

Exposed to the CEO Behind the Mafia Mask

Chapter 14: Chapter 14 Family Secrets and Dangerous Wounds

Ivy's POV

I opened up to Heidi about Max's father, sharing the whirlwind encounter that turned my world upside down and left me swearing off dangerous liaisons forever. Heidi listened with understanding eyes, but her expression suddenly darkened as if a violent memory had surfaced.

"You remind me so much of Caleb," she said quietly, her voice heavy with secrets. "He built the same walls around his heart. There was this woman he met at an underground event, and they spent the most incredible night together. But then his world exploded when he got the call about his parents. By the time he could think straight enough to find her again, she had vanished completely. He searched everywhere, hired the best investigators money could buy, but she was gone like smoke. That loss on top of losing his parents nearly broke him completely."

My chest tightened with dangerous curiosity. "Heidi, what happened to his parents?"

"Car bombing," she whispered, her voice cracking with pain. "They were driving back from a territory meeting when the explosion went off. Caleb's father got an emergency call about a rival family making moves on our operations and had to rush back to headquarters. Caleb was supposed to go with them, but he stayed at the underground auction with that woman. His parents left word with Xavier's family before they drove off, but by the time Caleb got the message..." She wiped her eyes. "He was never the same. Now he goes through women like they're weapons, never letting anyone get close enough to matter."

The weight of his pain settled in my stomach like lead. "No wonder he carries himself like he's at war with the world."

"He is," Heidi nodded grimly. "He was barely twenty-eight, not ready to run a crime family, but he refused to let Roman take over. Roman had been the underboss and felt entitled to the position since he'd worked closely with Caleb's father for decades. When Caleb stepped up as Don, Roman was murderous. He called Caleb a spoiled prince who would destroy the empire within a year. Their confrontation nearly ended in bloodshed."

Zoe leaned forward, completely absorbed by this deadly family drama. "What did Caleb do?"

"He brought in Xavier as his consigliere instead of promoting Roman. Xavier had been his blood brother since childhood, their families had been allies for generations. It was brilliant strategy, actually. Together, they transformed the organization into something

even more powerful than his father had imagined. But Roman never forgave the slight. He stays because Caleb kept all his father's lieutenants out of loyalty, but there's poison between them."

"How long ago was this?" Zoe asked, her eyes wide with fascination.

"Three years. Caleb and Xavier are thirty-one now, but they were just soldiers when they inherited that empire."

"And you've been with the Thorne family how long?"

Heidi's face softened dangerously. "Thirty years. I changed Caleb's diapers, for crying out loud. I started as his father's intelligence coordinator when I was twenty, fresh out of college and newly married. When I got pregnant with my twins two years later, I thought I'd have to leave the family. But then my husband was eliminated by a rival organization, leaving me with two babies and no protection. The Sterlings became my blood family. I was supposed to transfer to our Boston operations years ago to run the East Coast networks, but I couldn't abandon Caleb after losing his parents. Now that he's established his dominance, it's time."

Guilt washed over me. "I'm sorry, Heidi. I should have asked about your life sooner."

"Don't be ridiculous," she smiled, pulling out her encrypted phone. "My daughters are thriving in Boston. Both married into allied families, and I have three gorgeous grandchildren under our protection." She showed us photo after photo, her deadly pride radiating. "That's why I'm finally making the move. But leaving Caleb feels like abandoning my own son."

"He's lucky to have you," I said, thinking of my own parents and feeling a pang of longing for simpler times.

"Now enough about my dark past," Heidi said, her eyes sparkling with dangerous mischief. "Xavier told me your first encounter with Caleb was explosive. I want every lethal detail."

Zoe perked up immediately like a predator scenting blood. I recounted the whole mortifying scene, with Heidi filling in details she'd witnessed. Soon we were all laughing until our sides hurt. Zoe had us in tears describing how her previous boss once mixed up delivery packages, sending adult toys to his elderly mother while his mistress received a rosary and Bible. The best part was both women showing up at his office simultaneously to confront him, and his mother refusing to return the merchandise.

After Heidi left with promises to "handle" Caleb's territorial behavior, Zoe cornered me while we cleaned up.

"Spill it, Ivy. I want the real story Heidi doesn't know about."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't play innocent with me. You texted me that your boss grabbed you. There's more to this story than what you just shared."

I couldn't escape Zoe's interrogation skills. I told her about the electricity that shot through me when Caleb touched me, how his proximity made my skin burn and my mind go completely blank. Zoe studied my face with growing dangerous amusement.

"Zoe, do you think your uncle would really hire me back if this job goes to hell?"

"Girl, Kyle said the door's always open for you. Plus Dad's consulting firm is expanding into new territories. You won't starve. But why? You think your Don is going to eliminate you?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "But when he gets close, I feel like I'm losing myself. The attraction is so intense it terrifies me. I've never felt anything like it."

"I'm not following, Ivy."

"You know me, Zoe. I analyze everything, weigh every risk, never act without considering consequences. But around Caleb, I feel like I'm going to spontaneously combust. My whole body feels like it's on fire."

Zoe burst out laughing and grabbed my shoulders. "Girl, that's called being desperately horny for a dangerous man."

We collapsed in giggles, but her bluntness was oddly comforting. At least I wouldn't end up dead in an alley if this job imploded spectacularly.

"Oh, before I forget," Zoe said, "Mom found us security for Max. Her name's Carmen, and she used to protect me when I was little. She'll pick up Max from daycare and stay until we get home. She can handle everything—baths, dinner, even overnight protection if we need to handle business. I already arranged for her to watch Max Saturday night so we can scout some new territory. She's met Max and they bonded immediately. You'll trust her with your life."

Relief flooded through me. "Zoe, you're a lifesaver. I was panicking about daycare pickup times with all these unpredictable hours. But let me pay her salary."

"Absolutely not. He's my godson, and I want my partner available for dangerous missions. I'm covering it."

I knew arguing was pointless. Zoe had made up her mind, and honestly, having reliable protection for Max felt like winning the lottery in this dangerous new world. If her mother recommended Carmen, I trusted she'd die before letting harm come to my son.

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