the call, and through the door's gap, I glimpsed the soft smile gracing her lips.

Parker certainly didn't waste time pursuing her. But I wouldn't make his conquest easy. She might be dining with him, but thoughts of me would consume her evening. I drew a steadying breath and entered the break room calmly. I closed the door behind me and approached Ivy, who stood before the espresso machine preparing her drink. I positioned myself directly behind her, placing my hands on the counter on either side of her body. Ivy was completely trapped within my arms.

I inhaled her intoxicating perfume deeply. I pressed my body against hers, pinning her between the counter and my chest, my body responding immediately to her proximity as arousal stirred within me. I exhaled slowly and whispered against her ear.

"Another date with Parker, my treasure? Is this how things will be? Here I am, dying from wanting you, while you're entertaining yourself with another man?" Jealousy consumed me entirely.

"Caleb..." she breathed heavily, gasping as she felt my hardness pressing against her back.

"Tell me, my treasure. Tell me if your body responds to him the way it does to me." I swept her hair aside and trailed kisses along her neck. I gently sucked her earlobe before continuing my assault of kisses, finally delivering a tender bite to her nape. Ivy was breathless beneath my touch.

"Caleb, please, don't torture me like this. Can't you see how much I'm suffering because of you? But you're getting engaged to Yara, and I must find a way to move forward with my life."

A tear traced down her cheek, and I gently turned her head to kiss the path that tear had carved, stopping near her mouth. I gazed into her eyes and saw my own overwhelming love reflected in those stunning green depths.

"My treasure, I don't know how to exist without you anymore."

I turned her to face me and kissed her with desperate intensity, love, and longing. It was a deep, consuming kiss. She melted into my embrace and responded with equal passion. Our lips were starved for each other. The need to be together was devouring us both. Our tears mingled as we kissed. When our lips finally separated, I held her tightly against my chest, stroking her hair as her head rested over my heart.

"My treasure, I know I'm being incredibly selfish. Parker is a decent man. But I can't bear the thought of you with someone else. I managed to delay that cursed engagement for additional months. That's sufficient time to convince that viper to undergo paternity testing. This child might not be mine, Ivy. Please, just give me this time."

"And what happens if the child is yours?" she sobbed against my chest. "We'll only have extended our suffering."

"Oh, my love... please forgive me," I pleaded desperately.

"I simply accepted a friend's invitation, Caleb. It doesn't mean I'm pursuing a relationship with him. But I can't drown in this misery. I have a son who needs me," she attempted to explain.

"How is our boy? I miss him desperately. I want to see him," I asked.

"He misses you too. But it's better if you two don't meet anymore. I won't risk Roman and his daughter targeting my son. He's just a child. I'm terrified they might harm him." Her concern was justified.

"I understand completely. But can you tell him that I love him and miss him?"

"I will. He'll be so happy to hear that. Thank you." She pulled back slightly and placed her hand against my face. "I'll never love anyone the way I love you."

Ivy pressed a quick kiss to my lips and slipped from my embrace, leaving me alone with only her lingering perfume. I collapsed into a chair and like a broken man, buried my head in my arms and let the tears fall freely.

When I finally composed myself, I returned to my office. I retrieved my phone and sent a message to my Ivy.

"I just want you to be happy."

I attempted to resume reviewing shipping routes, but my mind had already fled to distant places.

Chapter 125 Electric Attraction

Ivy's POV

My phone buzzed with Parker's message saying his driver was downstairs waiting. I grabbed my clutch, kissed Max goodnight, and bid farewell to Carmen and Zoe before heading down to the lobby.

The moment I stepped outside, I saw Parker leaning against his armored black sedan, that devastatingly charming smile already spreading across his face. Dear God, why did this man have to be so ridiculously magnetic? I was still completely torn up about Caleb, heartbroken over losing him to the brutal world of mafia politics, but Parker was dangerous in an entirely different way. He radiated this raw power that made my pulse race. Everything about him screamed temptation - the way his expensive cologne

enveloped me, how his tailored suits fit his lean frame perfectly, that confident swagger that could make any woman forget her own name in this treacherous underworld.

"Hello there, gorgeous Ivy," he said, closing the distance between us and placing a soft kiss at the corner of my lips that sent electricity shooting through my entire body. "You look even more stunning than usual tonight."

"I... uh... well..." I stammered, clearing my throat as heat crept up my neck. "Good evening, Parker."

His eyes danced with amusement as his grin widened. He placed his warm hand against the small of my back, guiding me toward the passenger side. After opening the door, he leaned in close to help with my seatbelt, his breath tickling my ear as he whispered.

"Enjoying the view, Ivy?"

My eyes went wide and I opened my mouth to protest, but nothing came out.

"Because you're definitely undressing me with those beautiful eyes of yours," he murmured, gently biting my earlobe before standing up and closing the door. He slid into the driver's seat with that same mischievous expression. "Tonight is going to be absolutely incredible."

I sat there completely speechless, my mouth hanging open. He had caught me red-handed checking him out and was thoroughly enjoying my embarrassment.

"So Ivy, I know you're still head over heels for that Thorne monster - and I emphasize still because that's going to change. But I can tell I'm getting under your skin. Am I wrong about that?"

"Parker, I..." My cheeks burned with embarrassment.

"Come on, we're both adults here. You're an incredibly beautiful woman and I'm being completely transparent about wanting you in my organization and in my bed. Just be honest with me - do you feel even the slightest bit of chemistry between us?" He held up his fingers with barely any space between them.

"You’re obviously very attractive, Parker. Every woman in the underground probably fantasizes about being under your protection," I admitted.

"Maybe so, but there’s only one woman I’m thinking about," he said, catching my eyes as we stopped at a red light. "And she’s sitting right here beside me. You still haven’t given me a real answer though."

"Fine, yes Parker. You’re incredibly powerful and I do feel attracted to you," I said, meeting those mesmerizing green eyes.

"Attracted? Come on Ivy, don’t be so proper," he laughed. "Loosen up a little."

"What do you mean, loosen up?" I found myself relaxing despite everything, drawn in by his playful energy.

At the next red light, he turned toward me, his gaze slowly traveling down my body before locking onto my eyes again.

"Like this - I’m completely captivated by you right now. You’re absolutely gorgeous and you’ve got me completely under your spell. I’d protect you from any rival family that dared to touch you."

"Okay, I think I understand," I said as the light changed green and he focused back on driving. Two could play this game. I leaned over and whispered against his ear, "You want honesty? You’re dangerously seductive, devastatingly handsome, and every time you touch me, my skin catches fire. So yes Parker, you definitely affect me, and it’s way more than just a little attraction." I traced my tongue along his earlobe before settling back in my seat, watching goosebumps rise along his arms.

"Damn it Ivy, the second I park this car, I’m going to kiss you senseless," he said, his voice rough with desire and making my stomach flip with anticipation.

Minutes later, we pulled into a private underground garage beneath one of his legitimate business fronts. Parker took my hand and pressed his lips to my knuckles before getting out and opening my door. The moment I stepped out, he backed me against the car, his hands finding my waist. He moved closer slowly, never breaking eye contact, brushing his nose against mine tenderly before finally bringing

his mouth to mine. The kiss started gentle and sweet, but quickly deepened as I wound my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. He caught my bottom lip between his teeth, then soothed it with his tongue. He pulled back just slightly, our bodies still pressed together, eyes still closed.

"God Ivy, you're going to be the death of me," he breathed against my lips before kissing me again quickly. When he looked at me, his smile was brilliant. "I brought you here to make you happy, but apparently all I have to do is kiss you to see that beautiful smile."

"You're incredibly arrogant," I laughed, placing my palms flat against his chest. His eyes heated at my touch.

"Come on, I want to see you laughing all night," he said, taking my hand and leading me toward the building entrance.

A discrete sign read "The Comedian" across the front of the building. Parker explained it was an exclusive entertainment venue featuring an amazing underground comedy show tonight, completely off the radar of rival families. Inside, we were seated at a perfect table in the center of the room with an unobstructed view of the stage, which was bathed in spotlight while the rest of the space remained dimly lit and secure.

"You're going to love this, I promise. And if you don't, I'll just have to kiss you again until you smile," he said with that cocky grin that made me shake my head in disbelief.

"I'll have a caipirinha," I said, scanning the drink menu.

Parker ordered our drinks and some food, and we talked easily until the show started. He was absolutely right - I had an amazing time. The venue was fantastic, featuring not only the main act but several up-and-coming comedians as well. By the time we left after midnight, my sides ached from laughing so hard.

Back in the car before leaving the garage, Parker turned to me.

"So Ivy, did you have a good time?"

"Absolutely incredible, Parker. My face and stomach hurt from laughing so much. I loved every minute of it. I really needed this tonight after all the family drama. Thank you," I said, beaming at him as he made an exaggerated disappointed face.

"Damn, I was really hoping to kiss you again," he said flirtatiously, making me burst into laughter again.

While I was still giggling, Parker captured my lips in another kiss, this one hot and consuming.

"I couldn't help myself," he said when we broke apart, his thumb tracing along my bottom lip. "I need to make a quick stop at the casino floor. Want to come with me? We could dance a little in the VIP lounge."

"I'd love that," I replied, genuinely enjoying his company and this incredible night he was giving me.

At the casino, Parker led me upstairs to a secluded table tucked away in a quiet corner of the high-roller section. We ordered drinks and appetizers that arrived quickly. Brenda appeared and slid into our booth with us.

"Ivy, why didn't you bring my gorgeous friend with you tonight?" Brenda pouted dramatically.

"Because she's with her boyfriend tonight, Brenda," I replied, amused by his theatrics.

"Oh really? I think I'll text her then," Brenda said with that troublemaker gleam in his eyes.

After actually sending the message, Brenda discussed some territorial business matters with Parker. Soon after, Parker turned his attention back to me.

"I want to dance with you, but up here in the private lounge where we can have some privacy instead of that crowded floor downstairs. Is that alright with you?" he whispered in my ear.

"Absolutely," I said, loving the idea of dancing with him away from all the chaos below.

When Parker finally brought me home, dawn was already breaking. The entire night had been wonderful and relaxing. Parker had been a complete gentleman throughout everything despite the dangerous world we inhabited. He opened my car door and walked me all the way to the building entrance.

"So, did you enjoy yourself tonight?" he asked before we said goodbye.

"It was perfect. Thank you so much, Parker. You always know exactly the right places to take me, even in this complicated world."

"I'm thrilled you had such a great time. And just so I know," he leaned down and whispered against my ear, "how much has that little attraction grown tonight?"

"Well, maybe it's gotten considerably stronger," I said teasingly.

Parker pulled me against him by my waist and kissed me with raw hunger and urgency, making my knees buckle and leaving us both breathless. Before ending the kiss, he caught my bottom lip between his teeth and ran his tongue along the same spot in that incredibly sexy way he had before.

"Sweet dreams, beautiful Ivy. I'll see you very soon," he whispered against my ear before stepping back. He waited until I was safely inside before returning to his armored car.

Chapter 126 Mother Holds All Cards

Rossi's POV

"Mom, you cannot be serious about sabotaging everything I want in life!" Rossi's voice echoed through the marble corridors of their family compound as she confronted her bedridden mother in the master suite.

Patricia pressed a trembling hand to her forehead, her silk nightgown wrinkled from days of confinement. "Darling, please keep your voice down. This migraine is absolutely killing me, and the last thing I need is you screaming like some street thug's daughter."

"I don’t give a damn about your headache!" Rossi’s shout was even louder this time, her designer heels clicking aggressively against the imported Italian marble as she spun around and stormed toward the door.

Don Rossi looked up from his encrypted phone as his daughter burst into his private office, throwing herself onto the leather armchair across from his mahogany desk with theatrical flair. Her face was flushed with anger, her perfectly manicured hands clenched into fists.

"Princess, what has you so worked up?" he asked, setting aside the latest intelligence reports from their money laundering operations to focus on his obviously distressed daughter.

"It’s your wife, Daddy. She’s being completely unreasonable with me, and I’m sick of it."

The Don raised an eyebrow, his weathered face showing concern. In their world, family unity was everything, and internal discord could be exploited by rival families. "What did your mother refuse to approve now, sweetheart?"

"Yesterday I wanted to visit that exclusive bridal boutique in Manhattan, the one that designs gowns for all the other family daughters. But she suddenly developed this convenient illness and insisted we postpone until next week." Rossi’s voice dripped with accusation, as if her mother had orchestrated the sickness specifically to spite her upcoming marriage into the Thorne syndicate.

"Baby girl, why don’t you just take Monica with you instead? She has excellent taste, and the Thorne family would approve of her accompanying you."

"Because Mom is hoarding the family credit card like some paranoid miser! She keeps insisting it has to be a special mother-daughter bonding experience, like we’re some normal suburban family instead of one of the most powerful crime dynasties on the East Coast." Rossi’s tone turned whiny, the way it always did when she wanted something from her father.

"I transferred two hundred thousand into her account yesterday specifically for your wedding expenses, so she has no legitimate excuse to deny you access to those funds."

"Then you need to go talk some sense into her, daddyyy..." Rossi drew out the word in that particular way that had always gotten her what she wanted since childhood, even when she was asking for things that violated federal laws.

Don Rossi pushed himself up from his chair with a resigned sigh, his joints creaking slightly from old bullet wounds that never healed properly. "Give me a few minutes to handle this situation, princess."

He made his way through the compound's secured corridors to the master bedroom, where Patricia lay buried under imported cashmere blankets despite the controlled temperature. Rossi began his systematic search, rifling through her designer handbags, yanking open dresser drawers filled with jewelry worth more than most people's houses, and even checking behind oil paintings that concealed various family safes.

"Patricia, where the hell is that card? Rossi wants to get her dress fitted today, and the Thorne family is expecting this alliance to proceed smoothly. Just hand it over and she can take Monica to handle the arrangements."

"Absolutely not!" Patricia's voice carried surprising strength for someone claiming to be at death's door. "She's my daughter too, Rossi. I'm going with her to choose her wedding dress, and that's final. We'll go next week when I can actually stand up without feeling dizzy. And don't even think about giving her cash to bypass my authority in this family."

The Don's jaw tightened, his eyes flashing with the dangerous look that had terrified rival families for decades. "Patricia, you're really testing my patience here."

"And you're testing mine!" She sat up abruptly, her eyes blazing with an intensity that reminded him exactly why he had chosen her as his wife years ago. "Remember those documents I mentioned? The ones detailing the investigation into the Thorne patriarch's car bombing years back? And that particularly interesting recording I made of your late-night phone calls discussing your family's involvement in arranging that accident? They're safely stored with someone I trust completely. Someone who has very specific instructions about what to do if our daughter purchases that dress without me being present."

"You manipulative witch! You're blackmailing your own husband!"

"That’s exactly the kind of strategic thinking that made me the perfect wife for a man in your position, darling!" Patricia’s smile was cold as winter steel as she settled back into her pillows. "Now go explain to our daughter that she’ll be shopping with her mother, or she won’t be shopping at all. The Thorne alliance depends on maintaining certain appearances."

Don Rossi stormed back to his office, his hands clenched into fists that had broken more bones than he could count. His wife had outmaneuvered him completely from the very beginning. For years, she had seemed like the perfect crime family matriarch, never questioning his orders, never demanding explanations about the bodies that needed disposing of or the territories that required hostile takeovers.

But she had been watching, listening, and collecting evidence the entire time. The moment she had stolen those federal investigation files and recorded his confession about sabotaging the brakes on the Thorne patriarch’s vehicle, their entire power dynamic had shifted permanently. She held his life in her hands, and she had made sure he understood the consequences of crossing her.

The letter she had written, stating that if anything suspicious happened to her, he should be considered the prime suspect, was just another layer of protection. Rossi had spent months trying to identify her mysterious ally, the person holding all the evidence that could destroy not just him, but their entire criminal enterprise.

"Sweetheart, I’m afraid there’s no negotiating with your mother on this particular matter. She’s determined to accompany you dress shopping personally. You’ll have to wait until she recovers next week."

Rossi’s face crumpled like a disappointed child. "But daddyyy..."

"Princess, listen to me carefully. What if I make this worth your while? If you agree to wait for your mother, I’ll transfer some spending money to your account right now. You could visit those boutiques in SoHo today and buy yourself something stunning for the engagement parties."

Rossi’s expression shifted from sulking to calculating. "How much money are we talking about?"

"Would fifty thousand dollars make this easier to accept?"

Rossi’s smile was immediate and brilliant. "Daddy, you always know exactly how to make me feel better."

Chapter 127 The Pregnancy Deception

Rossi’s POV

Perfect! With daddy’s generous donation from the family vault, I could finally visit the doctor who would orchestrate this elaborate pregnancy charade within our syndicate’s underground medical network. The fake test results and bribed nurse who doctored Caleb’s mandatory blood work surveillance had already drained my personal accounts. But I knew exactly which pressure points to exploit with father - a dramatic tantrum about family honor always loosened his grip on the family coffers. The money he transferred would cover the initial ultrasound fabrication with plenty remaining for maintaining appearances at the upcoming territory meetings.

The moment father’s armored sedan disappeared beyond the estate gates, I slipped out and dialed the doctor’s secured line. Monica had connected me with this particular medical professional operating within our crime family’s protection network, and despite her being a complete fraud, she proved surprisingly resourceful in navigating syndicate politics. I possessed intimate knowledge of father’s illicit affair with her, having tailed them to their secret safe house rendezvous multiple times through the industrial district. While I hadn’t weaponized that information yet, Monica remained compliant as long as father’s protection payments kept flowing. Should cooperation falter, creating a public scandal exposing their liaison to rival families remained an attractive option.

"Dr. Edward’s private clinic."

"Hello Dr. Edward, Rossi calling."

"Ah yes, my expectant fraud client from the syndicate."

"The woman about to make you considerably wealthier through family connections," I shot back with icy sarcasm. His condescending tone grated against my nerves like fingernails on concrete.

"Naturally, though payment remains outstanding according to our arrangement. Have you actually conceived yet, my dear?"

"Progress is being made through various channels. Can we arrange a meeting? I have your initial blood money prepared."

"Excellent development for our mutual benefit. I'm at my private residence currently. The address will arrive via encrypted message momentarily."

The man disconnected without ceremony! Had I not desperately required his services for infiltrating Caleb's inner circle, I would have unleashed absolute fury backed by family muscle. His message revealed a location a short drive away in the neutral zone. The building's front desk security had clearance for my arrival under an assumed identity. When I pressed his doorbell, he appeared wearing nothing except silk boxer shorts.

"Planning to dress properly for syndicate business?" I inquired, scanning his moderately fit physique. While not conventionally attractive by mafia standards, he maintained decent physical conditioning for someone operating in our dangerous circles.

"This attire suffices perfectly for our private transaction. Where's my compensation?"

"Eager for blood money, aren't we?"

"In numerous aspects regarding family politics, darling."

"First, explain your methodology for deceiving syndicate leadership."

"Your medical records are prepared according to family physician protocols. During official examinations, authentic ultrasound footage will display on my equipment, simulating your condition perfectly for any syndicate oversight. Your devoted target will accept everything completely without questioning family medical authority. However, I strongly suggest genuine conception or strategic miscarriage following any territorial consolidation ceremony."

"I'll handle those tactical details personally."

"My payment for services to the family, please."

I completed the electronic transfer through encrypted syndicate channels and displayed confirmation on my secured phone. As I prepared to depart for the estate, he made an unexpected proposition that caught me off guard.

"Interested in conception assistance through direct intervention?"

"Meaning what exactly in syndicate terms?"

"You understand perfectly, sweetheart from the crime family."

His hands circled my waist, pulling me toward the leather sofa while his mouth found mine with calculated precision. His clothing removal technique proved as efficient as promised for someone operating under family protection - the entire encounter concluded within a brief time, leaving me completely unsatisfied and questioning his competence. Perhaps pregnancy would result from this clinical coupling within our syndicate's breeding expectations. With Caleb maintaining his maddening physical distance despite family pressure, any opportunity deserved serious consideration. I dressed quickly and departed with his assurance that our arrangement would proceed flawlessly under syndicate oversight.

The remainder of my day unfolded at the upscale shopping center frequented by crime family members. Late afternoon brought an encrypted message from associates announcing Austin's house party at his family compound. That lovesick fool worshipped me completely, willing to perform any request for syndicate approval. Since fabricating stories about intimate encounters with Caleb to boost my status, I'd been regularly sleeping with Austin who responded like a creature in perpetual heat seeking family acceptance. Pregnancy should have occurred by now through our frequent encounters, yet today's test remained negative despite my calculated efforts. Stress from syndicate politics must be interfering with conception according to family medical advisors.

Tonight's plan involved attending Austin's gathering and engaging in marathon intimacy until sunrise within the safety of allied family territory. Eventually pregnancy would occur through persistent effort. Perhaps Dr. Edward's contribution had already taken root according to syndicate medical predictions.

Austin practically sprinted toward me upon arrival at the heavily guarded compound, his adoration embarrassingly obvious to other crime family members present.

"Jade, you look absolutely stunning tonight for our family gathering! Let me fetch your beverage from the private bar immediately."

"Austin darling, I came exclusively for you and family business. Should we find somewhere more intimate within the compound?" Avoiding my other syndicate associates remained crucial - I hadn't confirmed attendance with anyone through proper channels. The strategy involved proceeding directly to his secured bedroom and remaining until morning under family protection.

"Seriously, gorgeous princess? That's incredible for our families! Follow me to the private quarters."

His pet names made my skin crawl with their lack of sophistication, but maintaining harmony within syndicate alliances remained essential for long-term planning. I accompanied him upstairs through the heavily secured corridors, engaging the reinforced door locks before pulling him close with calculated seduction.

We spent the entire night together within the compound's protection. Austin's bedroom performance remained consistently disappointing despite family breeding expectations - while he'd claimed my virginity years ago during a territorial celebration, he'd never delivered genuine satisfaction worthy of crime family standards. Actually, no man had ever brought me to climax according to my exacting syndicate expectations. I suspected my obsession with Caleb created this problem, knowing instinctively that he could provide the pleasure others couldn't through his dominant family position.

Before dawn broke over the estate grounds, I dressed silently and slipped away, leaving Austin unconscious across rumpled sheets within the secured compound. An armored sedan carried me home where exhaustion finally claimed me after the night's calculated efforts. The sacrifices I endured for infiltrating Caleb's syndicate position knew no bounds, but eventually every calculated risk would deliver the ultimate prize - his complete devotion and our combined family power controlling the entire territory.

Chapter 128 Sweet Dangerous Surrender

Ivy's POV

My weekend passed in tense quiet within the Thorne compound's secure walls. Parker flooded my encrypted phone with messages, explaining that urgent territory disputes kept him from our planned meeting. His texts arrived regularly through our coded channels, each one more apologetic than the last about missing our rendezvous at the neutral zone.

Heidi spent the next day wrapped around Max like a doting grandmother, spoiling him with contraband gifts smuggled back from her Boston intelligence gathering mission. She had returned bearing treasures that made my son's eyes light up like Christmas morning. The prize was an elaborate Buckingham Palace building set, complete with miniature street carpets and a red double-decker bus that actually moved and glowed with tiny working lights. Max's delighted squeals echoed through our secure living quarters as he built and rebuilt his British kingdom, blissfully unaware of the deadly world surrounding him.

Zoe watched the scene unfold with amused resignation from her position by the bulletproof windows. "Heidi, you're making the rest of us look terrible," she laughed, shaking her head as Max dissolved into giggles over his new treasure, her hand never straying far from the concealed weapon at her hip.

Heidi cornered me in the fortified kitchen later, her voice dropping to that conspiratorial tone seasoned family wives perfected. She peppered me with questions about Parker, urging patience and suggesting that perhaps Caleb and I still had a future worth the bloodshed. I deflected her hopes gently but firmly. Parker remained just an ally, despite his obvious intentions for something deeper. My heart belonged entirely to Caleb, carved into every chamber with permanent scars. But I refused to freeze my life in place, waiting for a maybe that might never survive the family wars.

The following week dissolved into a blur of routine surveillance and longing. Parker's daily encrypted messages became my constant companion, though he had to make an unexpected trip to Texas to handle crisis management at his family's drug distribution network. His apologies came wrapped in promises of rare gifts and safe house destinations upon his return.

The new week arrived with Heidi's departure, earlier than any of us could bear. Zoe and I offered to escort her to the private airfield, but she declined with a knowing smile. Caleb had already volunteered for protection duty before heading to his strategy meetings, she explained, leaving me with that familiar twist in my stomach.

At my desk in the family headquarters, the week's ritual awaited me. Fresh tulips in brilliant colors sat beside my computer, accompanied by the weekly message that had become both blessing and curse. Caleb's elegant handwriting proclaimed the same declaration it always did - eternal devotion until his final breath, regret for our impossible situation within the family structure. I traced the petals with one finger before filing the card away with all its predecessors, a growing collection of beautiful torture.

Xavier burst through my reinforced door like sunshine personified, carrying a package that made my mouth water instantly. Four chocolate chip muffins, still radiating warmth from the secure bakery and sending heavenly aromas through the air. My face transformed into pure childlike wonder.

"Xavier, I absolutely adore chocolate chip muffins," I breathed, practically bouncing in my chair despite the shoulder holster digging into my ribs.

His grin widened as he produced a second surprise. "Perfect timing then." A massive cappuccino appeared beside the muffins, steam rising like incense. "Our queen deserves the royal treatment."

"You are officially the most incredible consigliere on the planet," I declared, watching his chest puff with pride.

He disappeared into his tactical office while I invited Gemma to share my feast. She declined politely, explaining that Xavier had spoiled her too, and intelligence reports were drowning her in deadlines about rival family movements.

I was savoring my first bite when Caleb materialized in my doorway like a vision crafted specifically to torment me. He stopped beside my desk, fingers running through his hair in that nervous gesture I knew meant he was restraining his more violent impulses.

"I need to speak with Xavier about the east side territories," he said, though his dangerous eyes never left my face.

"Of course," I managed, completely mesmerized by the predatory grace in his movements.

We had not crossed paths recently. With Heidi’s visit and the family audit consuming his attention, Caleb had worked from the compound’s secure offices, leaving me starving for even a glimpse of him. Now he stood before me, devastatingly handsome in his tailored suit that concealed multiple weapons, and I could not look away.

He leaned down until our faces aligned perfectly, his thumb brushing across the corner of my mouth with deliberate slowness. Then he brought that same thumb to his lips, sucking away the chocolate while his eyes burned into mine with unmistakable hunger that could start territory wars.

"Ivy covered in chocolate is absolutely irresistible," he murmured, his voice like velvet over steel and death.

"Caleb..." My voice cracked, forcing me to clear my throat. "Caleb, you cannot do that here."

"Do what exactly, Ivy?" His smile turned wicked, predatory in the most dangerous way that reminded me exactly who ruled this criminal empire.

"You know perfectly well what. Anyone could see."

"Why do you not tell me specifically what threatens you?"

"You are deliberately provoking me in family headquarters."

"Am I?" He leaned closer, his breath warming my skin like a warning. "What about this, Ivy?" His tongue darted out to taste the chocolate at the corner of my mouth. "And this?" His lips pressed softly against the same spot. "And this?" His hands seized my waist roughly, crushing my body against his as his mouth claimed mine in a kiss that could ignite blood feuds.

Caleb kissed like a man dying of bullet wounds who had finally found salvation. Every touch of his lips carried desperate hunger, raw desire, and lethal promise that shattered every defense I possessed. Under his hands, I became molten, surrendering completely to the heat between us that could destroy families.

We kissed with the frantic urgency of lovers reuniting after warfare, trying to compress weeks of separation into this single moment. My fingers traced his shoulders before tangling in the hair at his neck, pulling him impossibly closer. His arms encircled my waist while one hand traced fire up my spine. Our breathing turned ragged, matching the wild rhythm of our racing hearts that could betray us to enemies.

Without breaking our connection, Caleb lifted me onto my desk, positioning himself between my thighs and pressing our bodies together until delicious friction built between us through our clothes. I forgot where we were, forgot everything except this desperate need for contact that could get us both killed. A moan escaped against his lips, and he deepened our kiss until I thought I might combust from the dangerous desire.

When we finally separated, gasping for air, he pressed one more tender kiss to my mouth before looking directly into my eyes with the intensity that made grown soldiers tremble.

"My angel, you have no idea how much I miss you every moment. I am dying without you in ways bullets never could."

I stared back at him, completely surrendered to this love that was destroying us both and threatening family stability. The spell shattered when Jude's voice cut through our bubble as he wandered into the office, intelligence reports in hand and completely oblivious to the dangerous territory he was entering.

"Pretty woman, I need to speak with the bosses about the harbor surveillance. Are they..." Jude froze mid-sentence, taking in our compromising position that could start rumors throughout the organization.

Reality crashed over me like ice water. I pushed Caleb away and scrambled down from the desk, frantically smoothing my wrinkled dress and checking that my concealed weapons remained properly hidden. Caleb groaned, closing his eyes as frustration flickered across his perfect features.

"Damn it, Jude," he growled at his lieutenant with lethal undertones.

"Sorry, I am leaving, I am so sorry..." Jude started backing toward the door, clearly recognizing his tactical error.

"Get back here. You already destroyed the moment anyway." Caleb called him back before turning to me, his thumb tracing my swollen lips. "My angel, thank you. I needed that more than breathing." Tears gathered in his eyes, matching the ones threatening to spill from mine. "Come on, Jude."

Jude passed my desk with his hands pressed together in apology, clearly understanding he had interrupted something that could affect family dynamics. I managed a shaky smile, though my legs still trembled from Caleb's touch and the knowledge of how dangerous our desire had become.

Gemma appeared moments later, concern written across her face as she asked if I was alright. I quickly recounted what had happened, confessing how much I loved kissing the man who owned my heart but could never be mine without destroying everything we had built.

The rest of my day passed in a haze of distraction. Work became impossible as my mind replayed every second of that kiss, every touch from the man who ruled our world but could never truly be mine.

Chapter 129 Stolen Moments Rising

Ivy's POV

After Caleb claimed me with that possessive kiss in my office and Jude walked in on us, the Don vanished from my world for what felt like forever. The days bled together in a haze of laundering accounts and managing the family's legitimate front operations, while he and Xavier conducted territory meetings across the city's underground districts.

The workweek arrived with its sacred ritual. Fresh white roses adorned my desk alongside a handwritten note bearing the Thorne family crest. Caleb had sworn to send me flowers every week without fail, and even the most ruthless mafia boss never broke his word. Just like the imported Italian pastries that mysteriously appeared during lunch breaks. Time had stretched since our separation. Days of aching emptiness and desperate yearning for the man who ruled the city's shadows.

Xavier assigned me urgent financial records that needed sanitizing before tomorrow's meeting with the Commission. The Thorne Group tower had emptied except for Xavier in his corner office and Jude, who blew me a theatrical kiss while carrying his espresso back to his surveillance station. Gemma had already escaped for the evening.

I pressed the elevator call button and waited. The doors slid open with their usual mechanical whisper. I stepped inside and immediately caught the scent of his expensive cologne drifting behind me. Caleb entered the elevator, and our eyes locked as the doors sealed us in together. He pulled out his phone and entered a security override code. The elevator jerked to a sudden stop between floors, plunging us into darkness before the emergency lighting flickered on. My heart hammered against my ribs.

Days had stretched between us like an eternity. He looked devastatingly powerful in his charcoal three-piece suit, crisp white shirt, and midnight black tie. His dark hair was styled to perfection, and that intoxicating cologne mixed with his aftershave made my knees weak. The gun holster beneath his jacket only added to his dangerous magnetism.

"Do you realize how stunning you look in that dress?" His voice was rough with barely controlled hunger. I wore the same dress from our first encounter at the underground auction. "I've fantasized about tearing it off since that night. Tonight might be my chance."

"Caleb..." I whispered, but he stepped closer, eliminating the space between us. His fingers traced my cheek with tender reverence, the same hands that had pulled triggers without hesitation. My self-control crumbled instantly.

"Don't fight this, my angel. I'm drowning without you." His hands gripped my waist as his mouth crashed against mine with the desperation of a man starved for his drug.

Caleb kissed me like his life depended on it. He pressed me against the cold elevator wall, his hands roaming my body until they found my breasts. He squeezed the already peaked nipples through the fabric, drawing a desperate moan from my throat that echoed in the confined space.

He spun me away from the wall, his lips trailing hot kisses down my neck. With the practiced ease of a man accustomed to taking what he wanted, he found my zipper and pulled it down slowly. His mouth followed the path of exposed skin as he lifted the dress over my head and let it pool on the floor.

My black lace lingerie set hugged my curves, delicate Italian silk that he had personally selected and delivered to my apartment. Caleb turned me to face him, his ice-blue eyes blazing with possessive hunger as they devoured every inch of my nearly naked body. He pulled me close and kissed me with renewed fervor, like a man reclaiming his territory.

His mouth traveled from my lips to my jaw, then down to my throat. He reached my breasts, teasing and sucking my swollen nipples through the sheer fabric. With expert fingers that had once dismantled weapons blindfolded, he unhooked my bra and cast it aside, returning to worship my breasts with his tongue and teeth.

Pure ecstasy flooded my senses. I had craved his touch through endless nights of exile from his world. While he feasted on my breasts, molten heat pooled between my thighs. Caleb slipped his hand beneath my panties, beginning an exquisite torture that made my vision blur. His fingers found my most sensitive spots, moving with the same skilled precision he used when handling explosives. Moisture gathered as he worked, and I moaned against his shoulder while he continued his assault on my breasts.

Tension coiled in my core, building toward an explosive release. Caleb slid two fingers inside me while his thumb maintained its circular rhythm. My body convulsed as waves of pleasure crashed over me. I cried out, my muscles clenching around his fingers as I surrendered completely to the overwhelming sensation that only the most dangerous man in the city could provide.

"God, I've missed you," Caleb growled against my ear, his voice thick with raw emotion and barely restrained violence.

My vision remained hazy as he captured my mouth again. Wild desire consumed every rational thought. I needed his skin against mine, needed him inside me like I needed air to breathe. His tongue exploring my mouth only intensified my craving for the man who owned half the city's underground.

While we kissed, I pushed his tailored jacket off his shoulders and let it fall, revealing the shoulder holster he never removed. I worked frantically to remove his vest, then started on his shirt buttons. When Caleb returned to caressing my breasts, I lost all patience and ripped his shirt open, sending buttons scattering across the elevator floor like spent bullet casings. He smiled against my lips.

"Impatient, my angel?"

"I need you inside me now. I need your body against mine, taking me to paradise." The words tumbled out without filter, raw and desperate.

"Your wish is my command." Caleb stepped back and quickly shed his remaining clothes, his movements efficient and predatory.

"You're magnificent," I breathed, admiring his sculpted form marked with scars from territory wars as I pulled him back to me.

Caleb kissed me with consuming hunger and tore my panties away with one swift motion, the expensive silk snapping like tissue paper. The delicate fabric fell to the floor. He pressed his body against mine, lifted my leg to his waist, and filled me completely with one powerful thrust that claimed me as his territory. He stayed perfectly still, eyes closed, forehead pressed to mine as our bodies remembered each other's rhythm. Then he began to move with slow, deliberate strokes that reminded me exactly who I belonged to.

"Caleb, please," I moaned desperately. "I need more. Harder."

"You want me to take you hard, my angel?" he whispered between kisses, his voice carrying the same command he used in Commission meetings.

"Yes," I gasped, lost in desire for the most dangerous man alive.

Caleb increased his pace, claiming me against the cold elevator wall while my body burned with need for my mafia king. Another orgasm built inside me, more intense than the first. My legs trembled as every nerve ending concentrated on reaching that peak. I lifted my hips to meet his thrusts, my entire body twisting with pleasure. The climax hit me like a gunshot, violent and all-consuming, making my muscles contract with incredible force around him.

"Christ, Ivy, you feel incredible," Caleb groaned, his control finally snapping.

He followed me over the edge, spilling inside me with hot pulses that left me feeling complete for the first time in weeks. We clung to each other, breathless and slick with sweat. He remained inside me, and I could feel his heartbeat pulsing through his body like the rhythm of power itself. We stayed connected, savoring these stolen moments between the Don and his forbidden obsession.

Eventually, he withdrew and kissed me deeply. He retrieved a monogrammed handkerchief from his suit pocket and gently cleaned between my thighs with surprising tenderness. Slowly, he dressed himself while I watched, then helped me back into my bra. He picked up his ruined shirt and smiled as he put it on, the fabric hanging open to reveal his chest. Dangling my torn panties from one finger, he gestured to his buttonless shirt.

"Now we're even."

I smiled at his dangerous playfulness. He looked even more commanding with his tousled hair and open shirt revealing the tattoos that marked him as the Thorne family heir. He helped me into my dress, and as he zipped it up, he bit my neck gently before kissing the spot.

"A mark, so you remember that only I can make you lose control like this." He ran his fingers through my hair, attempting to smooth it, then picked up his jacket and pulled me close. "Come home with me. Stay in the family compound tonight."

"I can't, Caleb. We can't do this." Tears filled my eyes as I held him tight, knowing the Commission would never accept a woman like me. "I love you, but we can't be together."

Caleb sighed against my ear, the weight of his crown heavy between us. We held each other in silence, tears falling freely as the reality of our impossible situation crashed down. After what felt like hours, Caleb took out his phone and entered the override code. The elevator hummed back to life.

When we reached the parking garage, we walked hand in hand to where his armored car and driver waited. He kissed my cheek and helped me into the vehicle, then leaned down to look into my eyes with the intensity that had built an empire.

"I can't forget you. I'll love you forever, even if it destroys everything I've built."

He closed the door and walked to his own bulletproof sedan. Tears streamed down my face as the city lights blurred past the tinted window, each one a reminder of the territory we could never share.

Chapter 130 Heartbeat Without Love

Caleb's POV

Weeks had passed since that desperate moment with Ivy in the elevator. Her touch still burned through my veins like wildfire, especially after being separated for those torturous months. She continued evading me with military precision, using Jude and Gemma as her surveillance network. They'd signal whenever I emerged from my office or headed to check on Xavier, giving her perfect escape routes through the compound.

Heidi had returned to help coordinate our upcoming territorial audit. The weekend would bring the crucial family meeting that could finally end this organizational nightmare. But today held a different kind of torment. I had to escort Yara Rossi to her gynecologist appointment for the first ultrasound. The mere thought made my blood run cold.

This appointment loomed like an execution. Every passing hour felt like agony. I couldn't focus on anything, my mind consumed with disgust. I'd been avoiding that manipulative witch entirely, forcing our family lawyer to serve as messenger for every communication. The poor bastard had essentially become her personal secretary. Her father Roman had grown disturbingly quiet lately, which triggered every survival instinct I possessed. I'd already warned Xavier and Scott that something felt dangerously wrong.

At the appointed time, Jude knocked on my office door. Time to descend into my personal hell. I grabbed my jacket with all the enthusiasm of a condemned man. When I reached the medical clinic, that parasitic woman was already there with her mother, launching herself at me like a heat-seeking missile. I sidestepped smoothly, watching her crash into the leather couch behind her.

"Darling, what a playful game. I could have been injured," Yara whined in that voice that could shatter bulletproof glass.

"This isn't a game. Stop throwing yourself at me like some desperate streetwalker," I snarled, noticing the receptionist attempting to suppress her laughter.

I didn't acknowledge Yara's mother Patricia with even a glance. Instead, I positioned myself by the window, studying the street traffic until the doctor called Yara's name.

The physician approached with an oily smile, extending his hand like we were old family friends.

"You must be the proud father. Congratulations on this wonderful blessing."

I stared at his outstretched hand without moving. Something about this man triggered my predatory instincts. His enthusiasm felt rehearsed, calculated. My survival instincts rarely failed me in this business, though I wondered if my hatred for Yara was coloring my judgment.

"Can we proceed, Professor? My time is extremely valuable," I said with arctic coldness.

The examination room felt like a stage set for some twisted theater production. The doctor bombarded Yara with endless questions before turning his attention to me.

"So, daddy, how are you handling those pregnancy cravings? Is mommy keeping you busy?"

I wanted to wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze until his eyes bulged. My expression could have frozen molten lava as I responded.

"She’s not my wife. Whatever cravings she experiences are none of my concern or business."

The doctor’s jaw dropped while Yara rushed to explain we’d be married soon according to family arrangements. I rolled my eyes, wishing I could vanish into the concrete.

Yara disappeared behind a curtain to change, then positioned herself on the examination table like some sacrificial offering. When the ultrasound began, the doctor’s excitement reached nauseating proportions.

"There it is. Your beautiful baby."

"Oh, how absolutely thrilling. Look, sweetheart, our child already has your strong bone structure," Yara shrieked while her mother dabbed at her eyes with expensive tissues.

"For Christ’s sake, woman, it’s nothing but a gray blur on a medical screen." My irritation leaked from every pore, and this circus showed no signs of ending.

"Don’t speak about our child that way, Caleb," Yara screamed. She always screamed like a banshee.

"Let me share something truly special with you both," the doctor announced with revolting enthusiasm, adjusting his equipment. "You’re about to hear your baby’s heartbeat."

The room filled with rapid, rhythmic sounds while Yara exploded into applause and ear-splitting squeals. Mother of God, this woman genuinely terrified me. She and her mother created such a spectacle that other patients probably thought someone was being brutally murdered.

"Doesn't this move you to tears, honey?" Yara asked, flashing those horse teeth at me. What temporary insanity had possessed me to touch this creature?

"No, I feel absolutely nothing. I never wanted a child with you. I'm here purely because family obligations demand it," I replied with brutal honesty.

"Caleb." Another banshee shriek. "You're going to traumatize our baby's emotional development before birth."

"Excellent. I'll add therapy expenses to my financial responsibility ledger." I felt nothing for her or this supposed pregnancy. The realization disturbed me because it wasn't normal. A father should feel something when hearing his child's heartbeat. I'd always envisioned fatherhood, but this situation left me completely hollow. With that troubling thought, I walked out.

The appointment suffocated me like being buried alive. Every minute in that room felt like drowning in quicksand. The doctor prescribed vitamins, ordered multiple blood tests, and instructed us to schedule another appointment soon.

At the reception desk, I handled payment and scheduling while the receptionist worked efficiently. Along with my receipt, she slipped me a card reading "call me" with her phone number. Interesting. The receptionist was making her play, but perhaps I could use this to antagonize Yara. She gave me a professional smile that I returned. Something about her face seemed familiar, like I'd encountered her somewhere in the organization, but the thought evaporated when I left the building.

"Sweetheart, you're taking mother and me to dinner at that exquisite French restaurant," Yara announced with such delusional confidence that I actually laughed.

"You're completely insane if you think I'm going anywhere with either of you parasites," I replied mockingly.

"Caleb," she screamed. Another tantrum brewing.

"Caleb, you must at least provide transportation home. I already dismissed our driver," Patricia interjected. Another woman who thought she could command a mafia Don.

"Since you don't want the families thinking I'm completely heartless," I walked to the curb and flagged down an approaching taxi. It stopped immediately. I opened the door with theatrical courtesy. "Your chariot awaits. Taxi service will transport you wherever your black hearts desire."

They stared at me in complete shock. I left the door hanging open, walked to my armored vehicle, and drove away. In my rearview mirror, I watched Yara having another complete meltdown while her mother shoved her into the taxi. For the first time all day, I laughed genuinely, feeling my tension finally dissolve.

I drove straight to Xavier's compound where he'd organized a poker game with the crew. He'd planned this distraction after noticing my murderous mood all day. Everyone had already arrived when I walked in. Finn immediately handed me a glass of bourbon with ice.

"So Caleb, how did your date with the devil's spawn go?" Jude asked with a dangerous smirk.

"Gentlemen, you cannot imagine what it's like dancing with Satan's own daughter," I said, remembering the horrific afternoon.

I recounted the street scene when leaving the clinic. The crew laughed until tears streamed down their faces. Then I described the appointment and my instinctive distrust of the doctor. Finally, I shared my complete emotional disconnection from this pregnancy.

"You know, guys, I've always wanted to be a father, especially after losing my parents to that car bomb. But I feel absolutely nothing, zero emotion, for this supposed baby," I concluded.

"Well, boss, it's probably because you despise the mother," Dominic suggested.

"I’m not sure. I feel such overwhelming love for Max. My heart nearly explodes when he runs toward me with those little arms stretched wide for a hug. I’m so proud of that boy. But for my own supposed child, I feel nothing."

"Maybe because Max is Ivy’s son and you’re obsessed with her," Finn observed.

"I don’t know. What I feel for Max is enormous. The way my heart ignites when he’s with me, the pure joy I experience. But with this baby, when the doctor played the heartbeat today, I felt absolutely nothing. Shouldn’t a father feel something? Pride? Excitement? Anything?"

"My old man always said when mom was pregnant with me, he went crazy with joy and cried over everything baby-related," Xavier shared.

"Same with mine. That’s why this troubles me so much," I admitted.

"Caleb, what if this child isn’t yours?" Jude asked, staring into his glass.

"That’s definitely possible," Xavier agreed. "From what you’ve said, you were extremely intoxicated at that family gathering. Are you certain you actually had intercourse?"

"That psychotic Yara is absolutely capable of orchestrating such a scheme," Jude stated.

"We’ve considered that possibility, but the witch refuses DNA testing because they claim it could cause miscarriage," I explained.

"But isn’t there a safer method for paternity testing?" Dominic asked.

"I honestly don’t know," I said.

"Send me that witch’s doctor’s information. My uncle runs the largest private medical facility in the city. I’ll ask him for guidance," Finn offered, surprising me.

"That assistance would be invaluable. I'll text you the details right now." I typed the message and sent it immediately. "If there's a method to conduct DNA testing without pregnancy risks, I could pressure her."

"Exactly what my uncle will clarify. I'll arrange a meeting with him," Finn said enthusiastically.

"And you won't believe this. The receptionist actually propositioned me," I remembered, laughing. "She slipped me her contact information."

"Good Christ, did your mother bathe you in pure gold instead of soap?" Jude mocked. "You must be made of solid platinum, Caleb. Women just magnetize to you."

We erupted in laughter, and the crew's relentless jokes knew no boundaries. My day had been absolute torture, but my brothers managed to salvage my evening completely.