Mafia Mask 141

Chapter 141 Dangerous Confessions

Ivy's POV

The entire day felt like navigating through a minefield while battling waves of nausea. Periodically, my stomach would revolt against me, and exhaustion clung to my bones like lead weights. When Xavier returned from his afternoon meeting with the capos at the social club, he approached my desk with that familiar commanding presence that made even hardened soldiers straighten their spines.

"Ivy, come here," his voice carried across the dimly lit office space of the Thorne family's legitimate front operations.

"Yes, Opal!" I responded with playful emphasis, unable to resist teasing him despite feeling absolutely wretched.

His scarred face lit up with genuine amusement. "I actually enjoy when you use my proper title." He gestured for me to step closer. "But I need you to check something for me. Come smell this cologne."

"What am I, a trained bloodhound now?" I laughed, though the motion made my already churning stomach lurch dangerously.

"Just humor your boss. I switched to a different scent after noticing you seemed uncomfortable during yesterday's money laundering briefing. Need to make sure this one works better for our close quarters work."

The thoughtfulness behind his gesture touched me deeply. Xavier, despite his reputation for brutal efficiency in family enforcement matters, always paid attention to details that mattered to those under his protection.

I leaned in and caught the subtle masculine scent. "This one is perfect. Much more tolerable."

"Excellent. Can’t have my best financial analyst avoiding me because I smell like a walking chemical weapons facility." His dark laughter filled the space between us before he disappeared behind the reinforced steel door of his private office.

That’s when I spotted Jude lingering in the doorway, his sharp eyes that had seen too many interrogations taking in everything he’d just witnessed.

"Did I miss something worth reporting to the Don?" Jude’s tone carried the weight of someone who’d survived many years in the family’s inner circle.

"Nothing that would interest Caleb. Xavier’s previous cologne was triggering my nausea, so he was considerate enough to change it." I kept my explanation simple and professional.

"Look at him, claiming territory like a true made man. I respect that level of attention to detail." Jude’s grin was knowing, predatory. "But more importantly, how are you holding up, Ivy? The whole family’s been concerned about your condition lately."

"Just dealing with the stress of managing underground financial networks. Nothing I can’t handle." The lie slipped out too easily, practiced from years of surviving in dangerous neighborhoods.

"Is that really the whole story?" His persistent stare felt like being under the harsh lights of an interrogation room.

"Absolutely," I insisted, hoping my voice carried more conviction than I felt.

"Then grab your things. We’re taking a little field trip." He extended his tattooed arm toward me. "Bring your purse because we’re leaving this fortress right now."

"Where exactly are we headed?" I asked while gathering my belongings from the desk that held encrypted financial records.

"Somewhere you can actually breathe without checking over your shoulder for rival family snipers."

We strolled through several blocks of territory controlled by various family allies, making casual conversation about weekend plans and recent developments in the ongoing turf negotiations. Eventually, we settled into a corner booth at a charming little bakery that operated under family protection and smelled like fresh bread and vanilla.

"Beautiful woman, you need to stop insulting my intelligence." Jude's blunt statement hit me like a punch to the solar plexus. "I've got several nephews and watched my sisters navigate pregnancy multiple times. I spoiled them rotten during each one, so I know all the warning signs." His weathered eyes never left mine. "You're carrying Caleb's baby, aren't you?"

Ice water seemed to replace the blood in my veins.

"Jude..." I attempted a casual laugh that sounded forced even to my own ears. "What would make you think something that serious?"

"Please don't play games with a man who's survived many years in this life, Ivy." Jude leaned back in his chair with the confidence of someone who'd interrogated countless enemies. "You're pale as fresh snow, you've lost weight everywhere except your chest, every scent triggers your gag reflex, you're exhausted around the clock, and now cologne sends you running for cover. And yes, I'm a man who adores his wife, but I'm not blind to obvious changes. Your breasts are definitely fuller."

One thought screamed through my mind: I'm completely screwed. Jude's raised eyebrow told me he wouldn't accept any denials I might desperately attempt.

"Jude, please promise me you won't breathe a word of this to Caleb." Tears started flowing before I could stop them, a dangerous display of vulnerability in our world.

"Ah, the hormone surge begins." He signaled the waitress and ordered pineapple mint juice without consulting me. "I won't say anything to Caleb or any other family member, but only temporarily. That man deserves to hear this news directly from the woman he's obsessed with. Now start talking and give me the complete picture."

I explained the entire complicated situation, emphasizing how desperately I wanted to keep this secret from Caleb until after his arranged marriage was finalized.

"Why would you want to hide this from him? He'll be absolutely over the moon!"

"Because I refuse to trap Caleb with an unplanned pregnancy. That's not how I want him to choose me over family obligations."

"Do you honestly believe Caleb would only stay with you because of a baby?" Jude looked genuinely shocked by my reasoning. "Woman, that man is completely obsessed with you to the point of concerning his capos. Wake up and see what's right in front of you. You two aren't together solely because you keep pushing him away every time he gets close. I understand your fears about this life, but Caleb would burn down entire cities to protect you, Ivy. I'll keep your secret for now, but if you don't tell him soon, I'll have no choice but to inform him myself."

The tears came harder then, unstoppable and embarrassing. These damn pregnancy hormones were making everything infinitely worse. Jude spent the following stretch of time trying to calm me down while I sobbed like a child who'd lost her favorite toy.

The remainder of the afternoon crawled by at a torturous pace, my head pounding with stress and bone-deep exhaustion.

By the time I reached my apartment in the family-protected building, I felt completely drained. But I'd made arrangements for Parker to visit after Max went to bed because we needed to have a serious conversation about our evolving relationship. He arrived looking devastatingly handsome in his perfectly tailored Italian suit, greeting me with a gentle kiss on the cheek that smelled of expensive cologne and danger.

"You've had me worried lately, beautiful. You haven't seemed like yourself during our recent dinner dates." Parker settled beside me on the leather couch, his concern evident in those calculating eyes that had seen too much violence.

"I have something important to tell you that's going to change the dynamics between us." I took a shaky breath and positioned myself next to this powerful man who controlled half the underground gambling in the city.

"The only thing that could change anything between us is if you decide to go back to Thorne's territory, or better yet, finally agree to be my woman exclusively." His optimism was both endearing and heartbreaking given what I was about to reveal.

"Unfortunately, it's neither of those options." My nerves were getting the better of me under his intense scrutiny.

"Then stop worrying and just tell me. Our arrangement will remain exactly the same, so there's no reason to be anxious about my reaction." He reached out and played with a strand of my hair, the gesture soothing despite the calluses from handling weapons.

"Parker, do you remember when I told you about what happened between Caleb and me?"

"Of course I remember every detail. Did something else happen between you two during one of his territorial incursions? If that's what this is about, Ivy, don't stress about it. You haven't committed to being exclusively mine yet, and while I hate the thought of Thorne's hands on you, I'm not giving up this chase. Like I've always said, you don't owe me exclusivity until you choose to give it."

"Thank you for understanding my position, but that's not what I need to confess." I steeled myself for his reaction to news that could start a war between territories.

"Then just say it, Ivy." His voice remained gentle and encouraging despite the danger radiating from his powerful frame.

"Parker, I'm pregnant." I squeezed my eyes shut, bracing for judgment or explosive anger.

I felt him shift closer before his voice whispered near my ear:

"Look at me, Ivy." When I opened my eyes, he was inches away, smiling with that dangerous charm that made him so effective in negotiations. "I don't care about any of that history." Each word was deliberate and clear. "I want you, I want Max, and I already want this baby because they're all part of you. I'm not running from this fight, and I'm not handing you over to Thorne without making him bleed for you first. You get to decide whether to tell him and how involved he gets to be, but if you'll let me, I'm more than ready to be this child's father figure, just like I've become with Max."

"You’re serious about taking on Thorne’s bloodline?" I stared at him in disbelief.

"Completely serious," Parker confirmed without hesitation. "You control how this war plays out. For now, I’m satisfied that you’ve agreed to let things develop naturally between us, without pressure or ultimatums. If you want to continue this way, I have infinite patience for the right woman. But the moment you decide you want me completely, Ivy, I’ll hold onto you against any enemy who tries to take you."

An overwhelming urge to kiss this incredibly dangerous man washed over me. How could I resist? He was gorgeous and deadly, making me feel lighter and uncomplicated in ways I’d forgotten were possible in this dark world. I studied his handsome face, this man who made everything seem manageable even in the midst of territory wars, and decided to take a chance. Why shouldn’t I? My heart was already shattered anyway, and he knew the risks. Maybe Parker could help put the pieces back together before the next battle began.

I stood up and positioned myself sideways across his lap, legs curled on the couch cushion, wrapped my arm around his neck, and pulled him into a deep kiss that tasted of danger and possibility. When we finally broke apart, I traced the line of his jaw with my fingertips, feeling the tension of barely controlled power beneath his skin.

"So let’s keep letting things flow naturally."

Chapter 142 Kiss of Chaos

Caleb’s POV

My nerves were stretched to their breaking point as I sat behind my desk at Thorne Industries, our family’s legitimate front operation. The DNA test results hadn’t arrived yet, but deep in my gut, I already knew the truth. Yara’s child wasn’t mine. I just needed those damn results to finally put this nightmare to rest and clear my name with the Commission.

The secure line on my desk buzzed with an encrypted call. My secretary Gemma’s voice came through the speaker, professional but strained. Someone was waiting in the lobby to see me. My blood turned to ice when she said the name.

Veronica Moretti.

What the hell was she doing here? The Moretti family had been our allies once, before everything went to shit. I told Gemma to escort her to Conference Room B. Neutral territory, away from my private office where family business was conducted.

I finished reviewing the latest shipping manifests from our South American operations, my fingers moving mechanically across the papers while my mind raced. When Gemma buzzed to confirm Veronica's arrival, I straightened my tie and headed down to the executive floor.

The moment I stepped into the marble lobby, Veronica launched herself at me like a guided missile. Her arms wrapped around my neck, her mouth crashing against mine in a kiss that tasted like desperation and expensive lipstick.

"Fantastic! Now this little snake is making herself at home in our headquarters?" Xavier's voice dripped with disgust as he emerged from the elevator bank, briefcase in hand. As my consigliere, he had every right to be pissed about unauthorized family visits.

"Good afternoon to you too, you miserable bastard!" Veronica fired back, her fingers still tangled in my hair.

I pulled away from her, my jaw clenched tight enough to crack teeth. That's when I saw them. Ivy stood frozen by the elevator doors, Jude beside her, both of them staring at the disaster unfolding in front of them.

Jude was shaking his head slowly, his expression a mixture of disappointment and fury. But it was Ivy's face that nearly brought me to my knees. The color had drained from her cheeks, leaving her looking pale and fragile. The woman who handled our money laundering operations with ice-cold precision looked like she might shatter.

She walked past us without a word, her heels clicking against the marble floor like a death march. Gemma trailed behind her, shooting me a look that could have melted steel.

Jude paused as he passed my position, leaning in close enough that only I could hear his words.

"If you can’t manage to send this piece of trash back to whatever hole she crawled out of, just say the word. Because I’m not sticking around to watch you destroy yourself, brother."

"So what’s it going to be, Caleb?" Xavier demanded, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you going to handle this or do I need to call the cleaners?"

"He’s not going to handle anything, Xavier. He’s the idiot who let her into our building in the first place," Gemma called out as she exited Ivy’s office, heading toward the communications room with murder in her eyes.

Xavier turned on his heel and stalked back to his office, slamming the reinforced door hard enough to rattle the bulletproof glass. I stood there like an idiot, completely lost. I needed to get Veronica out of here before she caused any more damage to family operations.

I grabbed her elbow and steered her toward the express elevator, taking her down to the secure conference level. I should have done that from the beginning.

"So Caleb, who were those two lovely ladies upstairs?" Veronica purred, draping herself across my shoulders like an expensive coat.

"What do you want, Veronica?" I stepped away from her, putting the mahogany conference table between us.

"Isn’t it obvious, darling? I want you back in my life!"

"No, it’s not obvious at all. We ended things when your family made their alliance with the Rossellis. You chose them over us and built a new life. I did the same."

"But in Miami, we reconnected and you wanted me just as much as before."

"Don’t twist what happened. We ran into each other and I made the colossal mistake of sleeping with you. That’s all it was. A mistake that could have compromised both our families."

"Oh darling, that’s not how I remember it. If you took me to bed, it’s because you still have feelings for me. That’s why I came back. To give us another chance."

I couldn’t believe the words coming out of her mouth. This woman was completely delusional about the reality of our situation. My patience was hanging by a thread.

"You’re completely insane. Do us both a favor and disappear. Get out. Leave the city. I feel absolutely nothing for you."

"Caleb, don’t be cruel. I flew all the way from Chicago for you."

"Then you wasted your time and your family’s money, because I don’t even want to remember you exist. Please, just go away and don’t contact me again."

"Is this because you’re involved with that boring little accountant Ivy? Yara filled me in on everything! How did you end up with the woman you supposedly can’t stand?"

"The same way I got tangled up with the biggest bitch on the East Coast, which would be you," I shouted, my voice echoing off the conference room walls. "Now get out and don’t contact me again."

"You think you can intimidate me?" She settled into one of the leather chairs, crossing her legs with theatrical flair. "I’m not giving up on you, Caleb. My family won’t either."

I yanked open the conference room door and spotted two of our security enforcers near the elevator bank. I waved them over, my voice sharp with authority.

"Escort Miss Moretti off the premises immediately. She’s banned from this building and all family properties effective now."

The men moved toward her without hesitation, recognizing the finality in my tone. As they flanked her chair, I stepped into the elevator and called our head of security, making sure Veronica’s name went on every blacklist we maintained.

When the elevator doors opened on the executive floor, I rushed toward Ivy's office. Through the glass walls, I could see her sobbing uncontrollably, surrounded by Jude, Xavier, Gemma, and Katelyn.

"Caleb, she's devastated. Back off," Jude blocked my path, his stance protective and unwavering.

"Come on, Jude. I need to explain what happened," I pleaded.

"Not happening, Don," Xavier stepped up beside Jude, using my title with cold formality.

"Yes, boss, it looks like you've done quite enough explaining already. Let the poor girl calm down. I gave her some of my special tea blend," Katelyn said, brushing past me with obvious disapproval.

"I'm taking Ivy to her apartment and then meeting you at my place. Got it? You too, Jude," Xavier announced.

"Xavier, let me drive Ivy home. You go deal with our Don and I'll catch up with you later," Jude suggested.

"Fine. Jude takes Ivy. Gemma, maintain communications here. Keep your secure phone on if anything explodes. Caleb, you're coming with me," Xavier decided.

Xavier refused to let me behind the wheel during the drive to his penthouse. The entire way, he lectured me about the spectacular mess I'd created and how he wouldn't stick around to watch me destroy everything our family had built if I got involved with Veronica again.

I tried to defend myself, but what defense was there? I'd really fucked up this time. Just when I was close to resolving the Yara situation, I'd created an entirely new disaster with Veronica.

At Xavier's apartment, he immediately made secure calls to Dominic and Finn, summoning them for an emergency family meeting. Jude arrived last, his face grim.

"Please tell me you used protection when you slept with that snake in Miami," Jude was furious, his protective instincts for Ivy on full display.

"Of course I used protection. I wasn't completely out of my mind. I just needed to clear my head, guys. For me, it was supposed to be meaningless, nothing more," I tried to justify my actions.

"And it's destroying Ivy's stability," Jude snapped. "You have no idea how much I've watched that woman suffer. She's brilliant, incredible, and all you do is break her heart repeatedly."

"How was she when you left her, Jude?" Xavier asked.

"She was already asleep by the time we reached her apartment. I made sure she was secure, and Carmen promised to stay with her until the other women arrived," Jude said, his voice softening. "That tea of Katelyn's works like a sedative. Oh, and Caleb, Max kept asking where you were."

"Christ, I miss that kid so much!" The words came out choked with emotion.

When Dominic and Finn finally arrived, we filled them in on the whole disaster. Finn looked at me like I'd lost my mind.

"Caleb, fix this mess before it spirals completely out of control and threatens everything we've built," Finn said grimly.

Chapter 143 Graceful Exit

Ivy's POV

By the time Jude's armored black Escalade pulled into the safehouse driveway, Katelyn's herbal sedative had worked its magic and I was drifting in and out of consciousness. I woke hours later to find Ruby perched on the edge of my bed, watching me with the sharp eyes of someone who had grown up in the shadows of organized crime.

"Hey there, sleeping beauty," Ruby said, her voice gentle but carrying the underlying steel that all mafia wives eventually developed.

"Hi, Ruby," I mumbled, pushing myself up against the pillows. "How are you holding up after everything?"

"Like I've been through a territorial war," I admitted, running my hands through my tangled hair. "Caleb's planning to form a strategic alliance with one famiglia while keeping another woman as his personal asset. And the worst part? I think she might be the ghost from his past that he's been hunting through every underground network for years."

Ruby shifted uncomfortably on the bed, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her designer blouse—a nervous habit she'd developed since getting involved with the Thorne organization. "Ivy, I cornered Xavier and made him spill everything. What I'm about to tell you might be difficult to process, but you need to know the truth. For your safety and my boss's sanity."

My pulse quickened. "What do you mean?"

"Caleb isn't forming any marriage alliance," Ruby said firmly. "I don't have all the intelligence, but he discovered that woman fabricated her pregnancy claims."

I stared at her, trying to process the information through the fog of painkillers and emotional exhaustion. "What are you talking about?"

"Something about forged medical documentation. The pregnancy was completely fabricated, and he terminated any discussion of alliance immediately. As for the woman you witnessed him with today, that situation has more history behind it. She's definitely a former associate, but Caleb swore to Xavier that he has zero romantic interest in rekindling anything."

Ruby's revelation hit me like sniper fire. "So he's not committed to either of them?"

"No. Caleb promised Xavier he loves you and only you." Ruby's expression grew more intense. "Listen, Ivy, you're in love with the most powerful Don on the East Coast. I can see it written across your face every time someone mentions his name. You're trying to be honorable toward Parker, but honestly, you're never going to purge Caleb from your system. You need to face reality and end things with Parker before you completely destroy a good man."

Guilt crashed over me in waves. "Ruby, I'm so sorry. I never intended for any of this to spiral out of control. I genuinely believed I could develop feelings for someone outside this world. Parker's incredible in every way—powerful, protective, completely removed from Thorne territory."

"I know he is," Ruby said with a melancholy smile, pulling me into a warm embrace. "I was hoping you might find peace with him too. But after witnessing your reaction today, I realize that's never going to happen."

"Are you furious with me?" I asked, searching her face for any trace of resentment.

"Of course not, sweetheart," Ruby assured me. "Like I told you before, Parker understood the risks when he decided to pursue someone with your... complicated connections. But now you need to have a honest conversation with him and stop running from what the fates have obviously decided."

After Ruby left, I took a scalding shower and joined my safehouse companions in the main room. They had ordered enough takeout to feed a small army, and we spent hours dissecting every aspect of my tangled romantic situation while consuming ridiculous amounts of comfort food.

Following a night filled with strategic advice and emotional support, I felt strangely renewed and determined. I knew challenging conversations lay ahead, but the most difficult would be facing Parker. The thought of causing pain to someone who had provided sanctuary and protection made my stomach clench with dread. I planned to use the security day Xavier had granted me to navigate through this mess.

I was lost in thought, staring through the bulletproof windows, when my encrypted phone buzzed. Parker's name appeared on the screen. Unusual timing, since he never contacted anyone this early in the morning due to his nocturnal casino operations. I answered, hearing his familiar smooth voice on the other end.

"Beautiful Ivy, how are you feeling today?" Parker's tone seemed lighter than usual, almost deliberately casual. "Ruby mentioned you weren't well yesterday."

"Hi, Parker. I'm much better, thank you. How are your operations running?"

"I've been thinking about you. About our arrangement." His voice carried a weight I hadn't detected before. "Since my security team reports everything's quiet today, I thought this might be the perfect opportunity for us to have a real conversation."

My pulse accelerated. "When did you want to meet?"

"Actually, I'm already en route to your location. I'll be there shortly. Hope that's acceptable."

"Of course. I'll see you soon."

Parker terminated the call, leaving me with time to prepare for what felt like an inevitable confrontation. When he arrived, he carried a box of freshly baked pastries from his casino's private kitchen and two steaming espressos. He greeted me with a gentle kiss on my forehead, notably different from the passionate encounters that had become our routine since we began this arrangement.

"Thought we could enjoy some caffeine while we discuss business," he said, his smile not quite reaching those calculating eyes.

"You always anticipate everything," I replied, though my voice sounded hollow even to my own ears.

We settled onto the sofa, the silence stretching between us like a chasm. I searched desperately for appropriate words, but they seemed to evaporate before reaching my lips.

"Why is it so challenging, Ivy?" Parker asked, taking a deliberate sip of his espresso and studying me carefully.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Why is it so difficult for you to admit you've already made your decision?" His voice remained steady, but I could see the pain flickering behind those green eyes.

Panic fluttered in my chest. "Did Ruby reveal something to you?"

"She did, because I practically interrogated her until she explained why you had that breakdown yesterday. She had no choice but to tell me the truth. And then she suggested I should be a gentleman and withdraw gracefully. So that's exactly what I'm here to do."

"Parker, I don't understand what you're saying."

"Yes, you do, Ivy. I came here to say goodbye. You love Caleb Thorne with everything you possess, and it's the kind of obsession that consumes everything in its path. I don't stand a fighting chance against that level of devotion. Especially since he loves you just as intensely. So I'm going to be a gentleman and remove myself from this territorial dispute. I'm relocating my operations to the Frost Coast next week to expand my family's interests. My father requires assistance with our Nevada enterprises, so the timing couldn't be more perfect."

"Parker, I don't know what to say. I tried so desperately to make this arrangement work between us, I swear I did, but..."

"I know you did, beautiful. I just arrived too late in your story, didn't I?" He gave me one of his devastating smiles, the kind that had made my heart skip when we first negotiated this deal. "Will you give me one final goodbye?"

I nodded, unable to speak past the tightness in my throat. Parker moved closer, closing the distance between us. His lips met mine in a kiss that was achingly tender and reverent, filled with all the gentleness that had defined our entire association. His tongue touched mine with something resembling worship, as if he was memorizing this moment. When he pulled away, he flashed me that beautiful smile one final time and walked out of my life.

The moment the door closed behind him, I collapsed onto the sofa and called Ruby through my tears, telling her everything that had just transpired. She tried to comfort me, insisting that everything would work out, that Parker would find the right person eventually, and that I needed to fight for the man I truly loved. Afterward, I sent a message to our encrypted group chat so all the women would know about this latest development.

I spent the remainder of the morning trying to stabilize my emotions. When Carmen arrived with Max from his protected daycare facility, he launched himself directly into my arms with his usual enthusiasm.

"Mommy!"

"My sweet boy, how are you doing today?" I asked, holding him tightly against me.

"Good, Mommy."

"And how was your lessons today?"

"Good too, Mommy." He pulled back to look at me with those innocent eyes that mirrored my own. "Mommy, where is Caleb? I really miss him."

"Oh, sweetheart, Caleb is very busy with family business right now. But he always asks about you and sends you lots of love."

"Tell him to come play with me soon, Mommy."

"I will, baby. When his work allows, he'll definitely come visit. Now, should we get you cleaned up before lunch?"

I gave Max his bath, and after we finished lunch together, he went down for his afternoon nap. Carmen chatted with me briefly, encouraging me to rest and take care of myself, saying the downtime would benefit my recovery. I took her advice, making the most of my unexpected security day by allowing myself to truly relax. I went to bed early that evening and slept more soundly than I had in weeks.

Chapter 144 The Setup Exposed

Caleb's POV

I arrived at Thorne Group headquarters before dawn, my mind consumed with one singular purpose: finding Ivy and making her understand the truth. The legitimate front of our family operations felt

suffocatingly empty without her presence. My plan was straightforward: explain everything, beg for her forgiveness if necessary, and somehow repair the catastrophic damage I had inflicted over the past few days. But Xavier crushed those desperate hopes the moment he spotted me prowling through the reception area like a caged predator.

"Get to your office. She's not coming in today. I gave her time off because she needs distance from this mess and frankly deserves it. And I promised the crew you wouldn't harass her today," Xavier stated with the firm authority of a consigliere who had grown tired of cleaning up his Don's emotional disasters.

"Damn it, Xavier!" I snarled like a wounded animal. "Let's grab some coffee and talk."

In the break room, Katelyn, Jude, and Gemma were huddled together in whispered conversation, their voices dying the instant we appeared in the doorway. After some awkward pleasantries that fooled no one, Xavier, Jude, and I retreated to my office where the real business could be conducted behind soundproof walls.

"Alright, Jude, what aren't you telling me?" I confronted him directly, my patience evaporated after days of cryptic behavior from my most trusted soldiers.

"I have no idea what you mean, Boss," Jude responded, but his refusal to meet my eyes betrayed him completely.

"Cut the bullshit! You know exactly what I'm talking about!" I stepped closer, using every inch of my height and reputation to intimidate him. "What's happening with Ivy? Why are you suddenly acting like her personal bodyguard? Why are you having secret conversations with the women? What information are you keeping from your Don?"

"It's not my place to share that intelligence with you," Jude finally admitted, his loyalty to whatever secret they were protecting clearly outweighing his fear of my wrath.

"So there is something?" I pressed, feeling the familiar rage building in my chest like a slow burn.

Jude's discomfort was obvious, but before I could extract more information, my phone interrupted the interrogation. Dr. Taylor's private number appeared on the screen. I answered immediately, knowing that the family's most trusted medical contact would only call with urgent matters. His secretary apologized profusely before explaining that the doctor had personally requested she contact me about critical test results he had sent via encrypted email.

My pulse quickened with anticipation. The tests had arrived. I rushed to my computer and opened the secure communication channel we used for sensitive family business. The message blazed across the screen with information that would change everything.

From: Dr. Gilbert Taylor

To: Caleb Thorne

Subject: URGENT - Your Toxicology Results

Caleb,

Forgive the delay, but a family emergency required my immediate attention, and I only reviewed your samples this morning. The results are quite shocking and have serious implications for your situation.

Regarding your toxicology screening, my suspicions were completely confirmed. Your blood work returned positive for morphine at concentrations that would render a grown man unconscious within moments. Someone dissolved pharmaceutical-grade pills in your drink, administering a massive dose that would have made you physically incapable of standing upright, much less engaging in any coherent activity. You were deliberately and systematically drugged by a professional.

The DNA and pregnancy test results are even more damning. The samples you provided cannot be processed because there is no pregnancy to test. Your alleged victim has never been pregnant, not recently, not currently, not ever based on her hormone levels. The entire situation is an elaborate fabrication designed to destroy you.

All documentation is attached with my medical seal. Contact me immediately if you require additional verification or testimony.

Dr. Gilbert Taylor

Thorne Family Medical Advisor

I examined the attached medical documentation with the same careful attention I gave to intelligence reports before ordering hits. The evidence was irrefutable and painted a picture of conspiracy that made my blood boil with rage. How could anyone dare to target the head of our family with such an intricate web of lies?

"What's wrong, Boss?" Xavier inquired, but I was rendered speechless by the magnitude of deception revealed before me. He approached my computer and read Dr. Taylor's encrypted message over my shoulder. "Unbelievable! I knew something felt wrong about this whole setup!" Xavier slammed his palm against my desk with enough force to rattle the crystal decanters.

Jude hurried over to view the screen, his expression shifting from concern to visible relief as he processed the medical evidence that vindicated his Don.

"I'm ending this nightmare immediately!" I declared, fury coursing through me like molten steel. "Whoever orchestrated this will pay in blood."

"Hold on, Boss. We should review the security footage from the charity gala and identify exactly who drugged you," Xavier reminded me with the tactical thinking that made him invaluable. "It was probably one of the servers who brought your drink on the terrace, but we need to discover their identity and who paid them to betray our family."

"I'll handle that investigation personally! I arranged all the catering services for that event," Jude volunteered, eager to prove his usefulness.

"I need to see Ivy right now and explain everything," I said, desperation bleeding through my carefully maintained control.

"Absolutely not! First, you're going to resolve this disaster and eliminate those two treacherous snakes who dared to move against our family. Then you can speak with Ivy," Jude warned with unexpected steel in his voice.

"Then tell me what you're hiding, Jude, because I know there's something you're not telling your Don," I demanded with growing impatience.

"Yes, there is something. But you'll clean up this betrayal first," Jude insisted stubbornly. "Don't even attempt to pressure me because I won't reveal anything until justice is served. I'm going to review that security footage now."

"I can't focus on family business right now," I admitted, a weakness I rarely showed. "I still don't understand how they fabricated that ultrasound image I saw."

"Boss, the doctor's secretary provided her direct contact information. Call her personally, maybe she can provide additional forensic details," Xavier suggested pragmatically.

"Excellent idea. Will you accompany me? I refuse to be alone with any woman ever again until this is resolved." My statement was deadly serious, but Xavier erupted in dark laughter.

The weight of this elaborate betrayal pressed down on me with crushing force. Someone had orchestrated this sophisticated scheme to destroy my relationship with Ivy, and I was determined to uncover every detail of their conspiracy. The morphine explained my memory gaps and complete physical helplessness that night at the charity gala. The fabricated pregnancy explained the urgency and emotional manipulation that followed. But critical questions remained about who else was involved and how deep this treachery reached into our organization.

My hands trembled with barely contained rage as I saved the test results to my secure files. The medical evidence would vindicate me completely, but the damage to Ivy's trust might prove irreparable. I had accused her of jealousy and dismissed her concerns when she was the only person who truly cared about my wellbeing beyond family obligations.

The bitter irony wasn't lost on me that Jude, who clearly knew Ivy's secret, was now protecting her from me with the same fierce loyalty he usually reserved for family matters. Whatever she was concealing, it

was significant enough that my most trusted soldiers had formed a protective barrier around her. That realization terrified me more than any rival family's threats ever could.

Chapter 145 Deception Unveiled

Caleb's POV

I arranged to meet the informant at a small Italian restaurant in neutral territory, just blocks from the underground clinic that served our family's medical needs. When Xavier and I walked through the heavy wooden doors, she had already secured a corner booth in the shadows.

"Good afternoon, Don Thorne. Mr. Black. How are both of you managing?" Her greeting carried the careful deference expected when addressing a mafia boss.

"Wait, you actually know who I am?" Xavier's eyebrows shot up with genuine surprise.

"I work the high-stakes tables at the Darkstone on weekends." Her cheeks flushed slightly under our scrutiny. "You gentlemen are among our most generous players. I'm Mabel."

"Holy shit, that's right! I definitely tried to get your number that one night..." Xavier's recognition dawned with his trademark laugh. "But damn, without all that casino makeup and with your hair pulled back professional like that, plus those glasses, you look like a completely different person."

"Yes, I'm aware." Mabel shifted uncomfortably under our intense stares. "Thank you for agreeing to meet with me, Don Thorne."

"Listen, Mabel, I'll be straight with you. When you slipped me that note, I figured you were looking for protection or a job. But now you've got my full attention." I leaned back in the leather booth, my hands folded on the table.

"Don Thorne, I only work at that clinic because I desperately need the money to support my sick mother, but I have to tell you, Dr. Edward is a man completely without honor, and what they're orchestrating against you is absolutely disgraceful. Plus, everyone at the Darkstone has seen how much you despise that Rossi woman. Nobody in our circles can stand her, if we're being honest." Mabel's words sent Xavier into a fit of dark laughter.

"What exactly are they orchestrating, Mabel?" I leaned forward, my voice dropping to the dangerous tone that made grown men confess their sins.

"Your so-called fiancée isn't carrying your child. That entire clinic appointment was nothing but theater. The doctor played you a recording from a completely different woman's ultrasound. His plan was to maintain this charade through every appointment until after your forced wedding, then Yara would stage a convenient miscarriage." Mabel laid out the entire deception with the precision of someone who had memorized every detail.

"Cristo santo, Caleb, this nightmare just keeps getting deeper." I pressed my palms against my closed eyes, feeling the familiar rage building in my chest.

"There's more you need to know. Your lieutenant Monica was the one who arranged the connection between Yara and this corrupt doctor." Mabel clearly had access to information that could destroy lives. "I was working the night shift before your appointment and overheard all of them planning every detail. That man is a complete disgrace to his profession, and I have no idea how the medical board hasn't stripped his license."

"He won't have one much longer, I can guarantee you that, Mabel." My voice carried the steel of a death sentence.

"Don Thorne, there's another piece. You know Rita, the one who manages the VIP sections at the Darkstone?" Mabel continued, her voice dropping lower.

"Yeah, what about Rita?"

"She mentioned that the Rita who works in your organization's personnel department is close with Monica and feeds her intelligence constantly. The moment you step foot in that casino, she's on her secure phone alerting Monica to your whereabouts."

"So that's how they always know my movements..." Xavier muttered, his hand instinctively moving toward the gun concealed beneath his jacket.

"Rita also overheard part of a conversation where Monica was boasting about having eyes and ears planted throughout your entire network, every business front your family controls. She claims to have detailed knowledge about your most private family matters."

"How could I have been so blind to the snakes in my own house!" The leather booth creaked as my hands clenched into fists.

We continued gathering intelligence for a while longer, and before departing, I handed Mabel one of my personal cards with an offer to discuss legitimate employment within our organization. She had refused any monetary payment for the information, so providing her with family protection seemed like the minimum gesture of respect. Having people I could actually trust working within my inner circle had become a matter of life and death.

Stepping out of that restaurant, my hands were practically shaking with the need to wrap them around Yara and Monica's throats. That's when Jude's call came through, informing me he had located the casino server and developed a strategy to interrogate him. We raced back to the family compound immediately.

Jude had already prepared our questioning session in the main conference room of our legitimate business front. He contacted the catering company that supplied the casino, gathered background intelligence on the server who turned out to be a recent hire with gambling debts, then placed an order for beverage service with a specific request for that same worker. When the appointed time arrived, everything was in position. Jude, Xavier, and I positioned ourselves in the conference room, and the moment the server entered with his cart, we had him completely trapped.

"Have a seat, friend. We need to discuss some business," Xavier's hand landed heavily on the server's shoulder, guiding him into a chair with the kind of pressure that suggested resistance would be unwise.

"Curtis, you worked one of our private events here a while back. How did that evening go for you?" Jude opened with false courtesy while making it clear we had detailed records.

"It was a successful event, Don Thorne," the server responded carefully, using my proper title.

"Not successful for everyone involved," I interjected with ice in my voice. "But I definitely remember you." His eyes went wide with the terror of recognition. "You served me whiskey out on the private balcony, except it wasn't just whiskey, was it, Curtis?"

"I... I... Don Thorne... I have no idea what you mean," he attempted to deflect, but his voice was already shaking.

"Oh, but you absolutely do," Xavier stated with deadly certainty. "And even if your memory needs refreshing, my friend, we've got it all on security footage." Xavier grabbed the remote and activated the wall-mounted screen, displaying the exact balcony footage showing the server handing me the glass. "Family compound, surveillance systems covering every inch. The equipment we use captures everything in crystal clear detail," Xavier explained with predatory satisfaction.

"P-p-please... I never... I..." He was stammering and sweat had started beading on his forehead despite the air conditioning.

"Curtis, let me make this very simple for you," I cut off his pathetic stalling tactics. "I had a full toxicology workup done at our family's private medical facility. I have video evidence of you serving me that drink followed by footage of me stumbling off that balcony like a drugged fool. So you can either tell us every detail of what happened, or I make one phone call and you disappear into the East River with concrete boots. Your choice."

"Please don't hurt my family, I'll tell you everything," his resistance crumbled immediately like they always did when faced with real consequences. "I was desperate for work and I've got a daughter who needs surgery. Someone I trusted helped me get this catering position through the union. I swear on my daughter's life, Don Thorne, I really needed that job," his terror was written across his face. "I wasn't even supposed to work your event, it was my day off, but she specifically requested me for the team, convinced my supervisor to add me to the roster, even arranged extra payment for me to show up. When you stepped onto the balcony, she signaled me over and told me to deliver that glass. I give you my word, sir, I had no knowledge it contained anything but whiskey, I swear on everything I hold sacred. She was someone I trusted, she had gotten me employment, she worked directly within your organization, I never imagined she would orchestrate something so treacherous against the Don himself."

"You had no idea what was mixed into that glass?" Jude pressed, his voice carrying the quiet menace of a professional enforcer.

"She told me it was premium whiskey from your private reserve, and that’s exactly what it smelled like. So I served it as instructed. But then I watched how you left that balcony, Don Thorne, and I knew something was very wrong because I had been serving you drinks throughout the evening and you were completely coherent before that particular glass." Curtis had tears streaming down his face. "When I saw you struggling to maintain your balance, I tried to approach and offer assistance, but she blocked my path. She insisted your companion would handle taking care of you. After the event concluded, I cornered her and demanded answers because I knew something terrible had happened."

"What was her response?" I demanded, my voice carrying the promise of retribution.

"She threatened to have me blacklisted from every legitimate job in the city if I wanted to keep working." Curtis revealed he had been under constant intimidation.

"How incredibly low can a person sink!" I dragged my hands down my face in disgust at the depths of this betrayal.

"Who was this woman, son?" Jude asked with growing impatience and the barely controlled violence that preceded family justice.

"Monica," Curtis answered, sealing her death warrant with that single word.

"Perfetto! She’s a poisonous serpent who’s been feeding information to our enemies." My anger was building toward the explosion point that usually ended in blood on the walls.

"Alright, Curtis. We appreciate your cooperation with this family matter. We’ll ensure the catering company understands that you acted under duress and had no knowledge of the conspiracy, and we’ll make it clear that Monica no longer breathes the same air as decent people," Jude offered the kind of reassurance that came with family protection. "Take my card and contact me if you or your daughter need any assistance with medical expenses."

"That’s all? You won’t be... disposing of me?" Curtis looked stunned by the unexpected mercy.

"No violence necessary. You were manipulated by a traitor. You can complete your shift today without any concerns. This matter is settled," Xavier confirmed, though his tone suggested Monica wouldn't be receiving the same consideration.

"Grazie, Don Thorne. Thank you for your mercy," Curtis expressed his gratitude as we exited the conference room, leaving him to contemplate how close he had come to becoming fish food in the harbor.

Chapter 146 The Final Reckoning

Caleb's POV

When we stormed back into the war room at Thorne Syndicate headquarters, fury coursed through my veins like liquid fire. Xavier and I laid out everything Mabel had revealed during our covert meeting at the docks, watching Jude's expression grow darker with each damning revelation about our family's infiltration.

"Jude, I need you to send coded messages to every capo, lieutenant, and allied family we work with," I commanded, my voice cutting through the tension like a blade. "Tell them Monica is no longer under our protection. Make it clear she's been selling family secrets and has compromised their operations. If they want to maintain their alliances with the Thorne Syndicate, they need to purge their ranks immediately."

Jude's fingers were already flying across his encrypted communications before I finished speaking.

"This betrayal runs deeper than a cancer in our bloodline," Xavier muttered, running his hands through his hair in disbelief at the scope of the conspiracy.

"And contact the Family Commission," I added. "I want Rita blacklisted from every territory under our influence."

Jude paused his typing and looked up at me with calculating eyes. "Caleb, when you were involved with that viper Veronica, she and Monica were like sisters in scheming, weren't they?"

The question hit me like a gut punch from a brass knuckle. "Yeah, though Monica claimed later she was disgusted by Veronica's manipulations. Said she never wanted to associate with her again. Why are you asking?"

"Because I'm beginning to suspect your little reunion with Veronica wasn't some romantic coincidence," Jude said, his tone sharp with the suspicion that had kept him alive in this business for decades.

My blood turned to ice in my veins. "That's impossible."

"Actually, it makes perfect sense," Xavier chimed in, his face grim with the realization of how deep this conspiracy ran.

"I'll dig into this through our street contacts," Jude declared. "Veronica's mother gets her hair done at my sisters' legitimate front business. Women love to gossip there, and money talks in those circles."

A slow, predatory smile spread across my face like a wolf scenting blood. "Jude, I need you to create something special for me. A comprehensive dossier showcasing all of Roman Rossi's treacherous moves against this family. It's time to end this charade once and for all."

Jude's grin matched mine with lethal promise. "Give me some time, Don."

"Perfect. I have some family business to conduct."

Later, I sat in our main conference room like a general preparing for the final battle. Xavier flanked my right side, Jude my left, and our family lawyer completed our council of war. The atmosphere was electric with anticipation for what was about to unfold.

When the pathetic trio walked through those doors, I felt a surge of pure satisfaction. Roman strutted in first with his usual arrogance, followed by his scheming wife Rita, with Yara trailing behind like a lamb being led to slaughter.

"Caleb, my boy, I've missed our family meetings terribly!" Roman's voice scraped against my eardrums like fingernails on concrete. "How could you return from your business dealings without calling a sit-down first?"

"Roman, seeing you today has made me absolutely ecstatic," I replied, and for once, I meant every word. My smile was genuine because I knew what was coming for this treacherous snake.

"I assume we're here to finalize the marriage arrangement with Yara, though I still think formal contracts are unnecessary between families," Roman began, his arrogance on full display.

"Oh, we have much more pressing family business than that," I said smoothly. "But we're waiting for one final guest."

When Austin walked through those doors, the temperature in the room seemed to drop considerably. Roman's face went ashen with the realization that his web of lies was about to unravel, and confusion flickered across Austin's features like a neon warning sign.

I had contacted Austin's father personally, calling in a blood debt without explanation. The old capo didn't ask questions, simply guaranteed his son would be present. And here Austin was, unknowingly about to witness the destruction of his manipulator.

"Now that our entire cast is assembled, we can begin this delightful family reckoning," I announced, settling back in my chair like a judge about to deliver verdict. "Let's start with some educational entertainment."

Jude activated the projection system, and our masterpiece began unfolding on the wide screen. The presentation opened with footage from Heidi's charity gala, featuring the bartender's full confession about drugging me at Roman's orders, complete with lab results confirming the substances found in my bloodstream.

The uncomfortable shifting in their seats was music to my ears.

Next came Xavier's secretly recorded surveillance footage of Austin and Yara in their passionate embrace at the hotel. Roman looked ready to explode, but I raised my hand, signaling for silence.

"The show's far from over, Roman."

The crescendo arrived with Jude's brilliantly crafted evidence presentation detailing the fake pregnancy scheme. Every sordid detail was laid bare: the corrupt doctor's fraudulent consultations, his nurse's damning testimony about falsified test results, and finally, the legitimate medical evidence proving Yara had never been pregnant.

When the screen went black, silence hung in the air like the moment before an execution.

"Austin," I said, my voice steady and clear as Don of this family, "I brought you here because I didn't want you living the same lie I almost fell victim to. Yara was never pregnant. Not with my child, not with anyone's child."

"That's a lie! I am carrying your heir! That evidence is fabricated!" Yara's shriek could have shattered the reinforced windows of our safe house.

"Oh, sweetheart," I said with mock affection, "stop embarrassing yourself before your father. You took that test willingly when we visited the family doctor, remember?"

Yara's face went purple with rage. "What doctor? What are you talking about?"

Yara's mouth ran faster than her brain could control the damage. "Caleb said I needed blood work to meet the Commission's marriage requirements. He claimed his father's will required medical clearance or he'd lose his inheritance to the family."

"Are you completely brain-dead, Yara?" Roman roared at his daughter. "You walked straight into a trap! Why didn't you contact me immediately?"

"He made me turn off my phone! Said he wanted uninterrupted time together as future spouses and that I should act like I'd already agreed to move into the family compound. Then I simply forgot to call you back."

I couldn’t suppress my predatory grin any longer. The foolish girl had just confessed to everything.

Chaos erupted. Shouting, accusations, threats, and desperate pleas filled the room like a symphony of destruction. I leaned back and savored every note of their downfall.

Then Austin’s voice cut through the mayhem with devastating clarity: "Were you using me this whole time, Yara?"

Yara’s response was a dagger of pure cruelty that sealed her fate: "What do you think, you pathetic fool?"

That was my cue. I stood up, commanding the room’s attention with the authority of a man who had just won a war.

"Enough," I said, my voice carrying the weight of absolute power. "Yara, there will be no marriage. Ever. If you come near me again, you’ll face family justice for fraud and conspiracy. Roman, you’re stripped of all positions within this family. Effective immediately. Security will escort you from our territory, and our legal team will handle the paperwork."

Roman’s face contorted with impotent rage. "You cannot do this to me, Caleb!"

I smiled coldly with the finality of a grave. "I just did, Roman."

Security arrived precisely on schedule, professionally removing the toxic family members from our headquarters. As the doors closed behind them, I felt like I could breathe freely for the first time in months.

Austin remained frozen in his chair, staring at nothing with the hollow eyes of the betrayed.

"Do you understand what just happened here?" I asked him with surprising gentleness.

"I do," he whispered, his voice hollow with the weight of realization. "How could she manipulate me so completely?"

"Because she learned from a master," Xavier said with brutal honesty.

I studied Austin's shell-shocked expression with something approaching sympathy. "Did you drive yourself here tonight?"

"No, my father's driver brought me. He's waiting in the garage."

"Jude, would you ensure Austin gets safely back to his family?"

"Absolutely, Don. Come on, kid."

After they left, the crushing weight that had been pressing on my chest for months finally lifted completely.

"There's still one thing bothering me about this whole mess," Xavier said thoughtfully. "How did our trusted lab's pregnancy test come back positive in the first place?"

"I'd completely forgotten about that detail," I admitted. "But we'll solve that mystery too, just like we solved all the others."

I immediately contacted Scott, sharing news of our victory and requesting he investigate how that test had been compromised within our supposedly secure medical network.

"Now I just need to tell Ivy everything that's happened."

"Not today," Xavier reminded me firmly. "You promised she could rest today after everything she's been through."

He was absolutely right. Today had been about delivering justice to our enemies. Tomorrow would be about sharing truth with the woman I loved.

Chapter 147 Truth and Reconciliation

Ivy’s POV

I had taken yesterday to clear my head after the chaos at the compound. Today, I was ready to face whatever storm awaited me. I had rested, processed the betrayal that cut like a knife, and organized the violent emotions churning in my mind. Most importantly, I was prepared to confront Caleb and demand the truth. His silence felt like a death sentence. Not a single call or message since that scene in the main hall when that woman pressed her lips against his in front of half the family.

Doubt crept through my veins like poison, making my chest tight with insecurity. Had he already moved on? That woman who marked her territory so boldly in front of everyone, could she be the mysterious woman he had been hunting through the underground for years? If that were true, then Ruby and Xavier had been feeding me lies. Maybe Caleb had already forgotten I existed.

The thought made my heart ache in ways I refused to acknowledge. I needed the truth, no matter how much blood it might cost me.

When Jude walked through the compound doors, I intercepted him immediately. He would have the answers I desperately craved.

"Looking sharp today, Little Bird. How are you holding up after that circus yesterday?" Jude asked, his predatory eyes scanning my face for signs of weakness.

"I am surviving, Jude. Thank you for getting me back to the safe house in one piece. I apologize for losing consciousness before we even made it through the gates."

"Forget about it, Ivy. That is what family does for each other. Besides, I enjoyed making sure you were tucked in safely," he said with that dangerous smirk that always made me want to slap him.

"I appreciate it regardless. But I need you to answer something for me."

"Shoot. What do you want to know?"

"Who is that woman?" Jude froze mid-motion, the sugar packet suspended over his espresso cup. His expression shifted to something guarded and lethal. "You should really discuss this with the Don directly."

"I know that. And I will. But right now, I am asking my friend."

"Playing dirty, are we? Fine, let us sit down." Jude guided me to the reinforced table in the center of the secured meeting room. "That piece of work is Veronica. She was Caleb's woman during his wild years who betrayed him with half the rival families until Xavier and I forced him to see what she really was. She made Caleb look like a complete fool, turned him into someone reckless and dangerous beyond reason. Caused him nothing but bloodshed."

"Is she the woman he has been searching for?"

"Hell no, Ivy. The woman he is hunting is completely different. Someone he met right after he dumped Veronica's treacherous ass. Veronica is just a manipulative snake who feeds information to our enemies. When Caleb finally caught her selling our secrets, they broke up and she ran off to Sicily with some arms dealer she was screwing. She showed up in Fresh Ramsey recently out of nowhere."

"What happened in Fresh Ramsey?"

"Ivy, remember that you two are not bound by blood oath and you have been under Parker's protection. I do not approve of what Caleb did, and I despise that woman. But he spent a night with her. You can breathe easy though, he used protection and she is not carrying his heir."

The words hit me like a sniper's bullet, stealing the air from my lungs. Even though Jude was right about our status, the betrayal cut deeper than any blade.

"I am not sure that information makes me feel any better, Jude," I managed to say. "If she is here now, there has to be more to this war."

"I think you are right." Jude's expression darkened with killer instinct. "Caleb wants nothing to do with her, but she is like a parasite that will not let go. I suspect running into us was not the coincidence she claimed it was. We are investigating it through our network."

"Does he have feelings for her?"

"He regrets that night completely. It was a stupid thing men do when their pride gets wounded in a gunfight. And no, he does not want her. But Veronica is dangerous, and she is not some innocent like Yara. We need to be extremely careful when it comes to protecting you from retaliation."

After extracting more intelligence from Jude, I started heading back to my quarters but made an impulsive decision to take a detour.

"Jude, is he in his office?" I gestured toward Caleb's reinforced door, and Jude nodded. "Can I have a few minutes alone with him?" Jude grinned like a predator, and I walked toward the office, ready to start dismantling this minefield.

I entered without bothering to knock and found Caleb on the leather couch, surrounded by scattered surveillance reports. I approached him, but he had not yet looked up from his intelligence briefings.

"Jude, you..." Caleb began speaking, and I cut him off.

"I am not Jude." I stopped directly in front of him.

"My angel!" He lifted his head from the papers, and his face lit up with that devastating smile that always made my knees weak.

I moved closer, leaned down, and pressed my lips to his. God, how I had missed this dangerous connection! I sighed softly when I pulled back and gazed into those mesmerizing ice-blue eyes.

"What am I supposed to do with you?" The question was more for myself than him. Inside me, a war raged between surrendering to his lethal embrace and maintaining my emotional armor.

"You know I belong to you completely. And you know you belong to me. How much longer are we going to torture ourselves like this? The choice is yours, my love. But I will never stop fighting for you," he whispered against my ear before placing a soft kiss behind my earlobe, sending shivers throughout my entire body. "I will get down on my knees and beg. I will crawl through broken glass and enemy fire if that is what it takes to make you understand how sorry I am for being such an idiot and how deeply I regret hurting you. I love you, Ivy. I destroyed everything between us, but I want you back, and I refuse to surrender."

I settled onto the coffee table, scattering his reports, and locked eyes with him. Resistance was futile. He was genuinely suffering and bleeding just as much as I was. I cupped his face in my hands and drew him closer, closing my eyes to breathe in that intoxicating scent that was uniquely his. It was magnetic, dangerous, and utterly seductive. Caleb remained perfectly still, refusing to pressure me, letting me control every moment. That restraint was more powerful than any weapon could have been.

I pressed my lips to his, savoring their warmth and softness as our mouths connected. I traced his lips with my tongue as if tasting something forbidden. He gasped, and I took advantage of his parted lips to gently explore his mouth with my tongue. I tangled my fingers in the hair at the base of his neck and intensified our kiss. He responded with matching passion but kept his hands to himself, giving me the freedom to pull away if I chose to. But the longer I kissed him, the more certain I became that I belonged in his dangerous arms. Our tongues moved together in perfect synchronization, creating an intensely sensual rhythm. Our kiss was consuming, pouring out every violent emotion we felt for each other.

My body burned with desire and craved his lethal touch, but he maintained his restraint. So while I continued kissing him, I shifted to sit sideways across his lap and wrapped my arms around his neck, silently communicating that I was his and could no longer bear our separation. Only then did he finally embrace me, one hand sliding to the back of my neck as he deepened our kiss even further.

When we finally broke apart, we were both gasping for air, but I could not stop staring into his eyes. They sparkled like two ice-blue flames. I could not survive without him anymore.

"I assume this means you have forgiven me," he said with that devastating smile that never failed to captivate me.

"This means I cannot live without you, that I am willing to forgive you, but you still have some serious groveling ahead of you. And while I have decided to face whatever war comes and return to you, you still owe me a lot of explanations."

"You are coming back to me?"

"Yes, after you properly explain everything that has been happening and end this ridiculous marriage alliance charade. I refuse to have any more women trying to steal what belongs to me. But you are not completely forgiven yet."

"The marriage alliance is finished. I will do whatever you ask," he smiled like a victorious warlord. "What I cannot do is exist without you. I cannot bear it. I love you, Ivy!"

"I should not, but I love you too, Caleb."

His encrypted phone buzzed, and he groaned in frustration. It was Scott insisting he needed to speak with him immediately and in person about a critical security breach. While he handled the call, I slipped off his lap and returned to my secured workstation.

I was considering sending Caleb a coded message about having lunch together when Scott appeared in my doorway.

"Scott? Is something wrong?" I studied him carefully. He looked anxious and battle-worn.

"Sweetheart..." he met my eyes as if he wanted to confess something critical, but then briefly closed his eyes and shook his head. "Is Xavier available? I need to speak with him immediately about a situation."

"One moment, Scott. Would you like some water? You seem shaken."

"No, I just need Xavier now."

I called Xavier's secure line to announce the visitor, and he instructed me to send Scott in immediately. Scott rushed past me and shut the reinforced door firmly. Something was definitely wrong. I picked up my phone to message Caleb, but Gemma interrupted with classified paperwork that demanded my attention.

Shortly after Gemma returned to her station, Xavier and Scott emerged from the office, both looking extremely troubled and ready for war. They offered no explanation for their obvious distress. Whatever they had discussed was clearly a matter of life and death.

When I went to Gemma's desk to return some documents, I spotted Caleb, Jude, Scott, and Xavier waiting by the armored elevators. Xavier was giving specific instructions to the security detail about monitoring me with lethal force authorization. What could possibly be threatening us?

"Where are they headed, Gemma?" I asked as I watched them disappear into the elevator like soldiers going to battle.

"No idea. They only mentioned they would not be returning to the compound today," Gemma replied, sounding equally concerned.

"How strange!" I left the papers with her and walked back to my quarters, my mind racing with questions that had no answers in this dangerous world we inhabited.

Chapter 148 Explosive Revelations

Xavier's POV

Caleb's excitement was contagious. The day before, Jude and I had finally managed to convince him to sever all connections with Veronica completely before making any moves toward Ivy regarding their future together. Veronica's relentless harassment had become a dangerous liability, and Jude had been insistent that Caleb eliminate this threat before subjecting Ivy to any additional emotional warfare. Eventually, Caleb had agreed to our strategy.

Jude's sisters had promised to deliver the intelligence we required by evening, since today was when Veronica's mother would be conducting business at their salon. All we could do now was wait. My schedule was packed with territory management, which would help the hours pass more quickly.

Seeing Ivy at her desk brought immediate relief. She appeared significantly better than she had in recent days, her posture more relaxed and her eyes clearer. I exchanged brief words with her before heading to

my office. Soon after, my secure line buzzed. Gemma informed me that Detective Daniel Martinez was calling, requesting to speak with me urgently.

"Daniel, good to hear from you. How have things been?"

"Xavier, I need to apologize. That background check you commissioned took much longer than anticipated. This woman maintains an incredibly low profile."

The conversation hit me like a lightning bolt. I had completely forgotten about the investigation I had authorized. When the situation with Ivy had exploded and Caleb had banished her from our territory, I had asked Daniel, my detective contact in Greenleaf, to conduct a thorough background investigation. With everything that had happened since, it had slipped my mind entirely.

"Actually, we discovered she was being manipulated and we've resolved everything. She's back with our organization now."

"That's excellent news, because I was about to tell you that this woman, aside from being absolutely stunning, is the most genuine and principled person I've encountered in my entire career," Daniel said with clear admiration in his voice.

"We reached the same conclusion. I should have contacted you earlier to halt the investigation, but things have been chaotic in our territory," I admitted, feeling guilty about leaving my contact in the dark.

"Don't worry about it. It turned out to be excellent training for my team. She maintains extraordinary privacy, doesn't even have social media accounts. Comes from humble circumstances, but her family is outstanding and completely legitimate."

"That's wonderful to hear," I responded, genuinely pleased.

"I'll transmit the complete file for your records anyway. But there's something that really puzzles me," Daniel's tone became contemplative.

"What's troubling you?" My interest was immediately piqued.

"How does such a responsible, conservative young woman attend an underground mafia auction and end up pregnant by someone whose identity she never learned and whose face she never saw?"

The words hit me like a physical blow. I shot up from my chair, my entire body turning ice cold.

"What exactly are you telling me?" I managed to whisper.

"Exactly what I said. Some time ago, at that exclusive underground auction our department has been trying to infiltrate. She attended and became involved with a complete stranger. The whole neighborhood was buzzing when she turned up pregnant. Her former boyfriend, what a piece of work, shared all the intimate details with one of my undercover officers while drunk at a local dive bar."

"Daniel, I need that report immediately," I said, my voice tight with urgency.

"Hold on, Xavier. Something's not adding up here. You're not planning to eliminate her over this, are you?" Daniel's concern was evident.

"Absolutely not, but I believe I know who fathered that child," I said, my mind reeling with the implications.

"I'll transmit it right now. When you confirm your suspicions, I want to know how this story concludes. Just sent it. There's even surveillance footage of her at the auction. Absolutely gorgeous. Listen, I need to disappear, but arrange a meeting soon so we can discuss this properly."

"Definitely. Daniel, I can't thank you enough," I said before ending the call.

I immediately accessed Ivy's file. When I reached the section about the underground auction, disbelief washed over me. If I was this emotionally affected, I could only imagine Caleb's reaction. I printed every page, organized it into a folder, and was just standing when my phone rang again. Ivy's voice informed me that Scott needed to see me urgently.

"Xavier, I apologize for arriving unannounced, but I desperately need your assistance." Scott appeared extremely anxious and unsettled.

"This seems urgent," I said, gesturing toward the chair across from my desk.

"Extremely, and I'm completely lost about how to proceed. This is explosive intelligence," Scott said, his hands trembling slightly.

"Another crisis?" I couldn't believe we were facing yet another complication. "What's happened now?"

"I don't know how to break this to Caleb. That's why I need your help," Scott's worry was written across his face.

"Scott, what is it? Does this concern his parents' assassination?"

"Not directly. It's about the woman he's been searching for. The report finally came through." Scott extended a folder toward me.

My hands shook as I accepted the folder and began reading. Tears filled my eyes as I considered the extensive damage Rossi had caused by blocking this investigation for so long. I cleared my throat and addressed Scott directly.

"We need to speak with Caleb immediately. But not here at headquarters. Let's go to my safe house. I'll gather our inner circle there for support. He's going to need them. And there's something else you need to see. When Ivy's situation erupted, I had my police contact investigate her background. Look what he just discovered."

Scott scanned through the report I handed him, and his expression grew even more stunned as he read. We arranged to meet at my residence. He departed with both reports while I contacted Dominic and Finn, insisting they abandon everything and meet us at my house for an extremely urgent matter. I left my office, informing Ivy I wouldn't return, then went to Caleb's office where Jude was waiting.

"Caleb, we need to leave for my place right now. This is an emergency."

"What are you talking about, Xavier? What's wrong?" Caleb looked up from his computer, giving me his full attention. "Are you alright? You look completely shaken."

"No, Caleb, I'm not alright. Come on. Leave everything and let's go to my house immediately," I pressed.

"Xavier, you're frightening me," Caleb said, rising from his chair. "Is Ivy safe?"

"Yes, she's working peacefully in her office. Just come with me," I insisted again.

"Alright, let's go," Caleb stood and followed me toward the door.

"We'll take my armored vehicle. The driver will return later for Ivy," I explained. "Fisher, maintain close surveillance on Ivy. Don't leave her unprotected. Is the security detail stationed at her apartment building?"

"Yes, sir. You can count on me. I won't let Rossi, his family, or Veronica anywhere near her," Fisher confirmed.

"Perfect. Thank you." We entered the elevator, and Caleb studied my face with growing concern. "Scott has received new and critical intelligence."

"Understood. But you're clearly disturbed by something significant," Caleb observed, analyzing my expression.

"You'll understand everything soon enough," I replied.

We traveled the rest of the way in tense silence. When we reached my house, Scott had already established a secure video connection with Heidi on his encrypted laptop. Like Dominic, Jude, Finn, and Caleb, she had no idea what revelations awaited us.

Chapter 149 Blood Revealed

Caleb’s POV

Xavier’s composure had cracked in a way that made my blood run cold. His usual iron control as my consigliere was nowhere to be found, replaced by something that looked dangerously close to panic. When we stepped into his safe house, the sight of Scott, Dominic, and Finn gathered in the war room sent warning bells clanging through my skull.

"What the hell is going on?" My voice carried the authority of a Don, but the tension in the room was suffocating enough to choke a horse.

"Sit down, Caleb," Xavier’s tone was measured, but I caught the tremor underneath. The kind of shake that meant either someone was about to die, or everything we knew was about to change. I dropped into the leather chair, every muscle in my body coiled like a loaded weapon. "Remember when we released Ivy from our protection? I had my contact at the NYPD run a deep background check on her."

"Yeah, so what? That intel is old news now." I shrugged, but something in Xavier’s expression made my gut twist like a knife was turning in it.

"It should be old news," Xavier ran a hand through his hair, his composure slipping further. "The investigation came back spotless. Ivy’s record is clean as fresh snow, exemplary even. But my guy stumbled onto something else entirely." His dark eyes found Finn across the room. "He figured out who Max’s biological father is."

Finn’s face went white as cocaine. "Are you fucking serious? I’ve been trying to track down that bastard since Ivy first told me she was carrying. I hit nothing but dead ends and burned contacts. Who is he?"

"Hold on." Xavier raised his hand with the kind of authority that made even made men freeze in their tracks. "Around the same time, Scott walked into my office with his report about that woman you’ve been hunting for years, Caleb. The one from the masquerade auction. He found her."

The safe house tilted on its axis. After all this time, all the sleepless nights and endless manhunts through every corner of the five boroughs, someone had actually tracked her down. But the way Xavier was looking at me made my blood freeze in my veins.

"I don’t see the fucking connection," Dominic’s voice cut through the thick air like a blade.

"There’s a connection, alright." Xavier’s words came out like bullets from a silenced pistol. "We never knew the details about how Ivy met Max’s father. None of us really knew the whole story, did we, Heidi?"

Heidi shifted uncomfortably in her chair, the old woman’s composure cracking. "Ivy only told me she met him at some underground gathering. They had one night together, and that was it. I figured you soldiers all knew that much."

"But you never knew which gathering," Finn’s voice was barely above a whisper, and when I looked at him, tears were already streaming down his scarred face.

"Exactly." Xavier’s next words came slowly, deliberately, like he was delivering a death sentence. "Just like you never knew the exact circumstances of how Caleb met the woman who’s been haunting him for so long."

"No fucking way." Finn was openly sobbing now, his shoulders shaking.

"Someone needs to spell this out for me because I’m completely lost here!" My patience snapped like a wire under too much tension, and my voice echoed off the reinforced walls.

Xavier looked directly at me, and I saw something like sympathy in his eyes. The kind of look you give a man before you tell him his world has just been turned upside down. "Caleb, you met a woman at that underground masquerade auction the night your parents were killed in the car bombing. You stepped away to take the call about the hit, got the worst news of your life, and when you came back, she was gone. You searched every corner of our territory but never found her. You’ve spent years looking for her."

The blood in my veins turned to ice water. "Yeah, and?"

"Ivy met Max’s father at that same masquerade auction." The words hit me like a shotgun blast to the chest. "The woman you’ve been searching for, Caleb, is Ivy. You’re Max’s father."

The world stopped spinning on its fucking axis. Everything around me went silent except for the roaring in my ears like a freight train. I felt tears streaming down my face, but I couldn't form words. The safe house was tomb-quiet, everyone frozen in shock like we'd all been hit by the same lightning bolt.

Xavier slid two thick manila folders across the metal table toward me. My hands shook like a junkie needing a fix as I opened them, scanning the investigator reports with growing amazement. One detailed Ivy's background check, the other documented the search for my mystery woman from the auction house.

When I finished reading, I looked up to find everyone watching me with tear-filled eyes, their faces mirrors of my own stunned disbelief.

"It's really her, Xavier!" I grabbed the photograph clipped to one of the reports, a grainy surveillance shot from the auction house that night. "This is her! I've been looking for her all this time, and she was right under my nose in my own territory! And Max, Christ almighty, Max is my blood!" The sobs came harder now, raw and uncontrolled like a dam had burst in my chest. "I always felt something when I looked at that kid, some connection I couldn't explain. Now I know why. He's mine!"

I shot to my feet, adrenaline and pure territorial instinct propelling me toward the door. "I need to see Ivy right fucking now!"

Finn and Jude moved like lightning, catching my arms before I could storm out.

"Slow your roll, Boss. You can't just charge over there and dump this on her. She's in a fragile state right now," Finn's grip was iron-strong.

"What do you mean fragile?" My voice rose to a roar that could wake the dead. "First Jude starts acting mysterious about Ivy, now you? What aren't you telling me?"

Finn's face crumpled like paper. "Dominic, get Zoe over here. Now."

"I'll call her. Ruby should come too," Dominic was already pulling out his encrypted phone, his expression grim as a funeral.

"Sit your ass down and wait," Jude's tone carried the kind of authority that made even Dons listen. "I'm calling Nora."

What felt like an eternity in purgatory passed, but finally all three women burst through the reinforced door, practically tripping over each other in their haste. The worry radiating from them was thick enough to cut with a knife, and when Zoe's eyes found my face, her expression shifted to something close to terror.

"What happened to Ivy? Finn, where is she?" Zoe's voice was pitched high with the kind of panic that preceded bloodshed.

"She's safe. She's at the headquarters with Gemma," Xavier's reassurance did little to ease the tension crackling through the room like live electricity. "Everyone sit down."

Xavier repeated the entire revelation for the women, who stared at me like I'd grown a second head or sprouted wings. Their mouths hung open, shock written across every feature like it had been carved there with a blade.

"Now I want the truth, Zoe. What's wrong with Ivy, and why can't I go to her?" I locked eyes with her, my patience completely shredded and hanging by a thread.

"Damn it, Thorne!" Zoe's curse cracked like a whip in the enclosed space. "This isn't my secret to spill. Ivy's going to put a bullet in my head."

"Zo, he needs to know. What he has to tell her changes the entire game. He should understand the situation so he can handle it like the Don he is," Ruby's hand found Zoe's arm, her voice gentle but insistent.

"That's exactly why I called you, Zo. We have to tell him," Finn added, his voice still thick with tears.

"Tell me what?" My voice was dangerously low, the kind of quiet that preceded executions.

Zoe took a shuddering breath, clearly weighing her words like they were made of pure gold. "Do you remember that day with Ivy in the elevator?"

"Of course. It was the last time we were together before everything went to hell." The memory still burned like acid in my chest.

"Well." Zoe's pause stretched like a torture session. "She's carrying your child, Thorne."

The earth stopped rotating for the second time in one evening, like God himself had reached down and grabbed the planet.

"She's what?" Xavier and Dominic's voices overlapped in perfect synchronization, their shock echoing off the walls.

"I'm going to be a father again?" The words came out strangled, and fresh tears began flowing like rivers down my face. "Really?"

"Yes, but Ivy's emotional state is extremely volatile right now. The hormonal changes are intense, which is why we're all walking on eggshells around her," Jude explained with the patience of a saint.

"How did you know when I didn't?" I turned to Jude, confusion mixing with everything else churning inside me like a hurricane.

"I pay attention to details. It's what keeps us alive in this business. I've got several nieces and nephews through my extended family. I know the signs when a woman's carrying," Jude said simply.

"I already have one incredible son, and now there's going to be another baby! I'm going to be a father twice over!" The joy was overwhelming, spilling out of me in shouts that could probably be heard three blocks away. "But why didn't she tell me?"

"Because you were engaged to that walking skeleton with a trust fund," Nora's words were sharp as broken glass and twice as cutting.

"Not anymore. You guys don’t know yet, do you?" I realized I’d only told Jude and Xavier about calling off the arranged marriage. "Jude, Xavier, fill them in. I can’t think straight right now. All I want is to see my family."

"You’re staying right here," Xavier’s tone carried the finality of a death sentence. "I’m calling Gemma to bring Ivy here instead."

"That’s perfect, Xavier," Zoe agreed quickly, relief evident in her voice.

I forced myself to take several deep breaths, fighting for the kind of control a Don needed to survive. "Listen, Ruby, I know Ivy’s been seeing your brother. He seems like decent people, but I’m not walking away from my blood."

Ruby’s smile was soft and understanding, like she’d been expecting this conversation. "My brother is wonderful, Caleb. But Ivy isn’t seeing him anymore. He went back to Texas to spend time with our parents."

When those words hit me, my heart nearly exploded with pure, overwhelming territorial joy that felt like pure cocaine in my veins.

Chapter 150 Hidden Father Revealed

Ivy’s POV

Gemma crashed through my office door like a woman possessed, her face flushed with the kind of urgency that meant life or death in our world. "Ivy, we need to move now. Xavier sent word through encrypted channels - get to the safe house immediately. Something massive is happening and the entire inner circle is already assembled."

"This whole situation screams setup. Xavier and Scott have been acting like they’re planning a war or covering up a massacre," I said, snatching my tactical jacket from the chair.

"I caught that vibe too. But orders are orders. He stressed it was code red priority and the armored transport is waiting in the underground garage."

I grabbed my emergency bag and followed Gemma out. Caleb materialized behind us, radiating the kind of lethal tension I'd only seen during family executions. He escorted us to the bulletproof SUV and slid into the passenger seat, his hand never leaving his concealed weapon.

As we pulled out of the building's secured parking structure, movement in my peripheral vision made my blood freeze. That snake Veronica lurked near the main entrance, watching our convoy departure with calculating eyes. The realization hit like ice water through my veins. What kind of bloodbath were we walking into?

The Thorne family compound came into view and my breath caught in my throat. Every single member of our crime family's inner circle was present. Even the wives and trusted associates had gathered. Heidi's weathered face filled a secure video feed from her safe house. The most terrifying detail was the tears streaming down every face present. My mind immediately conjured images of assassination attempts, federal raids, or family betrayals. My knees gave out and darkness consumed me completely.

Consciousness crept back slowly. I found myself stretched across the leather sofa in the main parlor, Caleb kneeling beside me with his scarred fingers wrapped around mine. His ice-blue eyes were rimmed red with what looked suspiciously like tears.

"My queen, are you with me?" His voice carried the weight of a man who'd seen too much death.

"I'm terrified out of my mind. What's happening? Why does this look like a funeral gathering?" My voice cracked with fear.

"Stay calm, my queen. Everything's going to be fine. We'll explain it all, but I need to know you're okay first." Caleb lifted my hand to his lips, pressing desperate kisses across my knuckles like a man seeking absolution.

"Is this about the hit on your parents?" He shook his head firmly. "The family business under federal investigation then?" Another denial.

Before I could continue interrogating him, Dr. Taylor burst through the doors, making a direct path toward me with the efficiency of a man who'd treated countless gunshot wounds in this very room.

"Child, how are you feeling?" His tone carried the gentleness reserved for family members rather than casualties.

"I think it was just my blood pressure dropping," I replied weakly, trying to process why everyone looked simultaneously devastated and euphoric.

"Lucky for you that I maintain quarters in Xavier's building complex and was available when the call came through," Dr. Taylor explained while checking my pulse. "May I conduct a full examination?"

"Please do, doctor."

After thoroughly checking my vitals with the practiced hands of a man who'd kept too many family secrets, Dr. Taylor concluded it was stress-related hypotension from the constant threat of violence that surrounded our lives.

"Ivy, you desperately need peace and stability. You understand the stakes here, don't you?" His expression turned gravely serious.

"Yes, but chaos keeps erupting around our territory."

"If you don't prioritize your health, I'll contact your father's people to extract you to the countryside compound."

"Absolutely not, Dr. Taylor. Nobody removes my queen from my protection," Caleb interjected with the deadly authority of a don. "I'll eliminate every threat that needs eliminating."

"You better, Caleb. The family can't afford to lose her." The doctor's warning carried the weight of someone who'd seen too many tragic endings.

"Professor, could you stay nearby? I need to share something with my queen, but I'm concerned she might have another episode," Caleb requested, and my anxiety spiked to dangerous levels again.

"Easy, sweetheart. Drink this herbal mixture," Zoe pressed a warm cup into my trembling hands with the care of someone who'd helped hide bodies.

"Of course I'll remain. Should I clear the room?" Dr. Taylor offered diplomatically.

"Unnecessary, doctor. I believe you'll want to witness this revelation." Caleb's smile seemed genuine for the first time in months.

"Excellent. I'm particularly fond of stories with happy endings in this business." Dr. Taylor settled back and accepted the bourbon Xavier offered, clearly preparing for something significant.

"I'm completely lost. When I arrived everyone looked like they'd attended an execution. Now it appears to be celebration. Someone explain what the hell is happening," I demanded, my nerves fraying beyond repair.

"My queen, Scott located the woman I've been hunting for," Caleb announced, and my breathing became dangerously shallow. "Breathe deeply, my love. Stay focused on me."

"Where is she?" I managed to whisper.

"Closer than you could ever imagine," Caleb replied mysteriously. "But there's more. When I had you investigated after the money laundering frame job, before we discovered the deception, Xavier asked his detective contact in Greenleaf to run a background check. We'd completely forgotten about it. The detective only delivered his findings today. It seemed irrelevant since we'd resolved our trust issues, and I should never have questioned your loyalty. However, this report contains information that changes everything."

"You had me investigated by professional trackers?" I shouted, fury rising in my chest like molten steel.

"Ivy, you cannot become agitated in your condition," Dr. Taylor cautioned with the firmness of someone who'd delivered too many devastating diagnoses.

I forced myself to breathe deeply, summoned what remained of my composure, and faced Caleb directly.

"It was off the books, Ivy. Stupid decision, but we were operating blind in enemy territory," Xavier attempted to justify from his position near the weapons cabinet. "It was my recommendation."

"My queen, look directly at me. Breathe slowly and center yourself. Now tell me, how exactly did you meet Max's father?" Tears began pooling in Caleb's ice-blue eyes.

"Why does that detail matter now, Caleb?" I asked, confused by the sudden shift toward ancient history.

"It matters more than you know, my queen. Please tell me. I need to hear it from your lips," Caleb pleaded with the desperation of a man facing his final confession.

"You despise me for this, don't you?" I said, recognizing in his expression that he already possessed the truth. "But if you want to torture me with it, if you need to hear my shame directly, fine. Years ago, I attended the annual masquerade auction in Greenleaf. I'd recently escaped a relationship that nearly got me killed, and Zoe kept insisting I attend this underground gathering and forget my troubles. I ended up drinking more than usual. I was with my crew at a private booth. At some point, a man approached me near the auction floor and asked me to dance. We danced, talked, and eventually he led me to a secluded area of the venue, a corridor leading to the service entrance. It was dark and deserted. He kissed me and, well..." I paused, my eyes burning with unshed tears, unable to meet his gaze. "Afterward, he stepped away to answer an encrypted call and vanished completely. We wore masks, so I never saw his face clearly. We didn't use protection. I'd stopped taking birth control after my escape, and days later I discovered I was pregnant. Max became the greatest blessing of my entire existence."

"You both surrendered to that moment. It was intense, consuming, and dangerous," Caleb suddenly continued my narrative with intimate knowledge. "You couldn't locate him because you never learned his name. When he was about to reveal his identity, an emergency call interrupted, and since the signal was compromised, he stepped outside to take it privately. He was delayed by a family crisis, but when he returned, he couldn't find you anywhere. You had vanished. And he spent years searching for you through every contact in the underground."

"You found Max's father," I whispered, pieces clicking into place.

"Yes, my queen, we did," Caleb smiled through his tears with the relief of a man whose war was finally over.

"I don't understand what you're telling me."

"My queen, you're the woman I've been desperately hunting! I am Max's father!" Caleb was crying openly now with the raw emotion of a hardened killer finally breaking. "Max is my blood!"

"What kind of sick game is this, Caleb?" I looked around wildly, and everyone was weeping with what looked like genuine joy.

"Sweetheart, the man from that night was Caleb," Zoe said gently with the certainty of someone who'd helped piece together the evidence. "Do you understand now?"

Shock paralyzed me completely. I felt Dr. Taylor wrapping the blood pressure monitor around my arm again with practiced efficiency. Words refused to come. I stared at Caleb, unable to comprehend how this was possible.

"My queen, I attended that auction with my parents. My father was receiving tribute at that event. Xavier and his family were there too. I watched you enter the gathering and was completely captivated. I observed you throughout the entire evening. When you finally separated from your friends, I approached and asked you to dance. We connected on a level that defied explanation. When my phone rang, it was Jude calling about a crisis here. My parents had departed early, and the helicopter transporting them had disappeared from radar. Search operations were beginning immediately. The signal was compromised, so I stepped away and gestured for you to wait. After speaking with Jude, I rushed back to get your information, but you had disappeared. I searched everywhere but couldn't locate you. That night I found you and lost you simultaneously. That same night I lost my parents to an assassination."

"Caleb, it was really you?" I sobbed with the relief of secrets finally revealed.

"Yes, my love, it was me! I searched for you through every connection!" Caleb was euphoric now with the joy of a man whose family was finally complete. "Look at me. Our son is my exact replica. He has my eyes. We connected instantly when we met. I should have recognized it. My boy, Ivy, my precious boy.

And he carries my father’s name, exactly as I always dreamed. You have no idea how complete this makes me!"

"You’re Max’s father? Oh my God." I placed my hands on either side of his scarred face, finally seeing the resemblance I’d been unconsciously noting for months.

"Child, take this medication." Dr. Taylor handed me a small pill and glass of water. "Take it now. You’re extremely agitated and it could be dangerous for both of you."

I swallowed the medication obediently, my heart hammering against my ribs like gunfire.

"Caleb, I need to tell you something critical," I said, attempting to wipe away my streaming tears.

"That we’re expecting another child? I already know, my love, and I’m the most dangerous man alive when I’m this happy." Caleb placed his warm hand protectively on my belly.

"Ivy, we had to inform him because with the revelation he had for you, we needed a strategy to prevent giving you and my new godchild cardiac arrest," Finn rushed to explain from his position by the window.

"Your new godchild, Finn? Not even if hell froze over!" Xavier complained loudly with mock outrage. "You’re already Max’s godfather. This one will be my godchild and that’s final."

"Shouldn’t the actual parents choose the godparents?" I protested weakly.

"This isn’t a democracy, Ivy!" Xavier’s declaration made everyone laugh despite the emotional chaos.

"My queen, I need you to know that Yara’s pregnancy was completely fabricated and we’ve eliminated everyone involved in the deception. Veronica means less than nothing to me. I love you beyond reason. I’m dying to see my son. And..." Caleb was practically vibrating with lethal joy.

"Professor, I’m feeling drowsy," I told Dr. Taylor beside me.

"Yes, child, that’s the medication taking effect. You’ll sleep peacefully for a while." Dr. Taylor confirmed, and I closed my eyes, surrendering to the approaching slumber with the knowledge that my family was finally complete and protected.