Mafia Mask 131

Chapter 131 Betrayal Runs Deep

Caleb's POV

The past week had completely drained my energy. Finn still couldn't arrange a meeting with his uncle, the family doctor, who remained trapped at some medical conference in Austin until next week.

Saturday arrived with our scheduled investigation meeting. Scott had promised he had news. Nearly everyone had gathered at my penthouse, including Ivy, though we were still waiting on Scott and Heidi. Besides Ivy and myself, Xavier and Jude were present, along with the information specialist Felix Hayes and two additional investigators from Scott's team.

"Ivy, I appreciate you being here." I moved toward her as she settled onto the leather couch. She wore a stunning floral maxi dress that flowed around her like water, but something seemed off. "I know you've been following the investigation updates, but with everything coming to a head, we needed you present."

"Of course, Caleb. I want to see these backstabbing rats finally exposed and eliminated." Her smile held no warmth, only determination tinged with something that looked like pain.

"Ivy, what's wrong? You look terrible." The words came out harsher than I intended, but genuine concern drove them. Whatever was bothering her went beyond the stress of our family situation. This looked physical.

"My stomach is killing me. I think I ate something that didn't agree with me earlier." She pressed a hand to her abdomen, her face tightening with discomfort that made my chest clench with worry.

"Walter can prepare you some tea." I called out, and Walter appeared almost instantly, disappearing into the kitchen before returning with an elegant tray holding a delicate cup and matching teapot.

"Miss, this blend works wonders for stomach troubles," Walter said as he poured the steaming liquid. "You young people survive on street food and never slow down. No wonder your bodies rebel."

"Walter, you're absolutely right." Ivy managed a genuine smile for the first time since arriving. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"My pleasure, miss." Walter retreated just as the doorbell chimed.

Heidi and Scott entered together, their fingers intertwined in a way that made every conversation in the room halt. The grins on both their faces could have powered the entire building.

"What's the matter? Do I really look that good?" Scott's joke broke the silence.

"Scott, when Heidi's with you, you definitely command attention," Xavier observed with mock seriousness. "Maybe she should be your permanent companion."

"That's exactly the plan, kid. Exactly the plan." Scott's response carried weight that suggested this wasn't casual banter.

After the usual round of greetings, curiosity got the better of me.

"Are you two going to announce what's obviously happening here?"

"Caleb, mind your own business!" Ivy's elbow found my ribs, though her tone held more amusement than real irritation.

"He's just asking what we're all dying to know, Ivy, including you!" Jude jumped to my defense immediately.

"Who says I don't already know?" Ivy's smile held secrets that made her eyes sparkle despite her earlier discomfort.

"Now you both need to start talking. What does she know that we don't?" I pressed, shifting my attention between Heidi and Scott.

"They know because they helped me prepare yesterday and gave me advice," Heidi explained with obvious affection.

"They? The entire inner circle knows?" Xavier's voice carried mock betrayal. "And here you claim to think of us as your soldiers, Caleb!"

"Stop being such a child, Xavier!" Heidi's scolding held maternal warmth. "Scott and I had dinner last night and decided to stop wasting time. Yes, we're officially together now."

Applause and whistles erupted throughout the room. We all stood to offer congratulations, embracing them both. Scott had carried a torch for Heidi for decades, but in their youth, his marriage to a woman who made Rossi look reasonable had trapped him. The woman had refused divorce on principle. Christ, I was walking the exact same path.

"Alright, now that the ladies have finished their romantic gossiping, can we actually accomplish something?" Scott rubbed his palms together, his teasing tone making everyone laugh.

When the meeting officially began, Scott unveiled the week's discoveries. They had identified five lieutenants participating in the systematic skimming operation, including Rossi and that snake Neil from the money laundering division. The operations lieutenant, enforcement lieutenant, and territory lieutenant were all involved. These positions represented the family's strategic core, held by soldiers with decades of service. Beyond the lieutenants, each crew had three or four additional members taking cuts of the diverted funds. One had made a critical error, giving us our opening. We would approach him as our weak link, offering a deal that kept him breathing in exchange for cooperation.

The amount of money Scott's team had uncovered being stolen from our operations staggered me. It represented a genuine fortune. Scott also provided a comprehensive list of businesses being manipulated into switching their protection payments to another organization. This competing operation was registered under fake names that Scott had traced back to Rossi. He was still waiting for evidence from his hired investigators, but they had already confirmed these fake identities reported directly to Rossi.

We spent the next stretch of time dissecting the report, clarifying details, and strategizing our next moves to secure everything we needed.

"Fortunately, they ceased operations recently," Scott informed me. "I still can't determine why they stopped, but they did. Nothing is currently being skimmed. No suspicious operations are occurring."

"Thank Christ for that! At least something's going our way," I said, exhaustion making me drag both hands down my face.

"That concludes our investigation discussion, but now I need to address your parents' murder," Scott said, his tone shifting to something darker that made me look up sharply.

Chapter 132 Bridal Breakdown

Caleb's POV

When Scott mentioned uncovering details about the hit on my parents, ice flooded my veins. Every muscle in my body tensed as memories of twisted metal and burning flesh clawed their way back to the surface. The familiar metallic taste of rage coated my tongue.

"What did you find?" My voice came out rougher than I intended, carrying the weight of years of sleepless nights.

Scott's weathered face grew grave, the kind of expression I'd seen countless times when delivering death sentences. "We identified the dirty cop Roman bought. Once Felix Hayes had the name, tracking his corruption became child's play. This bastard lives like a king on a detective's salary. Mansion in the Hills, multiple Ferraris in his driveway, kids at elite prep schools, wife buried under designer shopping bags. He's pathetic at hiding dirty money and even worse at staying under the radar. Our investigation revealed he's been collecting from every drug operation in the city. With all that evidence, I contacted my friend in Internal Affairs. They've quietly reopened your parents' case with a skeleton crew to keep it off Roman's radar. Progress is slow, but we're building an airtight case. They've already confirmed that key evidence from the original investigation disappeared. It'll take time, but we're going to bury these bastards."

Relief crashed through me like a tidal wave. "Outstanding work, Scott."

"There’s more." Scott’s tone sharpened, taking on the edge of a predator closing in for the kill. "We tracked down those private investigators you hired to find that woman from the auction. They played you like a fool, took your money while Roman paid them to feed you lies. We’ve reported them to the licensing board. The disciplinary hearing is sealed, but they’ll lose their licenses permanently. You can also sue for damages and fraud. I know money means nothing to you, but it’s another weapon against Roman and strengthens our RICO case. This could put him in federal prison for life."

"If you think it helps our war effort, then absolutely. Sue them into the ground."

"Your attorney is Ashford, right?" I nodded. "He’s a personal friend and a shark who eats prosecutors for breakfast. I can coordinate with him directly."

"Do it, Scott. I need every advantage right now. Everything feels like it’s collapsing around me," I admitted, something I’d never do in front of my soldiers.

"Of course, Don. Happy to handle it personally." Scott’s smile carried decades of loyalty. "But I need to know your orders regarding that person from the auction night. Do you want my team to continue the search?"

His careful phrasing didn’t fool Ivy. Her emerald eyes locked onto mine with barely concealed dread, waiting for my response.

"No, Scott. That Chapter is closed." But then a thought struck me like lightning, a possibility I’d been too blind to consider. "Actually, wait. Find her. I need to know if there are any loose ends. She could have gotten pregnant for all I know. Track her down and discover what happened to her after that night."

The moment those words left my mouth, I watched devastation crush Ivy’s delicate features. Her face went ashen, as if I’d just ordered her execution.

"Absolutely, Don," Scott confirmed with military precision.

As the meeting dissolved and my men filed out, I caught Ivy’s arm before she could escape. "Give me one minute."

When we were alone in my office, I studied her pale face with growing alarm. "My queen, you look like death. I should call a doctor."

She'd seemed better after the tea earlier, but now she appeared even worse than before.

"I'm fine, Caleb. Just something I ate. I'll rest at home and feel better tomorrow."

"Are you certain? I can have a doctor here soon."

"Completely certain. What did you want to say?"

I guided her to the leather couch, taking her cold hands in mine, noting how they trembled slightly. "My angel, I decided to find that woman because pregnancy is a real possibility. I never considered it before, but with everything happening, including your condition, I realized it could have occurred. Since she vanished without explanation after that night, investigating makes sense from a security standpoint."

"You're right. It's the responsible thing to do," Ivy sighed heavily, her voice hollow. "Is that all?"

"Yes. I want you to understand that my only concern is ensuring I don't have a bastard child somewhere in the world who could be used against our family. This woman means absolutely nothing to me since you entered my life. You are my queen, my everything."

"Thank you for clarifying that." Ivy managed a fragile smile that didn't reach her eyes, pressing her palm against her forehead. "I should leave. I feel terrible."

"Let me drive you home."

"Xavier's driver is waiting for me."

"Stay with me longer?"

"I can’t, Caleb. Not tonight."

Tears gathered in both our eyes, a rare display of vulnerability in my fortress. As she turned to leave, I pulled her back and pressed my lips to hers desperately, pouring all my devotion into that kiss. When we broke apart, she fled from my office without looking back, leaving me alone with my ghosts.

Later that evening, I headed to Xavier’s mansion for our weekly poker game with the crew. We were deep into a high-stakes hand when Jude suddenly grabbed his phone and erupted into hysterical laughter. He slammed it onto the felt table, pointing at the screen like it was the most hilarious thing he’d ever witnessed.

The image showed Yara Rossi in an elaborate white wedding gown, complete with veil and bouquet, with the caption "The most beautiful bride in the world. Dress successfully purchased."

"What the fuck is this?" I demanded, staring at the screen in shock.

My soldiers erupted into the same insane laughter as Jude, clearly finding the Rossi woman’s obsessive display far more entertaining than I did. She had completely lost touch with reality.

Xavier wiped tears from his eyes. "Boss, I think Roman’s daughter has officially lost her goddamn mind."

I stared at the photo of the delusional woman in bridal attire and felt nothing but cold satisfaction. Let her descend into madness. It would make destroying her family all the sweeter.

Chapter 133 Bridal Disaster Mission

Monica’s POV

Saturday mornings were supposed to be peaceful, but here I was trapped in bridal purgatory because Roman Rossi demanded his precious daughter needed my expertise for her wedding gown fitting. I’d already endured the initial selection of that catastrophic creation she believed would make her irresistible to Caleb Thorne.

Somehow this delusional mafia princess had convinced herself I was her personal wedding consultant, constantly calling with demands about her fantasy ceremony. The most nauseating part was Roman expecting me to coddle his tasteless spawn while I maintained my cover as Caleb's loyal associate. My handler's payments were the only reason I tolerated these two walking disasters.

Money kept me anchored to this charade. Without Roman's under-the-table compensation, I would have told his ridiculous daughter and her gaudy mother exactly where they could deposit their wedding fantasies. They embodied everything repulsive about nouveau riche crime families - flashy, vulgar, and completely devoid of sophistication.

The exclusive bridal salon felt like a gilded prison as I waited an excessive amount of time for the dynamic duo to honor us with their presence. They believed tardiness demonstrated superiority over the common merchants. When they finally swept through the doors like they owned the entire fashion district, the boutique manager informed us we'd need to wait because punctual clients had secured all available consultants.

Yara erupted like an entitled volcano, shrieking and gesticulating wildly in the middle of the pristine showroom. The manager smoothly offered to process their refund so they could locate another establishment, which immediately silenced her tantrum. The hideous gown was apparently too precious to sacrifice for theatrical outbursts.

We were relegated to a cramped waiting area where Yara's relentless chatter shifted into overdrive.

"This wedding will be absolutely magnificent," Yara gushed, practically vibrating in her chair with manic energy. "I'll be the most stunning bride anyone has witnessed, won't I, Mother?"

"Darling, you'll be positively radiant," Patricia purred, practically glowing with maternal pride over her disaster of an offspring.

"Everything is aligning perfectly, Monica. Caleb can't escape this arrangement now. Soon I'll control his operations, inherit his territory, possess everything that defines power." Yara's eyes gleamed with mercenary calculation.

"Sweetheart, don’t celebrate until the marriage certificate bears official signatures. You must maintain focus until this entire production reaches completion," I advised with manufactured sweetness, knowing it would agitate her nerves. If I had to endure this circus, I might as well enjoy watching her squirm.

"Are you attempting to jinx my happiness?" Yara’s voice climbed several octaves with indignation.

"Stop using those patronizing diminutives, they’re degrading," I snapped back. Her constant use of pet names made my skin crawl. "I’m providing tactical guidance, not superstitious nonsense."

"I don’t require strategy when everything is guaranteed. All I need to do is tighten the collar around my devoted pet’s throat, and Caleb will remain completely under my dominion forever." The comparison to a yapping lapdog was almost too perfect. I actually felt momentary sympathy for Caleb Thorne.

"Listen carefully, Yara. Your position isn’t as secure as you imagine. He demanded genetic testing, postponed the ceremony, can barely tolerate sharing space with you, and you’re not actually carrying his child. Your foundation rests on quicksand," I pushed harder, observing her face flush with mounting anxiety.

"My strategy is flawless, Monica. Do you honestly believe I’m some kind of amateur?" she demanded, offense saturating every syllable.

I knew she was precisely that kind of amateur, but I wanted to hear her excavate her own grave deeper. "Enlighten me about this masterful plan."

"Elementary. Following the wedding ceremony, I’ll stage a miscarriage and purchase time to develop the next phase." She appeared smugly satisfied with her brilliant deception.

"Fascinating approach. But won’t Caleb abandon you the instant he realizes there’s no child binding him?" I inquired with feigned innocence.

"You might have a valid point there. Perhaps I should fake the entire pregnancy and secretly acquire an infant to present as ours," she mused, as if discussing catering options.

"Genetic testing could expose that deception immediately," I pointed out helpfully.

"Silence, Monica! You're creating panic for absolutely no reason!" Yara's shriek could have shattered the boutique's crystal fixtures.

"Monica, stop tormenting my precious baby," Patricia scolded me like I was domestic staff. "Sweetheart, concentrate on the wedding first, then we'll address whatever follows."

A consultant mercifully liberated us from the waiting area so Yara could model her catastrophic creation. We followed her into an opulent fitting room where Patricia and I claimed the velvet chairs. Yara vanished behind ivory curtains to transform into her bridal fantasy.

When she emerged, I had to clamp my teeth together until they nearly cracked to prevent hysterical laughter.

The gown violated every principle of decent taste and human dignity. The skirt exploded outward like an architectural nightmare, supported by enough infrastructure to shelter refugees. Layers of tulle created a geometric silhouette resembling camping equipment more than couture. The strapless bodice disappeared beneath avalanches of ruffles that looked like someone had attacked it with industrial frosting equipment.

Her accessories elevated the disaster to unprecedented heights of horror. A towering tiara added substantial height to her frame, making her resemble a mobile monument. Satin gloves decorated with artificial flowers completed the ensemble, as if tropical resort wear had collided with medieval pageantry.

Yara examined her reflection with the intensity of a master appraising a priceless artwork. The dress was already a crime against fashion, but she had additional modifications planned. The skirt needed more volume. The bodice required additional ruffles. The gloves demanded floral enhancement. The crown wasn't sufficiently tall for her imperial vision.

I enthusiastically endorsed every terrible suggestion. If Yara wanted to resemble a carnival attraction on her wedding day, I would help her achieve that goal with complete dedication. My hatred for this spoiled brat made sabotage irresistible.

The emotional crescendo commenced when I glanced at Patricia, whose face had dissolved into streaked mascara and tears. Yara followed her mother's lead, sobbing with theatrical flair worthy of opera. I couldn't contain my amusement any longer and fled the fitting room with my hand pressed over my mouth.

Patricia's voice carried into the hallway: "Poor Monica became so overwhelmed by your beauty that she needed air. She didn't want us witnessing her tears. Darling, you look like absolute royalty!"

"Oh Mother, I'm completely gorgeous!" Yara wailed back, her expression stretched wide with simultaneous weeping and joy.

I reached the reception area and exploded with laughter, doubling over until my ribs ached and tears streamed down my cheeks. The absurdity of those two women celebrating that fashion catastrophe nearly destroyed my sanity.

A consultant approached cautiously. "Excuse me, your sister and niece are requesting you."

"Sister and niece? Dear God, absolutely not. I share no DNA with those creatures. This is purely professional obligation," I gasped, composing myself before returning to witness additional spectacle.

"Monica, I look absolutely divine!" Yara announced before anyone could offer manufactured compliments.

"Absolutely breathtaking, darling. Caleb will be speechless witnessing you walking down that aisle," I replied, channeling every ounce of self-control to maintain composure.

"You were overwhelmed with emotion too," Patricia said, squeezing my hand with maternal warmth.

"Completely overwhelmed, Patricia. Our little girl is becoming a bride. I thought you two deserved private mother-daughter time for such a precious moment," I explained sweetly. The consultant behind Patricia was practically rolling her eyes into another dimension.

"They should hire me as design consultant. Observe how much more stunning this gown became with my improvements," Yara declared, spinning before the three-way mirror like a demented ballerina.

I discreetly photographed the disaster and immediately transmitted it to Jude, knowing he'd ensure Caleb witnessed his bride's final appearance. The horror on Caleb's face would justify enduring this entire morning. I added the caption: "The world's most beautiful bride. Mission accomplished."

Chapter 134 Dawn of Hope

Caleb's POV

For consecutive nights, visions of Yara draped in white had invaded my sleep like a relentless curse. The sight of her in that wedding gown, smirking as she approached me down the aisle of some grand cathedral, haunted every attempt at rest. The lack of sleep was wreaking havoc on my already frayed nerves, and I could feel the familiar edge of violence creeping into my system. I needed caffeine and the steady presence of my most trusted men to clear the fog from my mind.

I reached out to Jude and Xavier, suggesting we meet in the war room for espresso and strategy. Perhaps their counsel would help me regain the clarity I desperately needed to navigate this treacherous situation with the Rossi family.

As I emerged from Jude's office, Ivy burst through her door like a woman fleeing a crime scene, her face drained of all color. The sight of her distress hit me with the force of a sledgehammer to the chest. Gemma immediately appeared at her side, concern etched across her sharp features. Every instinct in my body screamed to go after Ivy, to eliminate whatever was causing her pain, but Jude's iron grip on my arm stopped me cold.

"Let Gemma handle this, Don," Jude's voice carried the weight of hard-earned wisdom. "The women believe she's developed stress-induced ulcers from everything she's been dealing with. Your presence might only escalate her condition."

Xavier nodded grimly from behind his desk, where surveillance monitors displayed our territory's perimeter. "This entire situation with the Rossi engagement has been poison for everyone involved. But you're looking like death warmed over yourself, boss. Those shadows under your eyes could rival a corpse in the morgue."

I dragged a hand through my hair, feeling exhaustion seep into my bones like acid. "I can't find peace when I close my eyes. That damned image of Yara in wedding white keeps playing on endless repeat in my head. It's like psychological warfare, and I'm losing the battle."

We settled into the reinforced conference room with our espresso when my encrypted phone buzzed with a message from Finn, one of my most reliable associates in the medical field.

"Don Thorne, lunch is confirmed with my uncle from the private hospital. He's ready to discuss our situation."

Finally, some movement in this chess game. I quickly typed back my confirmation and gratitude, knowing that Dr. Taylor held keys to doors I couldn't kick down with brute force alone.

The day arrived with the promise of answers, and I found myself sitting across from Dr. Taylor at an exclusive restaurant known for its discretion regarding sensitive conversations. Finn's uncle commanded respect even in civilian circles - tall, distinguished, with silver threading through his dark hair. His bearing reminded me of the old-school gentlemen my father had spoken of with reverence. The family resemblance to Finn was unmistakable, both possessing that refined quality that comes from generations of education and influence.

"So, Don Thorne, Finn has briefed me on the predicament you've found yourself entangled in," Dr. Taylor began, his tone carrying both professional authority and genuine concern.

I released a bitter laugh that held no humor. "Professor, I never imagined that one night of compromised judgment could transform my entire existence into a waking nightmare. I've sworn off alcohol completely now, following Finn's example and my own hard-learned lesson."

Dr. Taylor's chuckle was warm and genuine. "A wise decision, my young friend. Excess of any kind wreaks havoc on both body and mind, and alcohol in particular can lead to catastrophic consequences in our line of work. Now, if you'll permit my directness, Finn mentioned that you have absolutely no recollection of the events from that particular evening?"

The admission still burned like acid in my throat. "Practically nothing, doctor. My last clear memory is having a whisky on the private balcony of our family's social club. Everything after that point is a complete void, as if someone erased hours from my mind."

"When you consumed that whisky, did you notice anything unusual about your physical response?" Dr. Taylor leaned forward, his medical instincts clearly engaged.

I thought back to that cursed night, trying to piece together the fragments that remained. "I had only been at our family gathering for a short time and hadn't consumed much alcohol. But I had been drinking heavily the previous evening during territory negotiations, so I assumed my tolerance was compromised."

"Have you considered the possibility that someone may have introduced foreign substances into your drink?" The question struck me like lightning, illuminating possibilities I had been too proud to consider.

My immediate reaction was denial born of wounded pride. "But this was our family's private function, held in our most secure location. Who would dare attempt such a thing?"

"I've witnessed similar situations occur even at the most trusted family gatherings, Don Thorne," Dr. Taylor shared, his experience evident in every measured word. "A comprehensive toxicology screening could provide the answers you seek."

The reality of my oversight crashed over me like a tsunami. "But months have passed, doctor. Surely any evidence has long since disappeared from my system."

"On the contrary, most pharmaceutical compounds and psychoactive substances remain detectable in hair follicles for months post-exposure. We would simply require a hair sample for comprehensive analysis," Dr. Taylor explained with professional confidence.

Hope surged through my chest for the first time in months. "You're telling me this is actually possible?"

"Absolutely feasible. If you're prepared to proceed, we could visit the hospital immediately following our meal. Results typically require a few days, though I might be able to expedite the process through certain channels. The question becomes whether you truly want to uncover what transpired that night," Dr. Taylor offered.

For the first time since this nightmare began, I felt the stirrings of hope in my chest. "Professor, that would be beyond valuable. Unfortunately, I have territory business that requires my immediate attention after lunch."

"Entirely understandable. Simply contact me when your schedule permits, but don't delay unnecessarily. Time degrades even the most resilient evidence. Now, Finn also mentioned the paternity verification situation. We have two approaches available: an invasive procedure with minimal risk, or a completely safe non-invasive test that analyzes fetal DNA present in the mother's bloodstream. The non-invasive method is absolutely reliable and requires only a simple blood draw," Dr. Taylor continued, showcasing advances that would have seemed impossible just years ago.

Finn interjected with tactical concern. "I suspect Yara will find ways to avoid any legitimate DNA testing if she realizes the true purpose."

"My thoughts precisely, Finn. I cannot fathom being intimate with such a calculating creature," I said, my disgust apparent enough to amuse Dr. Taylor.

"Son, I'm well acquainted with Ivy, and she's both a remarkable woman and stunningly beautiful," Dr. Taylor observed with knowing eyes. "I find it highly improbable you would choose someone like Finn described after having the opportunity to be with Ivy."

Her beauty filled my mind instantly, as it always did. "She truly is extraordinary in every way."

"I assume you'll be requiring ironclad prenuptial protection for this arrangement?" Taylor inquired with practical wisdom.

"Absolutely. A union this absurd demands comprehensive legal safeguards," I confirmed.

"Include mandatory health screening clauses in that agreement, specifying that all examinations must be conducted exclusively at our private facility. I'll ensure everything proceeds without complications," Taylor demonstrated not only medical expertise but considerable experience in protecting powerful families. "I handled a similar situation involving organized crime families years ago - a nephew questioning paternity when the woman refused legitimate testing."

Finn beamed with satisfaction. "I told you my uncle would have solutions!"

"Now for the more troubling intelligence. The physician treating your alleged fiancée, Dr. Edward Diaz, has an absolutely deplorable reputation in medical circles. He's currently facing multiple investigations involving fraudulent diagnoses, illegal prescription trafficking, falsified medical certificates, and completely fabricated test results. From what I understand, he's facing immediate license revocation and potential criminal charges," Dr. Taylor revealed.

The revelation hit me like a physical blow to the chest. "I've allowed myself to be manipulated by these criminals! My own pride blinded me to their deception!"

"Maintain your composure, Don Thorne. With my uncle's assistance, we'll dismantle their entire operation," Finn assured me with quiet confidence.

The remainder of our meal was spent discussing medical innovations and family histories. Dr. Taylor proved to be both intellectually brilliant and surprisingly well-informed about the realities of our world. For the first time in months, genuine hope began to bloom in my chest like spring after endless winter.

My afternoon was consumed by back-to-back territory meetings and enforcement issues, and I didn't find opportunity to contact my family attorney until late evening. I instructed him to incorporate mandatory comprehensive health examination clauses into the prenuptial agreement, specifying that all procedures must be performed exclusively at the private hospital where Dr. Taylor held administrative authority. I emphasized that these clauses needed to be legally bulletproof and non-negotiable. He guaranteed the agreement would be completed within days.

Now came the difficult part: waiting while trying to manage my growing anticipation for justice. But I had one more weapon to deploy in this war. I contacted Scott, my most reliable investigator, and requested a thorough background check on Yara's disreputable physician. He assured me it would be straightforward work and promised comprehensive results within days.

Finally, I could see light breaking through the darkness that had consumed my world. Yet one question continued to gnaw at me like a persistent wound: if someone had indeed drugged me that night, how had Yara managed to orchestrate such an elaborate deception within our own stronghold?

Chapter 135 Stolen Moments

Ivy’s POV

Xavier and I gathered with Caleb and Jude in the secure conference room for an urgent family meeting. Caleb had just received word from our Brooklyn associates, and their message demanded immediate action from the highest levels of our organization.

"The arms deal has exceeded their projections, but they want the Don there personally. They’re prepared to expand our territory agreement, but only through direct negotiation with family leadership," Caleb briefed us, his cold blue eyes scanning the encrypted documents spread across the mahogany table.

"When do we move?" Xavier asked without hesitation, already calculating logistics in his mind.

"First available transport tomorrow morning," Caleb replied curtly. "Jude will provide security detail, and I believe Ivy should accompany this operation. These associates need to witness our complete power structure and understand our negotiation methods."

"Agreed," Xavier nodded. "What are your thoughts, Ivy?"

"Actually, I think remaining here would be more strategic. These associates require extensive money laundering documentation, and you might need immediate access to financial records like the Denver situation."

"She makes a valid point," Xavier acknowledged. "Ivy’s rapid intelligence delivery prevented a significant delay on our last territorial expansion."

"You’re absolutely correct," Caleb conceded with a slight smirk. "Ivy oversees our financial operations while we handle the Brooklyn families. Can you manage everything during our absence?"

"Consider it handled, gentlemen," I confirmed. "How long should I expect you to be away?"

"An extended period," Caleb estimated.

We spent the remainder of the day preparing for their departure. Document encryption, communication protocols, and operational security briefings consumed our afternoon. The sun had disappeared behind Denver's skyline by the time we finished our preparations. I offered my best wishes for their successful negotiations.

Only after returning home and putting Max to bed did I notice my phone's silent mode. I reactivated the sound and scrolled through accumulated messages.

The group chat showed Ruby asking about my location, with Gemma explaining my meeting-heavy schedule. Zoe had sent word about staying at Finn's safe house tonight. My parents had left a message requiring quick acknowledgment. Then I discovered Parker's message:

"Every moment feels endless until I see you again. Missing you constantly, beautiful."

His message sent warmth through my chest. Parker remained in Texas expanding his gambling operations, yet maintained daily contact through encrypted messages and secure video calls. His consistency and charm never failed to lift my spirits despite the dangerous world surrounding us. I prepared to respond when his incoming call interrupted my typing.

"Hello, stranger! How's the Texas expansion treating you?"

"Profitable territory and excellent weather. Completely meaningless without you here." Parker's smooth voice carried its usual dangerous charm.

"Then you must be suffering from terrible boredom."

"Absolutely torturous!" His laughter carried through the encrypted line. "How was your day, stunning Ivy?"

"Productive but draining. My phone stayed silent all day during family business, so I missed your earlier message. I apologize for the delay."

"No apologies necessary from you. Are you completely exhausted?"

"Somewhat tired, why do you ask?"

"Because I'm currently parked outside your building's main entrance, hoping to steal some time with the most beautiful woman in Denver."

"You're lying!" The prospect of seeing him sent excitement through my voice.

"Completely serious. But if the timing isn't safe, I completely understand."

"Come upstairs immediately. I want to see you too."

We disconnected and I rushed to change clothes, selecting white shorts and a flowing lavender tank top. I positioned myself by the living room entrance, anticipating his arrival while checking the security monitors.

The elevator doors opened to reveal Parker carrying multiple luxury shopping bags, dressed in casual jeans and a fitted black shirt. His Texas tan enhanced his already striking features. His face illuminated when he spotted me waiting.

"Ivy, you're being completely unfair to me."

"What exactly am I doing wrong?"

"Wearing those shorts. Your legs are absolutely breathtaking!" His compliment sent heat rushing to my cheeks.

"Stop being ridiculous, Parker!"

"I'd be ridiculous not to appreciate such beauty. How do you become more stunning each time I see you?"

"That’s impossible." I rose on my tiptoes as he pressed a gentle kiss to my cheek, then we moved inside.

"Please make yourself comfortable. Can I bring you anything?"

"Two wine glasses and a corkscrew. I brought premium Texas wine for us to share while we catch up. I promise not to overstay my welcome." Parker’s thoughtfulness never ceased to amaze me.

I retrieved the requested items from the kitchen. Upon my return, he handed me the glasses before presenting two elegant shopping bags.

"This bag contains something for Max, and this one is specifically for you," he explained, indicating each bag clearly.

"Parker, your generosity overwhelms me. You shouldn’t take such risks. Max can discover his surprise tomorrow morning," I said, setting aside his bag while opening mine.

"I hope it meets your approval," Parker commented as he worked the corkscrew into the wine bottle.

I opened my bag and discovered an exquisite box inside. The contents took my breath away - a stunning cocktail dress with nude lining and sheer overlay, completely adorned with crystals, featuring a dramatic neckline and elegant long sheer sleeves. The luxury left me speechless.

"Do you approve?" Parker watched me with an expectant smile.

"It’s absolutely magnificent, Parker. But I cannot accept something so expensive."

"Of course you can accept it. It’s a gift with no strings attached. I’d be honored if you’d wear it tomorrow evening when you accompany me to the underground casino gala. What do you think?"

"That sounds absolutely perfect," I agreed, accepting the wine glass he offered. However, guilt crept into my consciousness as I remembered recent events. "Parker, I know you're pursuing me seriously, and I've maintained honesty with you throughout our relationship."

"Yes, and your honesty means everything to me. But unless you've reconciled with that dangerous fool Thorne, I refuse to abandon my pursuit," Parker smiled confidently.

"Thorne and I remain completely finished. But something occurred that you deserve to know."

"Tell me everything. You know I want complete transparency between us."

"How do I explain this properly..." I hesitated, fearing Parker might judge my character harshly, so I selected my words carefully. "Several days ago, something happened between Caleb and me."

"You had a vulnerable moment and slept together?" Parker's directness caught me off guard. I nodded confirmation. "That doesn't shock me whatsoever. Ivy, you've been completely honest about still having feelings for him. What happened between you two seems natural, considering your dangerous history together."

"I feel terrible about this situation. He's engaged to another woman, and you deserve better treatment from me. I feel ashamed."

"Ivy, you're not ashamed or cheap. My feelings for you haven't changed one bit. You sleeping with Caleb changes nothing for me, since you two aren't together officially. Besides, you're not committed to me, so I cannot demand exclusive loyalty from you. However, that doesn't mean jealousy isn't eating me alive inside."

"I'm so sorry for hurting you."

"Stop apologizing immediately. I shouldn't have stayed away for so long," he said with understanding. "But now, perhaps I can demonstrate that you could learn to love me." His fingers traced my face tenderly.

Setting both wine glasses aside and moving closer with deliberate care, Parker whispered when his face nearly touched mine:

"Ivy, may I kiss you properly?"

I swallowed nervously and nodded consent. Parker kissed me with characteristic gentleness, but underlying longing and passion burned beneath the surface. My lips trembled momentarily as his warm mouth claimed mine. His kiss conveyed hungry tenderness, allowing me to feel every emotion he harbored for me, every ounce of his deep affection. I surrendered to his kiss, which always tasted divine. His soft, skilled lips and his tongue moving expertly within my mouth, demanding to lead mine, left me drowning in conflicted emotions. My heart hammered frantically and, in that precise moment, Parker shattered my certainties completely.

"I felt your response, Ivy," he said with absolute certainty about his effect on me. "My chances just improved dramatically." He smiled triumphantly and kissed me again.

He positioned himself above me on the couch, our bodies molding together perfectly, and without spoken words, dangerous intimacy emerged, transporting me to complete bliss. Each movement of his lips against mine, each meeting of our tongues, made me float in an ocean of sensations. That kiss created perfect harmony between us. I tasted his wonderful, sweet lips and the delicious wine flavor, which carried me on an intoxicating journey with someone I had grown to admire and care for deeply, and momentarily, I could forget everything else consuming my thoughts.

Parker and I remained entwined on that couch, exchanging kisses and gentle caresses, until he gazed at me and said:

"I should leave now. It’s getting late and we both have dangerous business tomorrow." He sat upright and pulled me onto his lap, delivering another quick, tender kiss. "So, my beautiful woman, am I winning your heart now?" he asked with hopeful confidence.

"Parker, we’re still exploring our connection. If you’re asking whether we’re officially together, my answer remains no."

"Really?" he asked with amused surprise. "I gave you my absolute best effort and I’m still merely a friend?"

"Parker." I laughed at his playful protest. "I refuse to begin a serious relationship with you while harboring feelings for someone else. But I genuinely enjoyed our time together. Maybe we can share more intimate moments like this."

"Is that a promise?" Parker's face lit up with the most radiant smile imaginable. "Can I kiss you again right now?"

"Yes, absolutely. Including tomorrow evening, when you take me to the underground gala and I'm wearing my gorgeous new dress," I teased him flirtatiously.

"I'm absolutely going to hold you to that promise!" He gave me another lingering kiss. "Now I really must go before Thorne's surveillance catches me here."

I slid off his lap and walked him to the door, receiving one final passionate kiss before he disappeared into the dangerous Denver night.

Chapter 136 Venom in Veins

Caleb's POV

The Manhattan skyline stretched endlessly as our private jet touched down at Teterboro. The city pulsed with the same energy that flowed through our veins, and I felt the familiar rush that came with expanding our territory into new markets. Our first meeting with the clients went smoothly. Their leader laid out his proposal for a joint venture in their legitimate casino operations while we presented our terms for protection and money laundering services. We scheduled a private dinner at his country club for the following evening, and Jude promised to coordinate with Ivy for any additional financial documentation we might need.

That evening, we decided to unwind at an exclusive speakeasy in Brooklyn that catered to our kind of clientele. The bourbon was aged to perfection, the conversation flowed like blood through our territory, and for some time, I felt the tension ease from my shoulders. Then I felt slender fingers trail across my back, followed by a voice that sent ice through my veins.

"You look even more dangerous than I remembered."

I turned around slowly, already recognizing the sultry tone that belonged to a ghost from my past. Veronica stood there looking absolutely stunning. Her jet-black hair was styled in a sophisticated bob that framed her face perfectly. She was taller, more polished, and her figure had clearly been enhanced since our university days before I inherited the family business.

"Veronica. What an unwelcome surprise." I leaned in to give her a cold kiss on the cheek. "It's been a while. Still playing with fire, I see."

"Always, darling. Though I have to admit, seeing the infamous Don Thorne here is the most thrilling part of my evening." Her smile was predatory. "What brings the king of the underworld to my neighborhood?"

"Business expansion. What about you? Last I heard, you were slumming it with that pretentious artist in Florence."

"That pathetic wannabe couldn't keep his hands off his female models, so I cut my losses and returned. Manhattan suits a woman of my ambitions much better than going back to our boring hometown anyway."

"I see. You remember Jude and Xavier, of course. My most trusted lieutenants now."

"Well, well. If it isn't the viper herself," Xavier's voice dripped with barely concealed hatred. Jude simply glared and took a long drink from his whiskey.

"How could I forget such charming gentlemen?" Veronica's sarcasm cut like a blade.

Veronica had been my girlfriend during our final year at university, before my father's death thrust me into the family business. Xavier had despised her from day one, claiming she was poison wrapped in designer clothes. Some time before my parents were murdered, Xavier and Jude discovered she was sleeping with half the campus, including some Italian sculptor who was in town for an exhibition. They orchestrated a way for me to catch her in the act, and I ended things in a spectacular confrontation that became campus legend.

"Mind if I join you boys for a drink?" Without waiting for an answer, Veronica pulled up a chair and settled in like she owned the establishment.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" Jude's patience was wearing dangerously thin. He had even more reason to hate her than Xavier did. After her infidelity was exposed, she'd tried to sabotage his relationship with Nora out of pure spite.

Despite my men's obvious hostility, I found myself drawn into Veronica's web as the evening progressed. She was sharp, engaging, and undeniably attractive. Xavier and Jude were practically burning holes through her with their death stares.

"Shouldn't you two be heading back to check the perimeter? It's getting late for foot soldiers," Veronica taunted them with a wicked smile.

"Oh, are we cramping your style?" Xavier shot back with venom.

"Last I checked, we were here first, sweetheart," Jude added with ice in his voice.

"Since these two clearly can't take a hint, why don't we continue this reunion somewhere more private? My penthouse isn't far from here." Veronica's invitation was loaded with dangerous temptation.

"That sounds perfect." The words left my mouth before my survival instincts could intervene. One night of distraction wouldn't destroy everything I'd built.

"Caleb, just a friendly reminder that we have that crucial meeting with the clients tomorrow evening. Ivy already sent over the financial projections we need to review," Jude emphasized Ivy's name deliberately, a warning wrapped in professional courtesy.

"Relax, Jude. The family business won't collapse overnight." I waved off his concern dismissively. "Come on, Veronica."

We left the speakeasy together, and I spent the night at her penthouse. When I woke up, we were both naked, her body pressed against mine, and my phone was buzzing incessantly from somewhere across the room.

I stumbled over to find it and answered without checking the caller ID.

"Have you lost your goddamn mind, Caleb? Do you have any idea what time it is? I've been making excuses to the clients for a while now!" Xavier's voice was pure fury mixed with panic.

"Give me some time and I'll be there." My head was pounding, and the reality of my stupidity was crashing down like a building collapse.

"Don't you dare show your face at this negotiation. I already told them you came down with food poisoning from bad shellfish. Get back to the hotel, lock yourself in your room, and stay there until I decide what to do with you!" The line went dead.

Veronica was one of the few people on earth who could push Xavier to this level of murderous rage. He'd always said she turned me into a reckless fool, and once again, he was absolutely right. But I wasn't some college kid anymore. I got dressed quickly, leaving only a brief note apologizing for my abrupt departure.

When Xavier and Jude stormed into my hotel suite later, I was showered, dressed, and trying to salvage what remained of my reputation. They were both livid, and I had no choice but to sit there and take whatever punishment they deemed appropriate.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Caleb?" Xavier was pacing like a caged predator, his hands gesturing wildly with barely contained violence.

"It won't happen again, Xavier. You have my word."

"It better not, because as my grandmother always said, lie down with snakes and you wake up with venom in your veins!"

His rage was radiating off him in dangerous waves.

"If Ivy discovers what happened, or if any of our women find out about this disaster, you'll lose her forever. I guarantee it," Jude warned, his voice carrying the weight of absolute certainty.

"I know. I don't know what possessed me. I just wanted one night to forget the weight of everything."

"Really? Like that night at the underground auction when you paid for that masked dancer? Or the night you may or may not have been with Rossi's daughter? Oh right, you conveniently don't remember that one either!" Xavier's sarcasm cut through my defenses.

The weight of my destructive pattern hit me like a freight train. I claimed to love Ivy, but I kept sabotaging everything we were building together.

"Can this stay between us?" My voice was barely above a whisper, and I could feel shame burning behind my eyes. "I'll stay locked in this room for the rest of our stay except for family business."

"You'd better. If this gets back to Ruby or Nora, they'll abandon us for covering up your mess," Jude said grimly.

"You have my blood oath on it." I raised my hand solemnly.

For the remainder of our stay, I kept my promise religiously. Xavier mentioned that Veronica had come looking for us at the hotel, but he'd instructed security to deny we were guests. He was convinced she'd try to infiltrate our territory again once we returned home. Despite my personal catastrophe, we managed to secure an incredibly lucrative partnership with the clients, which helped ease Xavier's fury somewhat.

Thursday evening found us back on familiar ground. I'd successfully avoided Veronica for the entire trip, spending my time reviewing contracts and preparing financial reports from my hotel room. Xavier seemed eager to put as much distance as possible between us and Manhattan.

Friday morning, we were back at Thorne Group headquarters bright and early. Ivy looked absolutely radiant when we briefed her on the partnership's success, though I noticed she seemed slightly thinner and more tired than usual.

My attorney called mid-morning to inform me the prenuptial agreement was finalized. I reviewed the document carefully, satisfied with every clause. We'd structured it so the paternity tests appeared to be a mandatory requirement of my father's will, with failure to comply resulting in forfeiture of all family assets to charity. This would put enormous pressure on Rossi to submit to the testing I demanded.

Still, I couldn't risk giving Roman Rossi time to interfere or allowing his daughter space to maneuver. An idea struck me suddenly. I called Dr. Taylor to confirm his availability for the weekend. He normally didn't work Saturdays, but he agreed to accommodate my request. We scheduled the tests for the following day.

Chapter 137 Shocking Discovery Made

Ivy's POV

Saturday morning in our fortified apartment felt like a rare gift. I sat cross-legged on the bulletproof glass-reinforced living room floor, watching Max construct towers with his blocks while Zoe sprawled across the leather sofa, her legs dangling over the armrest. We discussed weekend plans in hushed tones, grateful for this precious respite from our usual Saturday security briefings. Caleb had recently reduced the mandatory family council meetings, reserving them only for genuine emergencies that threatened the organization.

The sharp ring of my encrypted phone from the marble kitchen counter shattered our peaceful conversation. I glanced at the caller identification and recognized the number, though something felt unsettling about it. Medical facility. Unusual timing.

"Hello?"

"Ivy? This is Sarah from Dr. Taylor's private practice. How have you been managing, sweetheart?"

"Oh, Sarah! I'm managing well, thank you. How are things with you?"

"Excellent, dear. I was anticipating your call to reschedule that appointment you had to cancel. It has been quite an extended period now."

My stomach plummeted like lead. The appointment. How could I have completely overlooked it? "Dear God, Sarah, I apologize profusely. These recent weeks have been absolutely overwhelming."

"No cause for concern, honey. I'm contacting you because I'm updating confidential patient records today, and your file is positioned directly before me on my desk. Since your current birth control coverage has lapsed, I thought perhaps you might consider coming in today? Dr. Taylor has an available slot this afternoon if that interests you."

The words struck me like arctic water. Birth control coverage lapsed. My mind scrambled frantically, attempting to calculate dates, but everything felt hazy and disconnected.

"Sarah, could you verify my file? How long has my coverage been expired?"

"Let me examine this... appears to be for quite some time now. You had the subcutaneous implant that provides extended protection..."

Her voice dissolved into background static as terror seized my chest. An extended period. An extended period without any protection. The elevator encounter with Caleb blazed through my memory with devastating clarity. This could not be happening again. Not now. Not with everything so dangerously complicated.

I must have produced some audible reaction because suddenly Zoe materialized beside me, carefully extracting the phone from my trembling hands. She spoke briefly with Sarah before disconnecting.

"Ivy, focus on me. Breathe alongside me." Zoe's voice sliced through the panic consuming me.

I stared at her as if she were communicating in an alien language. My chest felt constricted, as though someone was systematically squeezing all oxygen from my lungs. Zoe grasped my hands firmly, demonstrating slow, deliberate breaths until I could synchronize with her rhythm.

"Zoe... the elevator... it occurred weeks ago..." I struggled to formulate coherent thoughts.

"I understand, honey. I have arranged your appointment for this afternoon. Go shower and prepare yourself while I request Finn to supervise Max." Zoe had immediately shifted into emergency management mode.

Minutes later, we hurried from the building, leaving Max under Finn's reliable protection. Finn observed my distressed condition but wisely refrained from pressing for details when Zoe remained deliberately silent. She knew he would immediately alert Caleb if he suspected anything genuinely serious.

Outside the medical facility, Zoe squeezed my ice-cold hands and met my gaze steadily.

"Whatever transpires inside, we will confront it together. You are not isolated in this situation."

A solitary tear traced down my cheek as we entered the building. Sarah welcomed us with her characteristic warmth, quickly preparing chamomile tea when she noticed my obvious distress. Dr. Taylor emerged from his private office moments later, beaming at both of us.

"My most cherished patients! I have been wondering when you would visit."

"Hello, Dr. Taylor," Zoe embraced him affectionately. Since Finn's family had essentially adopted her into their inner circle, she had developed a close relationship with his uncle as well.

"I am thriving wonderfully, though I do not see nearly enough of you these days. Austin kept me occupied with the latest genetic research conferences, but I expected more frequent visits from you living so nearby now."

"Life in this city moves at breakneck speed," Zoe laughed. "Plus you are constantly traveling to fascinating destinations."

"And Ivy, how have you been coping?" Dr. Taylor directed his attention to me, extending his hand.

"Terrified, honestly. I have made a potentially catastrophic error." My voice cracked with raw emotion.

"Let us not assume the worst before we possess any definitive information. Come, let us conduct a proper examination." Dr. Taylor guided us into his secure private office.

He began with standard medical inquiries, weaving in lighthearted anecdotes and gentle humor to alleviate my tension. Once my breathing had stabilized, he requested I change into an examination gown for the physical assessment. His professional silence during the examination only intensified my anxiety. He collected blood samples personally, marking them urgent for laboratory processing.

"Results will require a while. Let us wait comfortably." Dr. Taylor escorted us to a small sitting area within his office, serving coffee and pastries that Sarah had thoughtfully arranged.

We discussed our adjustment to city life and Max's development. I mentioned my parents' relocation to the farm, and Dr. Taylor promised to visit them during his next trip to Greenleaf. The conversation helped occupy the time, though my stomach remained knotted with apprehension.

Sarah's gentle knock announced the arrival of test results. Dr. Taylor reviewed them meticulously before raising his eyes to mine.

"Ivy, you are pregnant. Congratulations on this wonderful news. Max will have a sibling..."

The room spun violently around me. My vision narrowed as consciousness slipped away.

I awakened on the leather couch with Dr. Taylor monitoring my blood pressure. The reality crashed over me in overwhelming waves. Pregnant. Again. Zoe watched me with barely contained excitement dancing in her eyes.

"I am receiving another godchild!" she announced joyfully.

"Only you could make me smile right now," I managed through tears and nervous laughter. "At least this time I know who the father is!"

Our shared laughter filled the room, breaking some of the suffocating tension.

"Ivy, you are incredibly resilient. This pregnancy will be different," Dr. Taylor assured me. "I will have Sarah schedule all your prenatal appointments immediately to prevent any missed visits. I am prescribing prenatal vitamins, anti-nausea medication, and other necessities."

"Thank you," I nodded, feeling slightly more grounded.

"Zoe, I cannot inform Caleb about this. Not yet." I noticed Dr. Taylor's expression shift behind his glasses.

"That will be nearly impossible, Ivy. The girls would preserve your secret indefinitely, but Finn and Thorne have become close allies. My boyfriend is not exactly renowned for his discretion," Zoe warned.

"My nephew was never reliable with confidential information," Dr. Taylor agreed. "Ivy, if you will permit me to say so, Caleb deserves to know. I understand your situation is complicated, but..."

"Wait, how do you know about Ivy and Caleb?" Zoe interrupted, clearly surprised.

"Finn introduced us recently. Caleb required information about DNA testing procedures. Actually, I came in today specifically to meet with him. You might encounter him when you leave," Dr. Taylor admitted reluctantly.

"Finn never mentioned any of this to me," Zoe muttered irritably.

"Professor, I need your complete discretion. Caleb is getting married very soon, and I will not be responsible for disrupting his life," I pleaded, knowing he would honor patient confidentiality.

Armed with prescriptions and a complete appointment schedule, we prepared to leave. Dr. Taylor extracted promises for future social visits with his family. Stepping out of his office, I exhaled with relief at the empty waiting room. But as we finished saying goodbye to Sarah and turned toward the exit, I found myself face to face with Caleb and his insufferable fiancée clinging possessively to his arm.

Chapter 138 Blood and Lies

Caleb’s POV

"Rossi, are you at the family compound?" I said the moment that insufferable woman answered her phone. "I want to take you somewhere important today."

The shriek that followed nearly burst my eardrum. Naturally, she was thrilled at the prospect of being seen with the Don of the Thorne crime family. This was exactly what I had calculated. My plan was already in motion. I sat in my armored Escalade outside her modest apartment, ready to escort her on a little trip without revealing our true destination. The private medical facility that served our organization exclusively. If she resisted, my consigliere was on standby to apply the kind of pressure that made people reconsider their choices. She would not leave that clinic without providing those blood samples. The timing was perfect since Xavier had confirmed Rossi was occupied with territory negotiations at the docks, giving me a clear window to execute this strategy without interference from other family business.

Within minutes, that conniving little schemer bounced out of her building, practically floating in a white summer dress paired with ridiculous pink heels. Madonna mia, what a spectacle. As she approached my vehicle, I gestured for her to slide into the passenger seat.

"Baby, I am so excited! Where are we going? You absolutely have to tell me." Her voice grated against my nerves like fingernails on concrete.

"Consider it a surprise. I just need to handle some family business first," I replied, forcing what I hoped resembled a genuine smile. "Though I do have one small requirement."

"What kind of requirement?" she asked, bouncing in her seat with anticipation.

"Hand over your cell phone. I refuse to let anyone interrupt our time together, and I know those friends of yours never stop calling." Every word required tremendous effort to sound affectionate and caring, but I desperately needed this charade finished quickly.

"But honey, I literally cannot survive without my phone." She produced the most ridiculous pout I had ever witnessed.

"No phone means no outing, since I know we will be constantly interrupted by your social circle. I want my complete attention focused exclusively on you." She studied me with narrowed eyes before finally surrendering the device. She placed her phone in my palm, and I immediately powered it down before slipping it into my jacket pocket.

When we pulled into the medical facility's parking garage, suspicion flickered across her features.

"Why exactly are we here, sweetheart?"

"I need to collect something from our family doctor. It will only take a moment," I offered another manufactured smile. "Come along, I want you to meet him. He is going to be our child's godfather."

She practically launched herself from the vehicle, releasing a series of delighted squeals that sent pain shooting through my skull. As we approached Dr. Taylor's private practice, my blood nearly froze at the scene before me. Ivy and Zoe stood directly in my path. Rossi, sensing an opportunity to mark her territory, immediately latched onto my arm possessively. Ivy regarded this display with obvious disgust. She appeared absolutely exhausted from her recent ordeals.

"Ivy, are you feeling well?" Concern colored my voice despite my efforts to remain neutral.

"I am perfectly fine, thank you. Let's go, Zoe." Ivy's response was clearly meant to mask her distress and avoid any confrontation.

"Oh darling, let's hurry up and meet your family doctor because I am simply dying to continue our romantic day together." That chattering harpy could not resist taking a verbal swipe at Ivy in front of witnesses.

"Really, Thorne." Zoe's tone dripped with disapproval as she swept past me, following Ivy toward the exit.

"Dr. Taylor will see you immediately, Don Thorne." The receptionist bowed respectfully, understanding exactly who commanded this facility.

Soon enough, the doctor emerged from his consultation room and welcomed us inside, maintaining perfect courtesy toward Rossi while keeping his true loyalties clear. We engaged in brief pleasantries before a pair of nurses appeared with their equipment ready.

"Shall we proceed with the testing as discussed?" Taylor inquired professionally.

"What testing? I absolutely refuse to do any tests!" Rossi's voice rose to a shout that echoed through the soundproofed room.

"Oh darling, but you absolutely must." I regarded her with my most charming smile, keeping my tone as gentle as silk. "Listen, my family's legal counsel explained it is a mandatory requirement from my father's estate planning. The marriage contract must include comprehensive health screenings to verify we are both in perfect condition for producing legitimate heirs."

"That is complete nonsense, Caleb! Your father has been dead for years!" Her volume increased dramatically.

"Sweetheart, I agree it seems foolish, but failure to comply means I forfeit the entire family inheritance. The territory, the legitimate businesses, the offshore accounts. I would be financially destroyed and stripped of my position as Don," I stated with complete seriousness. "So what harm could there be? It is merely a simple blood draw and basic screening."

"I am carrying your child, Caleb! What sort of testing are we discussing?" She crossed her arms with obvious irritation and growing suspicion.

"Just routine blood work and disease screening for you. For myself, they also mandated those same tests plus narcotics screening to ensure I was not compromising the family's interests with substance abuse. As you can see, it is completely standard procedure, but I have no choice but to comply." Her eyes remained filled with doubt.

"I do not like any of this," she declared firmly.

"Would you prefer to speak with the family attorney directly?" I retrieved my secure phone. She nodded, so I placed the call and requested he explain the legal circumstances. He essentially repeated my fabrication while using sophisticated legal terminology that lent the entire situation an air of complete legitimacy and family tradition.

"So darling, please do this for my sake and the family's honor. I cannot bear the thought of losing everything my father built," I pleaded sweetly. Then inspiration struck, and I delivered my final manipulation. "Afterward, we can visit the family estate, where we will establish our home with our little one. How does that sound?"

"YES!" She began screaming and clapping wildly. "Baby, what finally made you see we belong together?"

"Exactly that. I finally see the complete truth!" I replied, and for once, my words contained genuine sincerity about exposing her lies.

"Wonderful, shall we begin the procedures?" Dr. Taylor, who had been observing this entire performance with barely concealed amusement, asked professionally.

"Absolutely," Rossi agreed and extended her arm toward the nurses with eager compliance.

All necessary samples were obtained, and I exhaled with profound relief. Now I simply needed to find a method to keep that creature under control until the results proved her deception. I would take her for a scenic drive through our territory, pretend I had forgotten the estate access codes, and postpone the visit indefinitely.

"Dr. Taylor, thank you for accommodating us today. We would be deeply honored to have you serve as godfather when we formalize this union." Taylor looked at me with obvious amusement, clearly enjoying this elaborate performance.

"Don Thorne, the honor is entirely mine to serve as godfather for such a remarkably unique couple!" Taylor responded with perfect theatrical timing.

"Oh, how absolutely wonderful! Now let's go, honey. Goodbye, godfather!" Rossi waved enthusiastically, acting as though they were lifelong family friends.

Once we returned to the armored vehicle, she immediately launched into excited chatter about needing to contact her friends and mother to announce she would be moving into the Thorne family compound. I informed her that phone calls would have to wait until after our outing was complete. She would need to contain her enthusiasm a bit longer. I drove toward the gates of my family's fortress-like estate and began an elaborate show of searching for access devices in every pocket, the glove compartment, and anywhere else I could think of.

"Darling, I could have sworn I grabbed the security fob before leaving. But I cannot locate it anywhere," I said, projecting genuine disappointment. "Let me call my head of security, Walter, to bring the backup codes."

"Oh yes, honey, call him immediately!" Her excitement had her practically bouncing in the passenger seat.

My secure phone rang at precisely the right moment. Knowing exactly what this call concerned, I activated the vehicle's speaker system for her benefit.

"Thorne here."

"Caleb, where are you? Get to the compound immediately." It was Xavier, and this call had been carefully orchestrated between us earlier.

"Xavier, I am handling personal business at the moment. What is the emergency?" I feigned ignorance perfectly.

"The Fresh Ramsey situation. We have a serious problem developing, and the other families are demanding a video conference with both senior leadership present." Xavier spoke with such gravity I nearly burst into laughter.

"Can you not handle this situation independently? I am in the middle of something extremely important."

"Absolutely impossible, Caleb. We cannot afford to lose face with the Commission. Come immediately or risk a territory war."

"Fine."

I ended the call and turned to her, projecting deep frustration and family duty.

"Darling, I have to leave immediately. These negotiations represent enormous family interests and our standing with other crime families. I will take you home, and we can reschedule the estate visit. Actually, this works out better since I can ask security to have the entire place professionally cleaned so you will not suffer any allergic reactions to accumulated dust from recent renovations."

"Oh, how disappointing! Well, family business comes first, I suppose."

Chapter 139 Growing Secret

Ivy’s POV

The weekend stretched endlessly before me like a minefield I had to navigate alone. My mind felt fractured, thoughts scattered in every direction as I tried to make sense of what was happening to my body and my place in this violent underworld.

Sunday afternoon, I gathered my closest allies at my fortified apartment in the family compound. The weight of my secret pressed against my chest as I looked at their expectant faces. When I finally told them about the pregnancy, chaos erupted in the most heartwarming way possible. Zoe, Ruby, and the other wives immediately launched into a heated debate about who would earn the coveted title of godmother.

"I’m already Max’s godmother, so I’m obviously disqualified," Zoe announced with mock disappointment, which only intensified the competition among the others in our tight-knit sisterhood.

"Ruby, I need you to promise me something," I said, my voice carrying the gravity that came with living in our dangerous world. "Don’t tell Parker yet. I want to handle that conversation myself when the time is right."

They all nodded solemnly, understanding the delicate politics of keeping information from other family heads, even allied ones.

Monday morning hit me like a freight train loaded with concrete blocks. Every muscle in my body felt heavy, and an overwhelming fatigue seemed to seep into my bones. I could barely keep my eyes open as I sat at my desk in the Thorne Group offices, trying to focus on the laundered transaction reports in front of me.

"Ivy, wake up," Xavier's gentle voice cut through the fog in my brain. "Come on, you need to lie down on the couch in my office."

I lifted my head from where it had been resting on my desk, blinking in confusion at the consigliere's concerned face. "What happened?"

"You were sleeping at your desk again. I think I should give you some time off," he said, genuine worry evident in his voice as he studied my pale complexion.

"I fell asleep?" The realization hit me with a wave of irritation. "I think I'm having a really severe stress crisis from all the family politics."

Xavier knew better, of course. The way he looked at me told me he suspected exactly what was wrong, especially after Caleb had spotted me at the private clinic on Saturday.

"I think you should see our family doctor, Ivy. I'm starting to worry about you. You're so pale lately. Could this be anemia? Are you eating properly?" Xavier extended his arm to help me stand, and I gratefully accepted the support as dizziness washed over me.

"Actually, Xavier, I can barely keep anything down. I've already lost several pounds," I admitted, leaning against his shoulder for stability. But the moment I got close, a wave of nausea hit me, and I jerked away abruptly. "Oh my god, Xavier, what is that smell?"

"Smell? What smell?" He lifted his arm, sniffing himself with genuine confusion. "It's just my cologne, Ivy. The same one I wear every day."

"No, it’s not the same! It’s way too strong!" I said, making a disgusted face that I couldn’t control.

"Wow, friend, what an ugly expression," Gemma teased as she walked into the room and caught sight of my horrified look. As one of the capo’s wives, she had learned to find humor even in our deadly serious world.

"She said I smell terrible, Gemma!" Xavier said with an exaggerated pout.

"That’s impossible! You’re the best-smelling consigliere I know. Your cologne is even better than Dominic’s. Let me investigate." Gemma proceeded to sniff around Xavier like a detective searching for clues. "No, you smell absolutely delicious."

"You don’t find it overwhelmingly strong? Nauseating?" I insisted, still fighting the urge to gag.

"Friend, it must be because you haven’t been eating properly and your senses are getting hypersensitive," Gemma said diplomatically, trying to mediate the situation with the wisdom that came from surviving years in mafia families.

"Come on, lie down in my office for a while, and I’ll order something for you to eat. Something really appetizing," Xavier said, treating me like precious cargo that needed careful handling. "What sounds good to you?"

"Chocolate cake!" The words tumbled out of my mouth with surprising enthusiasm, my eyes practically sparkling at the thought.

Xavier left the room chuckling at my sudden excitement. Gemma instructed me to rest because I looked incredibly weak, then followed him out. Some time later, I woke up alone with a perfect slice of chocolate cake waiting for me. I sat up and demolished that cake with an intensity that surprised even me.

After washing my face in the bathroom, I found Gemma at her desk and asked her to join me for coffee in our secure break room.

"Did you eat the cake?" she asked, studying my face with the sharp eye of someone trained to spot weakness in our unforgiving world.

"Yes, I devoured it. I've been really exhausted lately, Gemma. Xavier mentioned giving me a few days off and I think I should accept. It might be beneficial until things stabilize."

"Maybe that's wise. The leadership suspects something serious is happening with you," Gemma warned me carefully. "All the capos have been asking me questions."

"Damn it! Last time I didn't experience anything like this. Now it feels like I'm dying," I said with a frustrated pout.

"My mom always said every pregnancy is completely different," Gemma laughed knowingly, her voice dropping to ensure our conversation remained private.

"Sweetie, how are you feeling?" Katelyn appeared in the break room and immediately inquired about my wellbeing with the maternal concern of someone who had survived decades in this brutal business.

"Not very well, Katelyn," I replied honestly.

"Would you like me to get you anything special?" she offered kindly.

"No, thank you."

"You really need to see our family doctor, and soon," Katelyn said before leaving the break room with a worried expression that spoke to genuine care beneath her hardened exterior.

I returned to my office, but it wasn't long before Caleb appeared in my doorway, his commanding presence filling the entire space like a storm cloud.

"My angel, how are you feeling?" He knelt beside my chair and asked with genuine concern that seemed to contradict his reputation as a ruthless don.

"Just perfectly fine, thank you!" I replied with deliberate coldness.

"You're not fine, Ivy. If you were fine, you wouldn't have needed to visit the clinic. Tell me what's wrong because I'm worried about you," he insisted, his piercing blue eyes searching my face for answers.

"You should worry about your precious fiancee instead," I replied grumpily, and suddenly tears started flowing down my cheeks. These damn hormones were going to be the death of me in this deadly game we all played.

Caleb immediately scooped me up and carried me into Xavier's empty office, closing the door behind us with the practiced efficiency of a man accustomed to securing private spaces.

"My angel, I care deeply about you," Caleb said while holding me close. "Tell me what's troubling you."

"Nothing significant, Caleb. Go spend time with your hell-spawn fiancee," I tried to break free from his embrace, but he tightened his hold and actually laughed.

"I took her there because I needed her to undergo a test at our trusted facility. But I had to maintain the role of devoted fiance to convince her to do it."

"What kind of test?" I asked, my curiosity overriding my anger.

"DNA test. Finn's uncle informed me about one that only requires the mother's blood, completely safe, and one hundred percent accurate. So I took her there under the pretense that it was just routine testing for the prenuptial agreement and that we would go for a pleasant walk afterward. She has no idea she underwent a DNA test. But everything was carefully orchestrated. You can ask any of the capos, including Finn. They know the entire strategy," he explained while cradling me in his lap.

"Do you honestly think this child isn't yours?" I asked quietly.

"I’m almost completely certain, my angel," he answered confidently. "Now tell me what’s wrong with you. You’ve been acting strangely for days, feeling sick constantly. Xavier suggested it might be an ulcer. Is that accurate?"

"It’s nothing serious. Just stress taking its toll. You know it hasn’t been easy lately with all the family tensions," I replied, being as evasive as humanly possible. "Xavier offered me a few days off, and I think I should accept."

"If it will help you feel better, my angel." He pressed a gentle kiss to the top of my head.

Caleb remained there, simply holding me for what felt like an eternity. Just embracing me in comfortable silence. I felt so perfectly safe in his powerful arms that I wished time would stop completely.

Chapter 140 Secret Affair Exposed

Xavier’s POV

I found it strange that Ivy suddenly developed an aversion to my cologne. She had praised the same scent countless times before, telling me how intoxicating it was on me. Her heightened sensitivity made perfect sense though, considering the emotional chaos she was navigating. I had Caleb pick up her favorite pastries from that exclusive Italian bakery in Little Italy. Even as the Don, he genuinely enjoyed these small gestures for Ivy.

My morning was scheduled with a potential arms dealer at our private country club. We had arranged a tennis match followed by lunch to discuss some lucrative trafficking opportunities. Unfortunately, my contact received an urgent call from his cartel connections and had to abandon our meeting abruptly. With unexpected free time stretching before me, I decided to indulge in a therapeutic massage at the spa facility.

The spa building was strategically positioned away from the main courts, concealed within a secluded grove of ancient oaks and towering maples. The isolated location always helped me decompress from the constant violence of our world. As I strolled along the winding stone path, a familiar voice pierced through the afternoon silence. Peering through the dense foliage, I spotted Yara Rossi locked in what appeared to be an intense confrontation with Austin Kieran. He looked completely unhinged, probably whining about her upcoming arranged marriage to Caleb. The pathetic fool was utterly obsessed with the mafia princess.

My curiosity overwhelmed my better judgment, and I thought Caleb might find this family drama amusing. I crept closer, positioning myself behind a massive rhododendron bush, and started recording with my phone. Nothing could have prepared me for the explosive revelation I was about to witness.

"Yara, you know perfectly well I worship you. Now Rick tells me you're planning to marry that cold bastard Caleb. Does your precious fiance have any idea how many nights you've spent writhing beneath me these past months?" Austin's voice dripped with bitter accusation and desperate longing.

"Lower your voice, Austin. You should consider yourself fortunate I even bothered entertaining you," Yara shot back with her trademark entitled arrogance.

"Fortunate, Yara? Really? Well here's the thing, princess, you're not walking down that cathedral aisle with Thorne," Austin's tone turned menacingly dark.

"Oh really? And just who exactly is going to prevent that sacred union from happening?" Yara's laugh was razor-sharp and cruelly mocking.

"I am, because Rick also mentioned you're carrying Thorne's bastard," Austin's fury was escalating dangerously. "But here's what I think, Yara. I seriously doubt that child belongs to that ice-cold Don. I'm convinced it's mine, and there's no way in hell you're marrying him. No other man is going to raise my flesh and blood as his heir."

My blood turned to ice as I crouched behind the ornamental bush. The scheming woman had been manipulating both men like chess pieces on her personal board. And everyone in our syndicate knew Austin intimately. This revelation was absolutely catastrophic.

"Rick has always been a terrible gossip with loose lips," Yara snapped irritably. "Listen carefully, Austin. You're constantly professing your undying devotion to me, claiming you'd spill blood to make me happy. So prove it now and keep your mouth permanently shut." Her voice adopted that manipulative sweetness that made my skin crawl.

"What's in it for me, Yara? I'm completely addicted to you, but I refuse to lose you to another man. Tell me the truth, am I the father of that bastard?" Austin's voice cracked with desperate, pathetic longing.

"Look, Austin darling, Rick has his heart set on me marrying Caleb to unite our families, and contradicting the old man isn't a survivable option. But that doesn't mean we have to stop our private arrangements. You can still have me whenever your appetite demands." Yara's shameless proposition made my stomach churn with disgust.

"You expect me to stand by while another man raises my child, Yara? While he claims my heir as his own? Absolutely not," Austin's voice thundered with uncontrollable rage.

"Oh, Austin sweetie, do this one favor for your little Yara, please?" She guided him toward an ornate stone bench, and they immediately began kissing with violent passion.

When they started frantically tearing at each other's clothing like animals in heat, I bolted from my hiding spot. The massage appointment was completely forgotten. I needed to get this intelligence to Caleb immediately. I practically sprinted back to the office compound, calling Jude during my mad dash through the city streets.

"For both of you to storm into my office looking like you're fleeing a five-alarm fire, something monumentally serious must have occurred," Caleb observed, glancing up from the quarterly laundering reports spread across his mahogany desk.

"Caleb, you absolutely will not believe what I managed to capture on video," I announced breathlessly, still buzzing with adrenaline from my discovery.

"What could possibly be so earth-shattering, Xavier? You spent your morning playing tennis with potential partners. How explosive could it possibly be?" Caleb's voice carried its usual hint of dangerous sarcasm.

"I witnessed your beloved fiancee in compromising action," I declared with a triumphant grin spreading across my face.

"For the love of all that's holy, please don't start discussing that manipulative witch again," Caleb groaned, rubbing his temples in obvious frustration.

"Oh, but I absolutely must. You need to watch this fascinating little recording. Jude, you definitely want to witness this too." I retrieved my phone, located the damning video file, and placed it directly in front of them.

"This cannot be authentic," Caleb whispered, his jaw dropping as the footage began playing.

"Watch every single second of it," I insisted eagerly.

"What an absolute whore," Jude muttered under his breath, shaking his head in complete disgust.

When the video reached its scandalous conclusion, all three of us erupted into uncontrollable, dark laughter. This exceeded our wildest expectations for family drama.

"Xavier, how on earth did you manage to record this without being detected?" Jude questioned, still chuckling with malicious amusement.

"Pure dumb luck, honestly. I recognized that irritating voice and thought I'd grab a quick video to torment Caleb with later. Never imagined it would turn into something this spectacularly damning," I explained proudly.

"How did she not spot you lurking around like some stalker?" Caleb pressed for operational details.

"I concealed myself behind that enormous bush like some kind of undercover surveillance expert," I boasted, puffing out my chest.

"More like a nosy neighborhood spy, if you ask me," Jude teased, earning himself a playful but firm shove.

"This footage is absolutely priceless. Come here, you magnificent bastard." Caleb jumped up from his leather chair, crossed the room, and pulled me into a grateful bear hug. "You just rescued me from what would have been the most horrifying mistake of my entire life."

"What horrifying mistake are you referring to?" Jude looked genuinely puzzled.

"The wedding ceremony with that psychotic manipulator, Jude," Caleb clarified with obvious relief washing over his features.

"Now we just need those DNA test results to complete our case file. Send me that video so I can create a comprehensive presentation combining both pieces of evidence to end this ridiculous arranged marriage charade once and for all," Caleb requested, his excitement building visibly.

"When should we expect the laboratory results?" I asked impatiently, eager to see this entire nightmare resolved permanently.

"They were supposed to arrive today, but Taylor had to make an emergency trip out of state for family business. He sent word that he'll forward them the moment they're available," Caleb explained with slight frustration.

"Let's hope we don't have to wait much longer," I sighed, already anticipating the explosive fireworks to come.