Mafia Mask 151

Chapter 151 Blood and Betrayal

Caleb's POV

After the whirlwind of revelations today, my only desire was to return to the estate and embrace my son. My son. Max was actually my flesh and blood. The thought sent waves of elation through my chest, but Ivy had succumbed to exhaustion from the medication and collapsed onto Xavier's leather sofa in his private study. She refused my suggestion of moving to the master bedroom, insisting she wanted to remain close to everyone in the family. So I settled beside her, cradling her head in my lap as my fingers traced gentle patterns through her silky hair.

Dr. Taylor instructed us to wait until Ivy regained consciousness before departing for the estate. He handed me a mountain of documentation about her current pregnancy and extensive medical records from Max's birth, which he had also supervised in secret. After our lengthy discussion about the family's medical security protocols, he bid his farewells and disappeared into the evening with his armed escort. Scott recognized his cue to leave for his patrol duties, and Heidi concluded her encrypted communications with our overseas operations.

"So, newly crowned father, what's running through your mind right now?" Xavier inquired with barely contained excitement from behind his mahogany desk. "Because I'm about to dethrone Zoe and Finn as the world's most devoted uncle in this family."

"In your dreams, Xavier! You might surpass Finn, but competing with me? Not a chance in hell!" Zoe retorted from her position near the fireplace, eliciting deep laughter from the capos present.

"Xavier, I'm struggling to find adequate words to express what I'm experiencing. Happiness feels insufficient. I'm absolutely euphoric," I responded to my consigliere, tears threatening to spill from my eyes. "I'm desperate to hold my son and bring him home to the compound."

"Max's going to be over the moon with this news. That boy mentions you constantly during our security briefings, like he's completely enchanted by his protector," Zoe observed while adjusting her concealed holster.

"As the old Don always insisted, Zo, blood calls to blood in this family," Gemma interjected from her monitoring station.

"When my parents discover this, they're going to lose their minds with joy," Zoe declared with a radiant smile. "They've always treated Ivy like their own daughter since she entered our protection."

"Zo, thank you from the bottom of my heart. I'll be eternally grateful to you and your entire bloodline," I said, grasping her hand as she positioned herself near Ivy's feet like a loyal guardian.

"For what, Caleb?" she asked, genuine confusion coloring her voice.

"For consistently protecting Ivy and my son from the street threats. And for orchestrating her entrance into our family operations," I said with raw emotion.

"You're such a sentimental bastard, but I suppose I can tolerate you," Zoe teased. "However, you still have mountains of territory disputes to resolve. I have faith you'll manage, but there's extensive blood to spill."

We had been engaged in conversation for considerable time when Veronica's voice echoed loudly as she argued with Xavier's armed sentries who failed to restrain her at the compound gates. Veronica burst through the reinforced doors and surveyed everyone assembled in the war room.

"There you are, Caleb!" She flashed a predatory smile and began advancing toward me with calculated steps.

With Ivy's head resting in my lap, I was completely defenseless. I quickly turned to Zoe with desperation in my voice.

"Zo, I need your firepower. That's my ex from the rival territories."

Zoe's eyes blazed with fury as she launched herself upward like a missile and positioned herself as a barrier between Veronica and me, her hand instinctively moving toward her weapon.

"Well, well! If it isn't that pathetic whore Veronica Loxley!" Zoe's smile was razor-sharp. "What brings you to our family compound, you worthless street trash?"

"Who gives you the authority to address me that way, Zoe?" Veronica's eyes sparked with venomous hatred.

"I'm the daughter of the loyal soldier you attempted to seduce for information. Oh, and I'm also the woman who demolished you and dragged your face across concrete outside that nightclub years ago. Ring any bells? Would you like me to jog your memory with my brass knuckles?" Zoe's threat was ice-cold and deadly serious.

"Keep your distance from me, you deranged psychopath!" Veronica shrieked.

"Lower your voice, you informant!" Zoe seized Veronica's hair and spoke through clenched teeth. "I haven't forgotten how you convinced my mother that my father had compromised family security for you."

"Release me, you insane bitch!" Veronica fought against Zoe's iron grip. "You're completely unhinged, Zoe!"

"Absolutely, I am completely unhinged! Don't assume I've forgotten all your espionage schemes against this family. And don't imagine that beating outside the club was sufficient revenge for me." I had never witnessed Zoe in such a state. She was pure, concentrated fury ready to execute.

Zoe jerked Veronica's hair with one violent motion, sending her crashing to the marble floor.

"You have severe psychological problems, Zoe," Veronica whined while struggling to her feet, then fixed her gaze on me. "Are you going to allow this soldier to treat me this way, Caleb?"

"I would inflict far worse punishment myself!" Xavier rose with a menacing expression, his hand resting on his gun. "I never extended safe passage to you through our territory, you rat. I despise you and everything you represent, so remove yourself before I contact our enforcement team and have you disappeared for trespassing on family grounds."

I carefully stood, positioning Ivy's head on a silk cushion, and asked Finn to watch over her with his life. I joined Xavier and Zoe, standing in solidarity as I regarded Veronica with complete contempt and barely restrained violence.

"When exactly did this informant attempt to compromise your father's loyalty, Zo?" I inquired with dangerous calm.

"Years ago during the territorial expansion. I knew she was working for someone, but I had no clue it was you she was targeting. This worthless spy nearly destroyed my parents' marriage and compromised our family's security network, and my father never even touched her," Zoe seethed with rage. "I still possess those surveillance recordings, you snake. Want me to broadcast them for the entire syndicate? Especially your new handlers?"

"Listen carefully, Zoe, don't attempt to blackmail me! I disappeared from your territories," Veronica said, desperately trying to regain control.

"Yes, you vanished after I dragged your face across the asphalt behind the nightclub," Zoe declared. "Don't you recall, Caleb? Didn't you notice your informant's face completely scraped up when she limped back to her handlers?"

"You demon from hell, I required reconstructive surgery in the underground clinics. You destroyed my face," Veronica complained bitterly.

"Damn right I did!" Zoe said with unmistakable pride. "And I'm losing my composure again, and I don't give a damn about maintaining my clean record with family leadership."

"And I assumed it was a territorial dispute injury," I said with disgust, realizing how thoroughly I had been deceived.

"I remember seeing you completely broken in the emergency room, you rat! Zoe, you have my eternal respect. You demolished this spy like she'd been hit by our enforcement vehicle!" Xavier said, laughing with genuine appreciation.

"Well, Veronica, I assume you have no further intelligence gathering business with our family," Dominic stood and approached with predatory grace. "But if you prefer, I can share details about your operations in our European territories. I have some fascinating photographs from your surveillance work. We encountered each other multiple times at that information exchange point where you operated, correct? Incidentally, your former handler mentioned you're the worst double agent he's ever recruited."

"Jesus Christ, Dominic, you really managed to shock me with that revelation, you bastard!" Jude commented with harsh laughter from his position guarding the door.

Chapter 152 Future Mrs Thorne

Caleb's POV

I heard Ivy's voice cut through the violent shouting that echoed through the Thorne mansion and immediately moved to her side. She had awakened from all the screaming and chaos reverberating through our fortress.

"What the hell is happening here?" she demanded, her emerald eyes scanning the bloody scene with mounting alarm.

"My queen, I'll explain everything in a moment. Finn, could you escort Ivy to the armory?" I turned to him, trusting him completely to keep her safe from this bloodbath.

"Absolutely not. I need to know what's going down right now," Ivy said with deadly calm, crossing her arms in that way that meant she wouldn't back down.

"Oh, so this is the little street rat you've been playing house with?" Veronica's voice dripped with venom as she spat the words. "I heard you were slumming it with some gutter trash. But sweetheart, don't delude yourself into thinking he actually gives a damn about you, because he's still mine!"

"You've completely lost your mind, Veronica. Whatever we had died when you betrayed the family years ago," I growled through clenched teeth.

"I don’t think so, Caleb. You were all over me in every possible way when I saw you in that Fresh Ramsey safehouse recently!" Veronica’s taunting voice made my blood run cold with rage.

"You worthless piece of garbage, I’m going to destroy that plastic face of yours so completely that no surgeon in the world will be able to put you back together!" Zoe completely lost control, lunging forward and grabbing Veronica by her perfectly styled hair. The room erupted into absolute chaos.

"STOP THIS MADNESS!" Ivy’s commanding voice cut through the violence like a blade. "Zoe, get your hands off that snake."

Zoe immediately released her grip and stepped back, looking toward her friend. Ivy rose gracefully from her position, smoothed down her dress and fixed her hair, then walked directly toward Veronica with measured, predatory steps. She stopped right beside me, gave me a reassuring smile, then fixed Veronica with a look of pure contempt.

"I actually feel sorry for you. What a pathetic little mafia princess you are! Surrounded by blood money but completely starved of genuine loyalty," Ivy spoke in a voice so calm and controlled it was almost terrifying. "I remember exactly what you did to Zoe’s family business, and the only reason I didn’t help her destroy you completely was because she found you here instead of in our territory. You’ve caused tremendous pain to truly honorable people. You’re immoral, crude, shameless, and absolutely despicable."

"Who the hell do you think you are to speak to me that way, you little nobody?" Veronica snarled back.

"Don’t you dare insult me by calling me a nobody," Ivy fired back without even flinching. "I may not have grown up in a crime family like you did, but I have integrity and self-respect. Concepts you clearly know nothing about. But you’re absolutely right about one thing - I haven’t properly introduced myself. Let me fix that oversight. I’m Ivy, the future Mrs. Thorne, and the closest friend - no, the sister - of this fierce warrior right here." Ivy wrapped her arm around my waist, took Zoe’s hand, and smiled warmly at her friend.

I stared at Ivy in complete awe. The only thing I could focus on was how she had just called herself the future Mrs. Thorne. Christ, how deeply I love this incredible woman!

"Ha! Look at you acting all superior, you piece of street trash!" Veronica's face twisted with disgust. "Why don't you ask him about his wild night in that Fresh Ramsey safehouse? Ask him how loudly he was moaning while I was servicing him!"

"Oh, you poor delusional creature. Let me enlighten you about something - he was thinking about me the entire time he was with you, and he only touched you because we were temporarily separated by family business. What did you think? That I didn't know about it? Who's living in a fantasy world now? So please, stop humiliating yourself any further, you've already embarrassed yourself beyond repair." Ivy's response was devastating.

"You little..." Veronica raised her hand to strike but froze completely when she heard a familiar voice calling her name.

"That's enough, Eleonora! I've been standing here for a while watching this absolute horror show, and I have never felt more ashamed in my entire life!" Veronica's father, Don Loxley, had entered the room and was walking straight toward her with deadly purpose. "Disappointment doesn't even begin to capture what I'm feeling right now. This young woman is absolutely correct - you have no honor and no respect for family law whatsoever!"

"Papa, you don't understand the situation, please let me explain," Veronica's voice suddenly became small and whimpering.

"I honestly don't know where I failed so completely with you!" He turned toward Ivy and me with a heavy sigh. "Caleb, I'm deeply sorry she's creating yet another problem for your family. Ivy, is it? Please accept my sincere apologies for this behavior. I was close allies with Caleb's parents, and I know they would have been honored to meet you. As for this situation," he said, gesturing toward his daughter and placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder, "please trust that I will handle it according to our laws."

"How did you even know I was here?" Veronica asked her father directly.

"I have loyal informants, Eleonora. One of them happens to be the uncle of Zoe's boyfriend. I know exactly what you did to this young lady's family operation. They were valuable allies of ours, and because of your actions, they cut all ties with our organization. When they spotted you entering this compound, they called to inform me immediately." Don Loxley explained calmly. "Now we're going home. You're going to pack your belongings, and your mother and I are taking you to our Norwegian territory."

"Like hell that’s happening, Papa." Veronica let out a bitter laugh. "I’m a grown woman, and I make my own decisions. I’m not going anywhere near Norway."

"Ah, you’re absolutely right. You do make your own choices. But if you want to continue enjoying my protection and resources - and I believe you do since you’ve never contributed anything useful to this family - you’re going to Norway and you’re going to stay there quietly under your brother’s supervision. I don’t imagine, dear daughter, that you want to lose my support completely and face the consequences alone, do you?" Her father’s threat was delivered with cold precision.

"Fine, whatever. It’s not worth the trouble anyway. Such a waste, Caleb, we could have had incredible power together!" Veronica huffed dramatically and turned to leave.

"You evil witch, just tell me one thing - how exactly did you track us down in that Fresh Ramsey safehouse?" Jude demanded.

"It was Monica, of course. I’ve maintained contact with her throughout all these years." Veronica gave a cruel, sarcastic laugh. "You think I’m terrible? She’s infinitely worse!" With those parting words, Veronica turned her back and walked out with her father.

"I knew it! We need to eliminate Monica permanently once and for all." Jude declared.

"And we absolutely will, Jude." I agreed, then turned my full attention to Ivy. "How are you feeling, my queen?"

"Exhausted and overflowing with questions. And absolutely starving." Ivy responded honestly.

"And what would the mother of my future godchild like to eat?" Xavier wrapped his arm around her shoulder and guided her toward the comfortable sofa.

"Actually, I really want to go home and see my son," Ivy said softly.

"Why don’t we bring our little prince here instead? I think everyone in this room wants to meet him and show support for you and Caleb during this moment. I know this is between you two, but I really want to be present for this..." Xavier looked at Ivy with pleading eyes.

"Oh, Ivy, I completely agree with Xavier. I’ve been part of my little angel’s life since the day he was conceived..." Zoe added enthusiastically.

"I don’t recall you being present during the actual conception, Zoe," I teased with a grin.

"Look who’s getting smart with me now, you ridiculous monster," Zoe laughed heartily. "I know every single scandalous detail of that night." She chuckled at our playful exchange.

"I’m genuinely grateful that you were there for her," I felt overwhelming gratitude that she had supported Ivy through everything.

"Alright then. I’ll call Carmen and ask her to bring him over," Ivy agreed warmly. "I love that you’re all here with us during such a monumental moment!"

"I’ll send the armored car and Caleb to collect them safely," Xavier hugged Ivy tightly. "And what sounds good for dinner?"

"A big juicy hamburger and crispy french fries," Ivy said with sparkling, delighted eyes. Xavier left with a huge smile to arrange everything perfectly.

"My queen, I’m the happiest man alive right now. I’m incredibly eager to meet my son properly. But I’m also terrified. How do you think he’ll react to learning the truth?" I asked, holding Ivy’s hands gently in mine.

"Max is an exceptionally intelligent and loving boy, Caleb. He already adores you, and now you’re simply his father. I believe he’ll be overjoyed as well. But don’t you think we should arrange for a DNA test?" Everyone in the room looked at Ivy as if she had completely lost her mind. Including me.

"Ivy, for Christ's sake, that boy looks exactly like me! I don't understand how we didn't figure this out before now!" I said with complete confidence. "Besides, we both know precisely what happened at that auction." I pulled Ivy close for a quick, tender kiss. "So you're planning to be the future Mrs. Thorne?" I asked with a broad smile.

"Did you honestly think I'd let that pathetic princess get under my skin?" Ivy said as if the answer should have been completely obvious to everyone.

Chapter 153 My Daddy

Ivy's POV

Carmen appeared in the doorway moments later, her weathered hands gently guiding Max by his small fingers. The moment Max spotted Caleb across the secure parlor of the Thorne safe house, he broke free from Carmen's protective grip and raced toward his father with unbridled joy.

"Caleb!" Max's voice echoed through the bulletproof walls as he stretched his tiny arms wide. Caleb immediately dropped to his knees on the Italian marble floor, sweeping his son into his embrace with desperate intensity.

"Max. My precious boy." Caleb's voice cracked with raw emotion as tears streamed down his scarred face. The sight of the feared mafia Don reunited with his child sent waves of emotion through every soldier and capo present. I glanced around the fortified room and saw hardened killers wiping their eyes, including myself.

"Caleb, I missed you so much. You stopped coming to see me," Max said with the innocent directness that only children possess, unaware of the dangerous world surrounding him.

"Oh, my sweet boy, I've been dying from missing you too." Caleb's words came out between sobs as they clung to each other with desperate hunger, the Don's tattooed hands trembling as they held his heir.

"Hi, Mommy." Max turned his bright face toward me while still nestled in Caleb's powerful arms. "Uncle Xavier brought us here to the big house."

"That’s right, sweetheart. Now aren’t you going to greet everyone else?" I asked softly, my voice barely steady.

"But Mommy, I missed Caleb so terribly much!" Max declared, settling his little head against Caleb’s muscular shoulder. The most dangerous man in North America couldn’t contain his tears. "Hi, everybody!" Max suddenly announced, waving enthusiastically at the roomful of armed mafia soldiers. "Caleb, why are you crying?"

"Because seeing you makes me happier than I’ve ever been," Caleb managed to say through his overwhelming emotions, his voice echoing off the stone walls. "I’m sorry, everyone, but I’m not putting him down right now. You’ll all have to wait your turn." The room filled with understanding laughter from men who’d never shown such softness before.

"Then let’s move to the dining hall, and you can hold your boy while we eat," Xavier suggested warmly, his consigliere instincts ensuring the family’s comfort. "Max, I had the kitchen prepare those fries you love."

"Hooray!" Max clapped his hands with delight, completely oblivious to the armed guards stationed at every entrance.

We gathered around the massive mahogany dining table that had witnessed countless family meetings and territorial negotiations. I found myself mesmerized watching my son perched contentedly on his father’s lap, the Thorne family crest carved into the chair’s back framing them both. Max was all smiles as he munched on fries and chattered about his latest adventures at the secure daycare facility. Caleb refused to release his hold on Max, constantly showering him with kisses and hanging on his every word as if memorizing each syllable. I was so absorbed in watching them that I barely noticed the other family members and soldiers talking quietly around us. The conversation we still needed to have with Max weighed on my mind, and I wondered if he would truly comprehend what we were about to tell him in this world of shadows and violence.

After dinner, we moved into the comfortable family parlor where the atmosphere felt more intimate despite the security cameras monitoring every corner.

"Max, Mommy needs to tell you something very important." He remained perfectly content on Caleb’s lap, showing no intention of moving from his father’s protective embrace.

"What is it, Mommy?" He gazed at me with those stunning ice-blue eyes and that radiant smile that never failed to fill my heart completely.

"Do you remember when you asked me why you don't have a daddy?"

"I rememba, Mommy. You and Auntie Zoe told me it's because my daddy lives really far away," he recited the explanation Zoe and I had always given him to protect him from the truth about the dangerous world we inhabited.

"Well, the truth is that your daddy lives very close now." I spoke as gently as possible, and I watched his little eyes light up with wonder.

"Really, Mommy? Can Caleb be my daddy?" His innocent question left me completely speechless, unaware that the man holding him commanded armies of soldiers.

"Yes, my precious son, I am your daddy. I am your daddy." Caleb's voice broke as he held his heir even tighter, his voice echoing with the weight of generational power. Max wrapped his small arms around Caleb's neck and squeezed with all his little might.

"My daddy? You're really my daddy! My daddy!" Max shouted with pure joy, laughing as he embraced his father with everything he had, the future heir to a mafia empire celebrating in complete innocence.

This display of pure love and acceptance only intensified Caleb's emotions, and soon everyone in the parlor was crying like children themselves, hardened criminals moved by Max's innocent happiness and the continuation of the Thorne bloodline.

"I think I should go prepare some warm milk for everyone," Gemma announced with a watery smile as she stood up, ever the gracious hostess in this fortress of danger. "Actually, I think we all need something soothing tonight." Her comment broke the emotional tension and had everyone laughing through their tears.

When Caleb and Max finally loosened their embrace, Max ran his tiny hand across his father's tear-stained and battle-scarred face with concern.

"Why are you crying, Daddy?" he asked with such sweet innocence, unaware of the violent legacy he'd just inherited.

Caleb smiled through his tears, the most feared Don in North America reduced to putty by his son's touch. "Because I'm so incredibly happy to be your father, son."

"I have the best idea!" Xavier announced enthusiastically, his strategic mind already working. "Nobody's leaving the compound tonight. This house has plenty of secure rooms, and we can all stay together and share this incredible moment."

"I absolutely love that idea, darling! Everyone should stay in the family wing," Ruby immediately supported her husband's suggestion, understanding the need for protection and celebration.

One by one, every family member and trusted soldier agreed enthusiastically. I watched Max, who was already getting excited about what the adults were calling a "family sleepover," and felt Caleb pull me close against his chest. He whispered in my ear with deep conviction, his breath warm against my skin:

"I'll stay anywhere you and my children are, tesoro."

Everyone looked at me with hopeful, pleading expressions, and I found myself nodding in agreement. We would stay within the safety of the Thorne compound walls. Carmen attempted to excuse herself to return to her quarters, but Xavier wouldn't hear of it. He insisted that she stay and be part of our impromptu family celebration in the fortified safe house.

The evening turned into something magical within those bullet-resistant walls, filled with games, endless laughter, and heartwarming stories. Xavier distributed comfortable sleepwear for everyone from the house's extensive wardrobes. When bedtime finally arrived, Caleb carefully positioned our son between us in the large guest bed and fell asleep with both of us wrapped securely in his powerful arms. I had never imagined it was possible to feel as complete and happy as I did in that perfect moment, protected by the most dangerous man in the city.

The following day, after a leisurely lunch filled with more laughter and bonding within the compound's secure dining room, we finally prepared to return to our regular territory. Caleb was hungry to learn everything about his son and heir, and the two of them were absolutely inseparable. Since it was the weekend, Zoe thoughtfully decided to stay at Finn's secured apartment, giving us the privacy we needed

to talk and spend quality time together as a new family. We made a quick stop at Caleb's penthouse fortress so he could gather some essential belongings, then headed to my place to begin our new life together under the protection of the Thorne name.

Chapter 154 Confessions and Claims

Ivy's POV

When we returned to Caleb's fortified penthouse, Max retrieved his favorite set of building blocks from his new bedroom and scattered them across the bulletproof glass-enclosed living room. Caleb settled beside him on the Italian leather carpet, and together they constructed towers and castles while cartoons played on the massive wall-mounted screen, the sound of children's laughter a stark contrast to the arsenal of weapons concealed throughout the apartment.

After our evening meal, exhaustion claimed our little boy. Max's eyelids grew heavy as he nestled against his father's chest, and Caleb insisted on carrying him to bed personally, his tattooed hands surprisingly gentle as he tucked in the son he'd only recently discovered was his. When he returned to the living room, he pulled me close on the sofa, his muscular arms encircling my waist with the same possessive intensity he used to claim territory.

"Tesoro, we have things we need to discuss." Caleb's voice carried the weight of unspoken confessions, his ice-blue eyes darkening with memories that haunted him. "There's so much I'm dying to understand about these past months in exile. But I also have confessions to make about my own failures. I'm not sure where to begin."

"Tell me about Fresh Ramsey first," I requested, turning to face the man who'd once banished me from his territory in a rage of betrayal and wounded pride.

"It happened the night we arrived back from the docks, after that botched arms deal. Felix dragged me to some upscale establishment in neutral territory, and suddenly Veronica appeared out of nowhere like a vulture sensing weakness. I was spiraling, convinced you'd never return to my side. You were building something with that casino bastard Parker, and I felt like I was losing the only war that mattered." Caleb's eyes squeezed shut as though the memory physically pained him, his jaw clenching with the same tension I'd seen when he executed traitors. "It was a single night of weakness, but just like you predicted, even while I was with her, every thought belonged to you, Queen."

"I'd be lying if I said it doesn't sting like a blade between my ribs, because it absolutely does. But I refuse to start a blood war over it. We weren't bound by any oath then, and I was exploring possibilities with Parker in neutral territory. Let's bury this deeper than we buried our enemies' associates and move forward," I replied, watching relief wash over his scarred features like absolution.

"What about you and that casino king?" Caleb asked, though his jaw tensed as if bracing for gunfire, his territorial instincts flaring even now.

"We never shared a bed, if that's what's eating at you like acid. But yes, we shared a few kisses during those weeks when you had me marked for exile," I answered honestly, watching his fists clench and unclench. "Parker is genuinely dangerous in his own way, but you had claimed permanent territory in my heart like a conquering army. I finally accepted that truth after witnessing Veronica practically marking you as her property in your own compound. I ended whatever was barely beginning with Parker, and he decided to relocate his operations to the Frost Coast to avoid an all-out territorial war. Now tell me about Yara Rossi and her psychotic schemes."

Caleb spent the following while unraveling every detail of his investigation into the Rossi family's web of deception and how he systematically dismantled Yara's elaborate manipulation campaign. The woman's talent for orchestrating fake assassination attempts and forging evidence to force a family alliance left me speechless with rage. Yet as Veronica had pointed out during her brief return, Monica remained the deadliest viper of them all.

"And after exposing everything, I finally had the satisfaction of personally executing that treacherous bitch Rossi," he concluded with the cold satisfaction of a predator who'd claimed his kill.

"Caleb, I'm terrified of what our remaining enemies might attempt next," I admitted, feeling ice travel down my spine like the barrel of a gun.

"Don't let fear consume you, my angel of death. We're maintaining the security detail around the clock. They won't get within a hundred yards of you or our son without triggering a bloodbath," he promised with the absolute authority of a man who controlled life and death across three states. "Our son! Christ, when I tell the surviving elders they have an heir, they'll kiss the ground you walk on. And he carries my father's name, exactly as tradition demands!" Caleb's voice trembled with emotion that he rarely allowed anyone to witness. "I love you beyond the boundaries of this empire, Ivy!"

"I love you just as fiercely, my Don. But I’m dreading the conversation with my parents in the civilian world." The thought alone made my stomach churn worse than my first execution. "Especially since I also need to reveal that I’m carrying your second heir."

"Why are you anxious about telling them I’m Max’s father when they already suspect you’ve been mixed up with dangerous men?"

"Caleb, obviously I couldn’t tell my law-abiding parents I had passionate encounters with a masked stranger at an underground criminal auction where people bid on weapons and territories!"

"So what cover story did you create for them?"

"Simply that I met Max’s father at a charity event and spent one night with him before he disappeared into dangerous business I couldn’t follow. Nothing more elaborate than necessary. Can you imagine their reaction if they discovered I never even saw the face of the man whose child I was carrying?" I explained as though it should be obvious to any criminal with half a brain. "And now I must come clean about everything, especially since you’ve already met them and I explicitly assured my father you weren’t involved in Max’s conception." Caleb erupted in dark laughter that echoed off the reinforced walls.

"This conversation will be absolutely priceless. And they still don’t know about the pregnancy?"

"No, I planned to share the news face to face, away from potential surveillance."

"Well, whenever you feel ready, we’ll visit my future in-laws and announce that I’m Max’s father, that you’re carrying my second child, and that we’re planning a blood oath ceremony. How does that sound for civilian shock value?"

"It sounds like a solid approach to giving them heart attacks." I sighed deeply, then fixed him with a challenging stare. "But hold on, who decided I’m binding myself to you with blood magic and ancient oaths?"

"You did, when you declared yourself the future queen of this territory to Veronica." Caleb reminded me of my words with a predatory smile.

"I was simply putting that delusional woman in her proper place before she got herself killed." I protested.

"I don’t care about your motivations, now you’re definitely becoming my queen through proper ceremony." He grinned with the dangerous charm that had first ensnared me. "But there’s another matter we need to address."

"What now, my territorial beast?"

"I’d bind you to me tomorrow morning if the decision were mine alone, but I can’t disrespect your civilian parents that way, and I know your friends will insist on creating a spectacular celebration that befits a mafia queen, so we’ll need time for proper planning." I followed his logic.

"I couldn’t care less about elaborate parties and all that ceremonial nonsense. I only want our family and your most trusted soldiers celebrating with us." I said.

"But I’m desperate to see you in an absolutely stunning gown that announces to every rival family that you belong to me! And I want the entire underworld to know you’re under my protection. So we’re having a proper celebration. But until our blood oath ceremony, I refuse to spend another night separated from you and my heir." I understood Caleb’s meaning perfectly, recognizing the possessive command beneath his request.

"Caleb, you can spend time with Max whenever you wish, obviously."

"I want all three of you in my fortress - our stronghold," he corrected himself with territorial satisfaction, "every single day. It’s non-negotiable, Tesoro, regardless of your reservations about security protocols, I need you with me. So either you relocate to my penthouse compound, or I move my operations into this vulnerable apartment. Your choice."

"Caleb..." - he interrupted before I could finish.

"Here or there, Ivy. The location is irrelevant, as long as we’re together and properly defended." He wouldn’t yield on this point, his protective instincts as absolute as his criminal authority.

"Fine, we'll move to your fortress." I conceded to the inevitable.

"Perfect. We'll relocate tomorrow under armed escort. Now let's go to bed, I've been starving for your touch for far too many weeks." He stood up with predatory grace, swept me into his arms with the same ease he wielded his weapons, and carried me toward the bedroom where bulletproof windows overlooked his criminal empire.

Upon reaching the master suite, Caleb gently secured the reinforced door, placed me on the bed with reverent care, and positioned himself above me with the focused intensity of a hunter claiming his prize. He captured my lips hungrily, his scarred hands exploring every curve of my body as though memorizing territory he'd thought lost forever. Slowly, he lifted the flowing dress I was wearing, and when he pulled it over my head, he knelt on the mattress and gazed at me with pure adoration and burning desire that could have melted steel. I wore no bra and only the delicate undergarments he had personally selected for me months ago during our early territorial negotiations. When he noticed this detail, his face lit up with a wicked smile that promised delicious destruction.

"Oh, my beautiful queen, you have absolutely no idea how desperately I've wanted to destroy these since I bought them for you!"

The mafia king removed his cotton shirt, revealing the intricate tattoos that mapped his criminal achievements across his muscled torso, and leaned over me, trailing kisses along my neck before claiming my breast with his mouth. My core became slick at his expert touch; Caleb possessed a sinfully talented mouth honed by years of interrogation techniques, and the kisses, gentle bites, suction, and licks he lavished on my breasts drove me to madness and forced soft moans from my throat despite my training in silence.

"Quiet, sweetheart! Stay silent, our heir is sleeping right next door," he reminded me in the commanding tone he used to control his soldiers, then continued his worship of my breasts with the devotion of a man honoring his queen.

His hand, which had been resting possessively on my waist, slowly traveled down my stomach until it discovered my center through my damp underwear, claiming that territory with the same expertise he used to control his criminal empire. He began delicious caresses there, running his fingers up and down in slow, teasing motions, occasionally creating circular patterns that made me arch against him like a weapon being perfectly calibrated. I became breathless from his skilled touches, each movement precise as surgical strikes.

What followed was a claiming that left no doubt about who ruled this territory, who possessed absolute authority over my body and soul. Caleb worshipped me with the intensity of a man who had thought he'd lost his most precious treasure, and I surrendered to him with the complete trust of a woman who had finally found her true king in this dark empire we would rule together.

Chapter 155 Ready For This

Ivy's POV

I stirred awake to the sound of hushed voices drifting from the kitchen, accompanied by the familiar clatter of dishes. The safe house felt different this morning, charged with an anticipation I hadn't experienced in months. I padded barefoot across the reinforced hardwood floor, noting how the morning light filtered through the bulletproof windows, and paused at the kitchen entrance to observe the scene before me.

Caleb sat across from Max at our steel-reinforced dining table, both completely absorbed in animated conversation. My breath caught watching them together like this, so natural, so right. The Don of the most feared crime family on the East Coast had prepared an elaborate breakfast spread that covered every inch of the table surface. Fresh fruit arranged in precise rows, golden scrambled eggs still steaming from the pan, crispy bacon that filled the air with its rich scent, thick slices of buttered toast, and Max's favorite chocolate chip pancakes cut into perfect triangles.

Max bounced in his reinforced booster seat, syrup already making his small fingers sticky, hanging on every word his father spoke. Caleb gestured with his coffee mug, his tattooed hands moving expressively as he explained something about security systems and protected perimeters. They were both showered and dressed while I remained in yesterday's oversized t-shirt, my hair a tangled mess from sleep.

How long had I been unconscious to the world outside these walls?

"Mommy's awake!" Max spotted me first, his voice carrying that infectious morning enthusiasm that never failed to pierce through even the darkest moments of our dangerous life.

"Good morning, sweetheart." I crossed to him and pressed a kiss to the top of his head, breathing in his familiar scent of strawberry shampoo mixed with the faint trace of the security soap we used in this protected compound.

Caleb's ice-blue eyes found mine over Max's head. The intensity in his gaze, that familiar predatory focus that had once terrified me, now made my stomach flutter with entirely different emotions.

"Morning, beautiful." His voice carried that rough edge that spoke of sleepless nights spent coordinating family operations. "We didn't want to disturb your rest. You needed it after everything."

I settled into the chair beside him, accepting the steaming mug of coffee he slid across the table with practiced ease. Our fingers brushed during the exchange, sending familiar electricity up my arm despite the calluses earned from handling weapons.

"So what were you two conspirators plotting so seriously?" I asked, though the answer was written across both their faces.

"The compound," Caleb replied, his excitement barely contained beneath his usual controlled demeanor. "I've already contacted the crew. The boys will be here soon to handle the relocation."

I nearly choked on my coffee. "You told Max already? We agreed I would have that conversation with him first."

Caleb had the decency to look sheepish, running a hand through his dark hair in that gesture I'd grown to recognize as his tell. "I couldn't wait. He was asking questions about why I was here so early, and the truth just came out."

Max piped up between bites of pancake, syrup coating his chin. "Daddy says our new house has motion sensors everywhere and my own bathroom with a shower that's bulletproof!"

I shot Caleb a look that promised we'd discuss his oversharing of security details later, but I couldn't maintain any real anger when Max looked so genuinely excited. We'd lived in this cramped safe house for months, just the two of us under constant guard rotation. The idea of space, of a real fortified home where we could breathe, felt surreal.

After breakfast, I escaped to the reinforced bathroom while Caleb cleaned the kitchen with military precision, a habit ingrained from his years climbing the ranks of the family hierarchy. By the time I emerged, towel-dried and dressed in clothes suitable for a day of supervised moving, the security buzzer was already sounding.

Zoe burst through the reinforced door without waiting for the all-clear from our guards, her arms crossed and lips pursed in mock anger that didn't quite hide her relief at seeing me safe.

"So you're really stealing my roommate and my godson, you manipulative bastard?" She pointed an accusing finger at Caleb, completely unfazed by the armed men flanking the doorway.

He grinned, utterly unaffected by her theatrical display. "I've waited long enough for my turn with them. You've had them under your protection for three years."

"I'm not sure I approve of you taking over their security detail, Thorne," Zoe shot back, but her facade cracked when Max launched himself into her arms with his usual fearless abandon.

Soon the safe house filled with our carefully vetted circle and controlled laughter. Ruby arrived with Xavier's lieutenant providing escort, followed by Nora and Gemma under similar protection. The men congregated around Caleb, discussing logistics and security protocols while we women gathered in my bedroom to pack my personal belongings under the watchful eyes of posted sentries.

"I should have consulted you first about this move," I said to Zoe, folding clothes into a reinforced suitcase. "I feel terrible making these decisions without input from my security team."

Zoe waved me off while keeping her voice low enough that our guards couldn't overhear. "Ivy, honey, I'm not your handler. You don't need my permission to accept protection from the most powerful family in the city." She sat on my bed, watching me pack with careful efficiency. "Besides, Caleb wants his family together under one roof where he can control every variable. I understand the logic. And frankly, the timing works because Finn's been practically living in my place anyway. We made it official last night."

"Wait, what?" I dropped the shirt I was holding.

"He moved into my apartment!" Zoe's face glowed with happiness despite our dangerous circumstances. "All his gear and surveillance equipment is being installed this afternoon."

Ruby groaned from her position on the floor, sorting through my shoe collection with practiced caution. "At this rate, I'm going to cave and let Xavier assign me a permanent detail too. He's been pushing for consolidated protection for weeks."

"Do it," Nora encouraged quietly. "Life's too unpredictable in our world to waste time on logistics when you've found someone worth trusting with your safety."

The conversation naturally shifted to relationships within our dangerous circle, and I noticed Gemma's unusual silence. She sat in the corner, mechanically folding my sweaters without really seeing them, her movements precise but distant.

"Gemma, you're being unusually quiet. How are things with Frost?" I asked gently, mindful of the listening devices throughout the room.

Her hands stilled on the fabric. "We've been having some complications."

"What kind of complications?" Zoe's protective instincts immediately activated, her voice sharpening with concern.

Gemma's voice cracked as she spoke. "He's been distant lately. Cold. Recently I decided to surprise him at his apartment with dinner." She paused, tears gathering in her eyes. "Another woman answered the door wearing nothing but his shirt."

The room went silent except for the muffled sounds of the men coordinating security arrangements in the hallway.

"That cheating piece of garbage!" Zoe jumped up, her face flushed with rage that our guards probably registered on their monitors. "I'm going to have him dealt with permanently!"

"Please don’t cause problems with his family connections," Gemma begged. "I was humiliated enough hearing him call her ’babe’ from the bedroom."

Ruby pulled out her encrypted phone with a predatory smile that would have made Xavier proud. "I have a better idea than direct confrontation."

She dialed a number and activated the scrambler function. We all leaned in, curious about her plan while remaining aware of surveillance protocols.

The afternoon dissolved into a controlled whirlwind of packing, planning retaliation against Frost through proper channels, and preparing for my transition into the Thorne family compound. As I sealed the last box of my belongings with tactical tape, I felt that familiar mixture of excitement and terror that had become my constant companion in this world. Caleb appeared in the doorway, his sleeves rolled up and hair messed from coordinating security details with his crew.

"Ready for this?" he asked, his voice low and intimate despite our friends and guards bustling around us.

I looked around the bedroom that had been my sanctuary for months. The place where I’d planned our survival strategy, where I’d read bedtime stories to Max between security checks, where I’d built a life as a single mother in the shadows.

Now I was about to build something entirely different under the same dangerous sky.

Chapter 156 Truth Finally Surfaces

Ivy’s POV

"Well, well, if it isn’t my favorite little firecracker finally remembering us old soldiers exist," the familiar gravelly voice crackled through the phone’s speaker.

"Hunter, sweetheart, you know family always comes first in our world. How are you managing without backup?" Ruby’s eyes glittered with the kind of mischief that usually meant someone was about to get their world rocked.

"Barely surviving, princess. Could use some proper company since my partner decided to chase opportunities on the Frost Coast," Hunter grumbled, referring to Parker's recent territory expansion. His voice carried the weight of someone who'd seen too many wars and lost too many brothers.

"Stop being such a drama queen, you old wolf!" Ruby laughed, but her tone carried genuine affection. "But listen carefully, because I've got intelligence that'll make your whole month."

"I'm listening, gorgeous. You know I trust your word above most."

"That complete liability Dominic finally showed his true colors, and Gemma is free to make her own choices," Ruby announced with the satisfaction of someone delivering long-awaited justice.

"You're pulling my chain! Please tell me you're not playing games with classified information, Pickles."

"Dead serious as a hit contract. Dominic is officially persona non grata."

"You're a goddamn angel! I've got business to handle, but we'll debrief soon." Hunter terminated the call with military precision.

Within moments, Gemma's secure phone buzzed against the marble countertop. She glanced at the encrypted display showing Hunter's code name before activating speaker mode.

"Hunter, this is unexpected. Are you calling with orders?"

"My beautiful queen, I'm drowning in isolation out here. You know Parker relocated his operations to the Pacific territories, and I'm practically withering from lack of proper counsel," Hunter's voice carried theatrical despair mixed with genuine loneliness that only former soldiers understood.

"Poor thing, what can I do to provide support?" Gemma asked with the genuine concern of someone who understood the weight of loyalty in their world.

"Your distinguished presence would be the perfect remedy. But I don’t want to overstep boundaries with Frost," Hunter said carefully, navigating the treacherous waters of mafia politics like the seasoned operative he was.

"No concerns there. Frost and I are finished, permanently terminated," Gemma stated with the finality of someone closing a business deal.

"Oh darling, how are you processing the transition? Did that moron cause you operational damage?"

"Like you said, he’s a moron. But I’d rather not waste valuable resources analyzing his incompetence."

"How about a strategic lunch meeting? We could make an entire afternoon operation of it." Gemma looked around at our assembled group, and we all nodded enthusiastically, gesturing for her to accept what was obviously a long-overdue alliance.

"That sounds like an excellent tactical decision. Where should we rendezvous?"

"I’ll personally extract you, my queen. Just transmit me the coordinates."

"The Thorne safe house. I’ll send encrypted location data."

"Give me a few minutes for transport. See you soon, beautiful."

The moment Gemma disconnected, we erupted in knowing laughter. Hunter had been completely captivated by her since their first intelligence briefing.

"Ivy, are you absolutely certain you don’t require additional security here?" Gemma asked, her trained eyes scanning for potential threats.

"Don’t be ridiculous. Go enjoy yourself with Hunter and provide us with a full debrief later. You deserve some happiness after dealing with that liability," I insisted, practically escorting my friend toward what was obviously going to be more than just lunch.

After Gemma headed downstairs to meet her extraction, Finn wandered into the main room carrying another equipment case and casually mentioned Gemma's sudden deployment. Dominic overheard and stormed in looking absolutely murderous.

"What the hell is the operational status here?" Dominic demanded with the authority of someone who'd forgotten he'd just lost all his privileges.

"Stand down there, hotshot. Gemma just accepted a social invitation from an ally. Nothing unauthorized about that since she's completely independent now," Zoe said to Finn, but her words were clearly calculated to detonate Dominic's already volatile temper.

"That's complete bullshit, Zoe!" Dominic exploded.

"Watch your tone and lower your voice when addressing me, Frost. I'm not one of your disposable assets!" Zoe shot to her feet, confronting Dominic with the deadly grace of someone trained in close quarters combat, until he retreated like a disciplined soldier. "Now, provide a full mission report on whatever disaster you created."

"Hold position, what do you mean you and Gemma aren't operational anymore, Dominic? Why are we receiving this intelligence secondhand?" Caleb commanded with the voice of someone accustomed to absolute obedience. "Xavier, report to the main room." He called out, and Xavier appeared with Max secured on his shoulders like precious cargo.

"Outstanding! Is this turning into some kind of family tribunal?" Dominic groaned.

"Start talking, you complete liability," Jude ordered with military precision.

Just then, Carmen arrived in high spirits, and Caleb requested she escort Max to his secured quarters upstairs.

"Gemma discovered me with another operative. She appeared at my apartment without advance notice, and there was someone there with me. It wasn't a serious engagement. But Gemma went completely tactical, blocked all communications, refuses extraction, won't accept contact, nothing. She

made me promise not to brief any of you because Caleb and Ivy were handling their own critical operations," Dominic confessed, staring at the floor like a court-martialed soldier.

"What were you possibly thinking, you complete moron?" Nora snapped, delivering a sharp strike to his arm.

"Ow, Nora! Sometimes an operator's discipline fails and..." Was he actually going to attempt justifying this catastrophic breach of protocol?

"If you keep talking, I'm going to permanently rearrange that stupid expression!" Zoe seethed with deadly intent. "Who's the target?" When Dominic maintained operational silence, she pressed harder with interrogator's precision. "Answer me, Dominic!"

"Remember that day at the shopping complex? When that psychotic Yara Rossi materialized with her little crew, throwing herself at all of us like some kind of honey trap operation?"

"Beatrix, that complete asset, Dominic? I cannot believe you compromised yourself!" Zoe was beyond tactical rage. "She's allied with that manipulative operative who tried to infiltrate Caleb's organization, you absolute idiot! That's the girl from the mall, everyone!"

"Oh Dominic, now I want to personally discipline you!" I felt pure rage coursing through my operational systems.

"Easy there, sweetheart, I'll handle the disciplinary action," Xavier said, his voice carrying the deadly calm of someone who'd eliminated many problems.

"Go ahead, I've earned whatever punishment you deem appropriate," Dominic said with the resignation of someone accepting court martial.

"Everyone needs to maintain operational discipline right now," Caleb commanded with absolute authority. "You're a complete liability. Parker and his crew are genuinely honorable soldiers, so you might have lost Gemma permanently. I'll remind you that she's under my organization's protection, so you won't be making unauthorized contact again. But right now, we're completing this relocation

operation for my family. Once we establish the new safe house, we'll conduct a proper disciplinary hearing."

"For the record, I'm the one who provided Hunter with this intelligence," Ruby announced proudly. "Like Caleb said, he's a genuinely honorable soldier."

We completed the equipment transfer and proceeded to Caleb's compound. When we arrived, Walter greeted us and approached Max with tears in his eyes, clearly amazed by the unmistakable resemblance between Max and Caleb. When I entered what would become Max's secured quarters, I was completely stunned. The room was perfectly arranged with a small reinforced bed, armored dresser, comfortable surveillance chair, little table with matching tactical chairs, and an array of educational equipment scattered about. Caleb's eyes filled with emotion.

"These were all from my childhood quarters. My mother maintained everything and always said that someday her grandson would sleep securely in her compound, in the same bed that provided my protection," Caleb said softly, his voice thick with memories of his fallen family.

"He'll sleep every single night in the bed that grandma secured especially for him," I whispered, running my hand gently across his scarred cheek. "Walter, thank you for establishing everything so perfectly and so efficiently."

"It's absolutely nothing, Ivy. It's my greatest honor. I watched Caleb enter this world, and now witnessing his children is the most wonderful gift imaginable," Walter said warmly before leaving us alone.

In what felt like tactical efficiency, my entire relocation was complete. We assembled in the main room to hear Dominic's full confession and deliver the disciplinary action he desperately needed.

Chapter 157 Max Goes Missing

Ivy's POV

On Monday morning, we drove Max to the secure private school that served the children of our family's inner circle. I made sure to update his authorized pickup list, adding Caleb's name alongside the trusted guards who could collect him. The headmistress smiled warmly as she watched us together, clearly pleased to see Max with both parents under the family's protection.

At the Thorne family compound’s business headquarters, Caleb kept steering me toward his executive wing instead of my own financial operations office.

"Caleb, you’re going the wrong direction. My office is in the east wing," I pointed out with amusement.

He stopped abruptly, running a hand through his dark hair. "Right. Sorry, I keep forgetting we don’t share the same workspace yet."

I spotted Jude emerging from my office, grinning like he’d just secured a major arms deal.

"Well, well, if it isn’t the power couple who finally got their act together!" Jude called out cheerfully. "Don’t worry about me cramping your style anymore. I’ve moved back to work directly under Xavier’s command. Listening to you two conduct business was becoming torture."

Heat flooded my cheeks. "Jude, we never..."

"Sweetheart, these walls aren’t soundproof against family members," he interrupted with a knowing wink. "I know exactly what kind of negotiations happen behind closed doors."

Caleb’s lips curved into a dangerous smile. "Can’t argue with facts, tesoro."

"Everything’s been relocated to the main office," Gemma called out from her desk without looking up from the encrypted communications terminal. "No need to thank me."

Inside my office, I found everything perfectly arranged. Like every Monday for the past months, fresh white roses graced the mahogany side table with a handwritten note in Caleb’s distinctive script: "You make me the most powerful man alive. Forever yours, my queen."

Unexpected tears pricked my eyes. These pregnancy hormones were turning me into an emotional wreck. I pulled Caleb close for a kiss, savoring the familiar scent of his expensive cologne mixed with gunpowder.

"So you've officially stolen my best intelligence analyst?" Xavier appeared in the doorway, pressing a brotherly kiss to my temple in the Italian family tradition.

"You stole her from me first," Caleb shot back with mock aggression.

"Keep talking and I'll reassign her permanently to my division," Xavier threatened, his hand instinctively moving toward his shoulder holster.

I left them to their territorial posturing and invited Gemma for espresso in the secure break room. I was dying to hear about her evening with Hunter versus her complicated situation with Dominic, both of whom were high-ranking soldiers in rival crews.

Caleb, Xavier, and Jude joined us shortly after, followed by Katelyn bustling in with her usual commanding presence.

"About time you two eliminated all the uncertainty," Katelyn announced, gesturing between Caleb and me with obvious satisfaction.

"Sit down, Katelyn. We have major family announcements," Caleb said, practically vibrating with excitement as he launched into our story about Max, our relationship, and our plans to formalize everything with a blood oath ceremony.

Katelyn's weathered face lit up progressively. "That beautiful boy is your heir! He has your exact eyes, and your father's intensity too. I'm absolutely thrilled for both of you." Her expression shifted to concern as she noticed Gemma's subdued mood. "But what's troubling you, dear? You look like someone died."

"Nothing gets past you," Gemma sighed, explaining her breakup with Dominic over his refusal to leave his current crew.

"That soldier's an absolute fool for letting you slip away," Katelyn declared firmly. Then her expression grew deadly serious. "Before I forget, this might be nothing, but after everything that's happened with internal security, I learned never to stay quiet. My contact in the kitchen mentioned that Rossi and that

snake Monica were meeting in the staff dining area recently. Monica seemed extremely agitated about something."

Caleb's relaxed posture immediately transformed into predatory alertness. "When was this? Did your contact overhear their conversation?"

"She couldn't make out their words, thankfully," Katelyn assured him.

Caleb was already pulling out his encrypted phone. "Fisher, I need you to review all surveillance footage from the staff areas immediately. Rossi and Monica had an unauthorized meeting recently. Find that footage and send it to my secure terminal. And I want to know why this wasn't reported through proper channels."

After thanking Katelyn, we returned to our respective operations. The afternoon brought us together in Caleb's executive office with Xavier and Jude for an emergency security briefing.

"Fisher recovered the surveillance data," Caleb announced grimly. "Someone had deliberately corrupted the original files. Our tech specialists had to use military-grade recovery software. We definitely have compromised personnel in our security network. I've already contacted Scott, and Fisher is conducting a comprehensive investigation of all family soldiers."

Xavier leaned forward with barely controlled fury. "How extensive is this breach? How are they managing to turn so many of our people?"

"Let's assess what we're dealing with," Caleb said, pulling up the recovered video.

The footage revealed far more than we'd expected. Monica clearly possessed detailed intelligence about our private family business and upcoming operations. We needed to find leverage to make her cooperate or eliminate the threat.

"So that's how they manipulated the pregnancy test results at your secure medical facility," Jude observed. "I'll contact the clinic director immediately. He needs to investigate which staff member was compromised. This is destroying their reputation in our community."

"Good thinking, Jude. There is some positive intelligence though," Caleb added. "Fisher confirmed that Veronica is currently under surveillance in Norway. We're monitoring her movements through Interpol contacts, and we'll know immediately if she attempts to return to North American territory."

"At least that particular threat is neutralized temporarily," Xavier said with visible relief.

"True, but I'm considering hiring external security contractors for Ivy and Max," Caleb mused aloud.

"That could be extremely risky," Jude cautioned. "We don't have background files on outside personnel, and it would be easier for enemies to infiltrate our protection detail."

"I've considered that, but I'm genuinely concerned about our current vulnerabilities." The security breach had clearly shaken Caleb's confidence in family operations.

"Caleb, I trust Caleb completely. He never allowed anyone near me during the previous threats. And the guard monitoring Max is his blood brother. I don't think we need outside contractors," I said, trying to ease his paranoia.

"Maybe you're right, but I'm still worried," Caleb insisted. "Let's maintain current security protocols and stay hypervigilant. At least Carmen agreed to move into the family compound with us."

We spent the remainder of the afternoon addressing legitimate business concerns, and time passed unexpectedly quickly. At the main house, Max was absolutely euphoric, building with blocks on the Persian carpet alongside Walter and Carmen. The moment he spotted his father, he launched himself into Caleb's arms with pure joy.

At dinner, Caleb invited Walter and Carmen to join us at the formal dining table. Then he surprised us with another significant announcement.

"I'm incredibly satisfied with how my life is developing. And I want to propose something important to you, Ivy." Caleb took my hand gently. "After my parents were murdered, I stayed at Xavier's compound for several weeks. I couldn't bring myself to enter the ancestral family home. I would drive to the gates but couldn't go inside. So I bought this secondary residence and asked Walter to maintain everything at the main estate. Thank you for that, Walter."

"Always my honor, Don Caleb," Walter replied with respectful warmth.

"But after seeing Max's room established here, and knowing our family is expanding, I kept thinking about how proud my parents would be to watch their grandchildren grow up in that house. How complete I would feel raising my family there." Tears began flowing as Caleb spoke. "Ivy, I want us to move into the Thorne family estate. It's enormous, has incredible gardens and security, and I know we could be truly powerful there."

"Caleb, I would be happy with you living in a mountain fortress," I said with complete sincerity. "Are you absolutely certain you want to live there?"

"I am certain. It's in the same secured district as Xavier's compound, very close for backup. I think it would be perfect." Caleb searched my eyes hopefully. "We could visit tomorrow before business hours, and then you could ask the women to help with any renovations. Gemma has excellent taste."

"I would love that. And so would the girls," I agreed, making everyone smile.

"It will be wonderful returning to that house. There's an atmosphere of pure strength and happiness there. Your parents were so powerful there, and your grandparents before them," Walter commented with obvious emotion.

"Then it's absolutely perfect," I declared decisively.

The next morning, we visited the estate as planned. It was absolutely breathtaking. I gasped when Caleb opened the reinforced front doors. Everything was immaculate and perfectly maintained, as if the family still lived there. Caleb explained that Walter had preserved everything flawlessly over the years. His mother had completed a major renovation just before their assassination.

The mansion was magnificent and imposing, built in classical Italian style with multiple full stories, vaulted ceilings, painted pristine white with a dramatic slate roof. The front featured manicured gardens and an elegant marble fountain. Massive bulletproof windows flooded every room with natural light. Inside, the luxury was truly impressive. The backyard boasted a swimming pool, tennis court, sauna, and even more extensive, meticulously maintained grounds.

I watched Caleb’s face as we moved through each room. Instead of grief, his smile grew progressively wider. He seemed completely natural and comfortable.

"Caleb, it’s absolutely magnificent! How are you feeling about being here?"

"I’m so glad you love it, my queen. I feel incredibly strong. I’m imagining how powerful our children will be here, filling this house with life and laughter. So, do you want to rule from here with me?"

"I would love living here! Max will go absolutely wild over these gardens."

"Then I’ll call my mother’s architect contact as soon as we reach headquarters. She’s a phenomenal professional who can work with you and the women on any modifications you want."

"But I don’t want to change anything!" I said with complete honesty. "Unless you want to, but I think it’s absolutely perfect as is!"

"Seriously, my angel? Are you sure?" When I confirmed with a smile, he continued, "Thank you! I feel like my mother prepared this estate specifically for us! I couldn’t enter before because something was missing. It was missing you and our children." Caleb declared through tears, kissing me tenderly.

"Can we have our blood oath ceremony in the garden?" I asked excitedly.

"My God, you’re absolutely perfect!" he said, kissing me again. "That was my mother’s dream! She would have adored you."

We explored the entire estate, making countless plans and sharing dreams. We finally left around midday and went to a secure restaurant near the headquarters. While waiting for our meal, my phone rang with an unknown number. I answered on speaker, and my heart stopped when I heard Carmen’s voice through desperate sobs.

"Ivy, sweetheart, they took Max. I don’t understand what happened. Fisher drove me to collect him from school. I got out and picked up Max normally. I was securing him in his car seat when everything

went black. I woke up in the hospital. The doctor said someone struck me in the head with a weapon, but Max wasn't there, and I couldn't reach Fisher. I don't know what happened, but someone took Max."

Chapter 158 War Room Vigil

Ivy's POV

Consciousness returned to me in jagged pieces as I stirred on the leather sofa in Caleb's private office. Through my blurred vision, I could make out Gemma clutching my hand with white knuckles, Katelyn entering with an ornate silver service, Xavier barking rapid-fire orders into his encrypted phone, Jude pacing the Persian rug while speaking in clipped tones to his contacts, and Caleb unleashing his volcanic rage on Fisher, the head of our security detail.

"Caleb, she's awake," Gemma announced softly, and he immediately abandoned his brutal interrogation to rush to my side.

"Tesoro, our people are already mobilized. The police task force is en route." His voice fractured as tears carved paths down his scarred face. "It seems Caleb and Fisher were feeding information to the Rossi family. Both have vanished completely. Dr. Taylor is coming to check on you."

"Caleb, our little boy..." Terror clawed up my throat, making each breath a struggle.

"We will bring him home safely, Queen. I give you my blood oath." His ice-blue eyes blazed with deadly promise as he cradled my face between his tattooed hands. "I need you to stay calm for the baby you're carrying, but you're not leaving my sight until this is over. Trust me to hunt down our son."

"This herbal blend will steady your nerves without causing drowsiness, dear," Katelyn murmured, offering me the delicate porcelain cup.

Soon, Caleb's office transformed into a war room. Zoe, Ruby, and Nora burst through the reinforced doors with Dominic flanking them for protection. Finn arrived with his uncle and Carmen, who was sobbing uncontrollably and pleading for forgiveness from anyone who would listen. Dr. Taylor pushed through the assembled crowd to reach me, administering a mild anxiolytic after his examination.

"Ivy, this medication will simply stabilize your nervous system. Your blood pressure is dangerously elevated, which poses a threat to your pregnancy," Dr. Taylor warned gravely. "You need to return to the compound and rest immediately."

"Absolutely not. I'm staying until we have intelligence on my son's location," I stated with iron resolve.

"This environment is too volatile. It will only exacerbate your condition," he pressed.

"Tesoro, move to Xavier's office with the girls. I'll update you regularly and share every piece of intelligence we gather," Caleb said, framing my face with his powerful hands. "I'm sending Carmen back to our penthouse. She's traumatized and needs medical attention for her head injury. Walter will monitor her there."

I stood and embraced Carmen tightly, assuring her that none of this blood was on her hands. Dr. Taylor escorted me to Xavier's adjacent office and helped me settle onto the black leather couch before returning to Caleb, instructing the girls to summon him if my condition deteriorated. The girls positioned themselves strategically around the room as I recounted our peaceful morning at the safe house and Carmen's frantic warning call. Gemma disappeared to the reception area to cancel all appointments and manage the steady influx of family soldiers and associates.

Scott appeared in the doorway, his weathered face etched with guilt and anguish.

"Sweetheart, please forgive an old soldier. I never imagined the Rossi family's reach extended this deep into our security network. I placed complete faith in the protection detail."

"Scott, this betrayal isn't your burden to bear. No one could have anticipated their desperation," I replied, trying to ease the weight crushing his shoulders.

"Honey, I should have seen the signs, considering the scope of our operations and the enemies we've made. I should have maintained tighter surveillance. I'll mobilize every resource to help bring Max home. Heidi has chartered a private jet and is boarding now. She'll arrive before dawn and asked me to tell you she'll stand vigil by your side."

The knowledge that Heidi was rushing to us provided a fragment of comfort in this nightmare. Scott pressed gentle kisses to my hands before departing to coordinate search efforts. Shortly afterward, Jude entered carrying a covered meal tray, which he placed carefully across my lap.

"I know you have no appetite and this feels impossible, but we must protect your unborn child as well. Dr. Taylor stressed that you need proper nutrition. Please try to consume something."

"Jude, thank you for thinking of everything. Yes, I'll force myself to eat. I must stay strong for both my children," I replied, genuinely attempting to swallow the food despite my churning stomach. I couldn't afford to compromise my pregnancy and health during this crisis.

"Ladies, we've arranged a full spread in the reception area. Please get some sustenance. Should I bring individual trays here instead?" Jude inquired.

"No, darling, we'll go there," Nora replied gratefully. "Any new intelligence?"

"Yes, a specialized task force has been established. Federal contacts are briefing Caleb now. They've already debriefed Carmen, and Xavier's driver transported her to Caleb's penthouse under armed escort. Walter is monitoring all communications there and will provide medical care for Carmen."

We thanked him as Jude returned to Caleb's office, which had apparently become our crisis command center. Time crawled by without meaningful updates. Caleb entered carrying a steaming espresso cup, exhaustion carved into every line of his face.

"How are you holding up, Tesoro?" I managed a weak smile as he pressed a kiss to my forehead and settled beside me on the couch. "They discovered the abandoned SUV on a dirt access road outside the city limits. Our forensics team is processing it for evidence. The feds are convinced a second vehicle was staged there for the extraction."

"What's our next move?" I asked, feeling dulled by the medication coursing through my system.

"Now we hunt through every shadow, and every member of our security apparatus is being interrogated under enhanced methods. Scott is conducting comprehensive background investigations on all personnel. He's consumed with guilt, just like Carmen." Caleb looked utterly drained.

"Neither of them deserves to carry this blame," I said, studying the harsh lines of fatigue etched across his features.

"I know. We're investigating the entire Rossi network and Monica's remaining contacts thoroughly. I reached out to Loxley and requested he pressure Veronica for any intelligence she might possess. Can you think of anyone else who might have information?" Caleb asked. I shook my head helplessly.

Suddenly, Caleb's attention shifted to a spot near the bulletproof windows where Zoe sat completely motionless, staring into the darkness beyond.

"How long has she been catatonic like that?" he asked with concern.

"For some time," Ruby answered quietly. "I don't know how to reach her."

Caleb approached Zoe and knelt beside her chair, speaking in low, gentle tones until she completely shattered and collapsed sobbing into his arms. I realized she was as devastated as we were, blaming herself for not preventing this somehow.

Jude returned with several maintenance workers who efficiently assembled multiple military-style cots throughout the room. Katelyn followed immediately behind them, expertly outfitting each cot with fresh linens and pillows.

"Ladies, if we're maintaining this vigil, you need proper rest," Jude commanded with paternal authority. "Nora, your supervisor has granted you indefinite leave, so you're staying with the family. Zoe and Ruby, Dominic has temporarily reassigned you here until this situation is resolved."

"Everyone, you don't need to sacrifice your lives for this," I protested weakly.

"There's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be," Nora smiled with fierce loyalty.

"None of us is leaving until Max comes home safely," Ruby declared with absolute conviction.

"It wouldn’t be any different regardless, Ivy. Come, you need rest." Jude helped me to my feet, but I needed to use the private washroom first.

"Jude, please contact the Molina family," Caleb requested quietly.

I went to Zoe and embraced both her and Ruby, whispering that everything would work out according to fate’s plan. Dr. Taylor examined Zoe thoroughly, prescribing medication and providing guidance for managing her shock. Finn helped her settle into one of the cots while I took the adjacent one, and we clasped hands tightly as darkness enveloped the room.

Chapter 159 Inside Betrayal

Caleb’s POV

Hours. Many agonizing hours since my son had been torn from our world. Since Carmen’s frantic call had shattered the fragile peace I’d fought so hard to build around my family. Every second that ticked by felt like a blade twisting deeper into my chest, but I couldn’t afford to break. Not now. Max needed his father to be the ruthless Don who commanded fear across every territory in North America. Ivy needed me to be unbreakable.

The executive floor of Thorne Tower had been transformed into a full-scale military operation. My most trusted enforcers had mobilized every asset at our disposal - every informant in the underground, every dirty cop on our payroll, every favor owed by rival families. The marble conference room now resembled a war bunker, with communications equipment humming alongside laptops displaying real-time intelligence feeds from across the city.

Xavier and Jude had orchestrated the logistics with military precision. Temporary sleeping quarters, round-the-clock catering, fresh clothes for extended operations. None of my inner circle would step foot outside this building until Max was safely returned to his mother’s arms. The alternative was unthinkable.

"Boss." Jude’s voice cut through the controlled chaos as dozens of phones rang simultaneously. Maps of the city covered every available surface, marked with red pins indicating search zones and potential safe houses. "Heidi just arrived."

I turned as the elevator doors opened, revealing the woman who had been more than my father's trusted advisor - she had been the closest thing to a maternal figure I'd known since my parents' assassination. Her silver hair was perfectly styled despite the emergency flight, her sharp eyes immediately assessing the situation with decades of experience in crisis management.

"Caleb." Her embrace was firm, steady, exactly what I needed. "Keep your head clear and your faith strong. That boy will come home where he belongs."

"Thank God you're here," I admitted, allowing myself this moment of vulnerability. "I feel like I'm walking a razor's edge between sanity and madness."

"You're not falling apart," she said firmly, pulling back to study my face. "You're one of the strongest men I've ever known, and certainly smarter than whoever took your son. Fear is human, but you'll keep leading this operation until we bring Max home. Where's Ivy?"

"Sedated in Xavier's office. Dr. Taylor had to give her something strong after she nearly collapsed from exhaustion and panic."

Heidi's weathered hand touched my cheek with surprising gentleness. "Then go sit with her. I just spent hours in first-class accommodations - I'm perfectly rested. Let me oversee operations while you take care of your wife."

I made my way through the maze of equipment and personnel to the converted sleeping area. Ivy lay motionless on the narrow cot, her breathing deep and even thanks to the sedatives. The girls had organized themselves into shifts - Nora currently manning the reception desk, monitoring every incoming call and visitor, while Gemma rested nearby. Zoe had also required medical intervention after nearly fainting when the reality of Max's disappearance fully hit her.

Earlier, I'd contacted Zoe's parents with instructions to reach out to Ivy's family and arrange their immediate travel here. Ivy would need their strength in the coming days, especially if this nightmare extended beyond a simple ransom demand. My mind refused to consider darker possibilities.

Despite my body's desperate need for rest, sleep remained impossible. I lay beside my wife, listening to her steady breathing while my thoughts raced through every potential scenario, every possible lead. Someone would pay dearly for putting my family through this hell. When I found the bastards

responsible, their deaths would serve as a permanent reminder of what happened to anyone foolish enough to threaten a Thorne.

Jude’s urgent voice interrupted my spiraling thoughts. "Boss, Scott’s got something big."

I carefully extracted myself from the bed and returned to the command center, where Scott was waiting with a grim expression and several files spread across the table.

"What have you discovered?" I demanded immediately.

"Caleb and Fisher joined our security detail years ago through Monica’s recommendation. They’ve been with the organization ever since, with perfect service records and no obvious red flags. She covered her tracks expertly - there’s no obvious paper trail connecting her to their recruitment process."

"Explain," Jude pressed, leaning forward intently.

"They’re Rita’s cousins. She runs operations for the Social Union. You know her from recent business discussions," Scott explained, referencing my previous conversations with Mabel about suspicious Union activities.

"That’s exactly why her name triggered my attention when my team compiled this intelligence," Scott continued. "You’d mentioned her before, and I know her through Union connections. Local authorities are already pursuing her location."

"How exactly did Monica orchestrate their hiring?" Jude questioned.

"Because you personally authorized it," Scott said, sliding two security personnel files across the table.

I stared at the documents in disbelief. "I have absolutely no memory of this. Years ago, certainly. I never involved myself in hiring decisions, especially not security personnel."

The signature was unmistakably mine, but the handwritten approval notation looked somehow wrong - similar to my writing style but lacking the natural flow of my usual penmanship. I had no recollection whatsoever of signing these authorizations.

"How did Human Resources receive these documents?" I asked.

"An employee found them on your desk and delivered them directly to Miles in HR. We've already summoned both individuals for immediate questioning," Scott explained. "According to this employee, he and Monica were involved romantically for a brief period. She frequently visited his workspace. He discovered these resumes immediately following one of her visits, and seeing your signature, he assumed they were legitimate and forwarded them to Miles, who processed the hires without question."

"How could I have signed something I can't remember?"

"Caleb, years ago you were completely consumed with Veronica. You arrived at work hungover more often than not, missed countless important meetings, lived in a perpetual state of irresponsible behavior," Xavier reminded me bluntly. "Monica could easily have caught you during one of those compromised moments when you'd sign anything she put in front of you."

"Damn it, that's entirely possible." The realization hit like a physical blow. I slammed my fist against the conference table hard enough to rattle the laptops. "I trusted her completely back then. I signed countless documents she brought without consulting anyone. What else do we know about these two?"

"Authorities are currently tracking every relative and known associate. They're also searching for Monica, but she's disappeared completely. They searched Rossi's residence thoroughly but found nothing useful. However, Yara Rossi is also missing, and her parents claim they have no idea where she might be."

"I believe she and Monica have my son together. Christ, they're both completely unhinged." The thought of Max in their custody sent ice water through my veins.

Dawn began breaking across the city skyline, painting the sky in shades of amber and rose. My team and I moved to check on the women and invite them for coffee. We gathered in the reception area, sharing our latest intelligence over steaming cups while the city slowly awakened below us. Zoe had recovered

from her earlier breakdown and now radiated fierce determination - ready to tear apart anyone standing between her and Max's safe return.

Gemma caught my attention with a subtle gesture. When I approached, she leaned close to whisper her update.

"Ivy's parents just arrived. They're en route with Zoe's parents and Dr. Taylor."

The elevator would soon deliver more people who loved Max into our desperate search. Every additional pair of hands, every extra heart invested in finding my son, brought us incrementally closer to bringing him home safely.

Chapter 160 Yara's Ultimatum

Caleb's POV

I returned to Ivy's side and pulled her trembling form against my chest. The private elevator opened with a soft mechanical whisper, and I guided her toward the waiting figures in the secured hallway. She broke from my protective embrace and rushed into her parents' arms while Zoe embraced her own family with desperate relief. Thomas stepped forward, his weathered face marked by exhaustion and the kind of worry that only comes from sleepless nights spent fearing for your child's safety.

"Son, I cannot begin to express how grateful we are that you brought us here," Thomas said, his voice carrying the weight of paternal anguish.

"No gratitude is necessary, Thomas," I replied, accepting his firm embrace and feeling the raw strength of a father's desperate love.

Diane approached with tears streaming down her cheeks. I pulled her close, drawing unexpected comfort from her maternal presence that reminded me painfully of everything I had lost when my own parents were murdered. After acknowledging Zoe's parents with necessary politeness, I provided them with a carefully edited version of our current crisis. Dr. Taylor had already taken Ivy to her private medical suite for a comprehensive examination.

I requested a private meeting with Ivy's parents. The time had arrived to reveal the dangerous truths we had been forced to conceal. We gathered in Ivy's recovery room where Dr. Taylor delivered reassuring news about her physical condition before departing discreetly.

"You actually arranged for my parents to fly here?" Ivy asked, fresh tears flowing down her pale cheeks.

"Yes, I contacted Miller immediately after the kidnapping and explained our situation completely. I had the family jet bring them here within hours," I explained carefully. "Ivy, all I can think about is how desperately I wish my own parents could be here right now. I thought having your family close would provide comfort for both of us during this nightmare."

"Thank you, Caleb," Ivy whispered with profound gratitude.

"But we must reveal everything now. This was not how I intended to handle these revelations, but we cannot allow this moment to pass without complete honesty," I said, ensuring she understood the gravity of our situation.

"What other developments should we be aware of?" Thomas asked with the serious demeanor of a concerned father preparing for harsh truths.

"Thomas, we have discovered that I am Max's biological father," I stated directly, refusing to soften the shocking revelation. "Ivy and I first met at that underground masquerade auction and spent the night together."

"But when I asked you directly during our visit, you denied being Max's father," Thomas said with confusion clouding his features.

"We had absolutely no knowledge of our previous connection. During our encounter that night, we both wore elaborate masks that completely concealed our identities. We never exchanged names or any personal information. Later, when she began working within my organization, neither of us realized we had met before." I provided a detailed explanation of my parents' assassination, my desperate search for the mysterious woman from that night, and my overwhelming joy upon discovering my role as Max's father.

"This story would make quite the dramatic film," Diane observed with a slight smile that helped ease the mounting tension.

"Well, you two certainly chose an unconventional path to find each other," Thomas remarked, causing us all to share a moment of much-needed levity despite our circumstances. "But as long as my daughter and grandson are happy, nothing else matters. I am relieved to know my grandson's father is an honorable man who loves him completely."

"There is one additional matter we need to discuss, Dad," Ivy said softly, her gaze dropping to her folded hands.

"What concerns you? That you moved into his compound? I completely understand that decision. I would never want my child living separately from her family either," Thomas demonstrated his practical understanding of our dangerous world.

"That is certainly part of it, Thomas. As soon as we recover Max safely, we will finalize wedding arrangements immediately. But Ivy and I are expecting another child," I announced, attempting to deliver the news with calm composure despite everything.

"Is this true, Ivy?" Her father studied her with intense seriousness, causing her to shrink slightly under his scrutiny. "I am going to become a grandfather again? This is wonderful news despite these terrible circumstances! Our family continues to grow beautifully."

Ivy smiled radiantly and embraced her parents warmly. With our major revelations complete, we returned to the main conference area where Carmen and Walter had arrived to offer their complete support during this crisis. Mr. Miller was already mobilizing his extensive network of contacts throughout the city, though no significant leads had emerged yet.

After a tense lunch, I retreated to my private office with Thomas and Miller. Federal agents waited inside alongside Scott, Felix Hayes, Dominic, Xavier, Finn, and Jude. Ivy remained with her mother and the other women for emotional support during this difficult time. My secure phone buzzed with an untraceable number, prompting me to immediately activate the speaker function.

"Thorne speaking."

"Oh darling, what a deliciously commanding voice you possess," Yara Rossi's sickeningly sweet tone filled the room like poison. "Are you missing me terribly?"

"Where are you hiding, Yara?" I demanded, fighting to maintain control over my rising murderous fury.

"Just enjoying precious quality time with an adorable blue-eyed little boy," she replied with chilling casualness that made my blood freeze.

"You are completely insane! Where is my son?" I shot to my feet, my hands clenched into fists that ached to wrap around her throat.

"Oh please, calm yourself, handsome. The little brat does not belong to you anyway. He may share your striking looks, but he belongs to that pathetic servant girl who stole you from me." Yara spoke as if discussing weekend social plans rather than kidnapping and terrorizing a child.

"Yara, put Max on this phone immediately," I commanded with barely restrained violence.

"Not quite yet, lover. First, we need to discuss my terms for returning the little monster unharmed. First condition: that maid disappears permanently back to whatever backward town spawned her. Second: you will publicly declare your love for me and announce our engagement to all the families. Third: you will be my husband in every possible way, and I trust you understand my complete meaning. Fourth: we will live in your parents' estate as master and mistress. Fifth: you will transfer controlling interest of your organization to my father. After you fulfill every single demand perfectly, I will consider returning the brat to his mother. Refuse me, and I will eliminate the little pest permanently. Do we have a clear understanding, darling?"

"You are beyond insane, Yara, completely deranged!" I roared into the phone.

"Oh, to demonstrate my absolute seriousness about this arrangement, listen carefully to this." Max's terrified crying filled the room as he called desperately for his mother and me. A male voice ordered "disconnect now" in the background. I recognized that voice but could not place its owner immediately. "I am granting you very little time to consider my generous proposal. Sweet dreams, handsome." The line went dead abruptly.

This deranged woman had crossed every conceivable line into complete madness! I needed to rescue my son before she caused him irreparable psychological damage. I noticed Finn had begun briefing Thomas about our crisis, and I felt grateful for his thoughtfulness during this chaos.

"Caleb, we could not successfully trace that call," Felix Hayes reported grimly, "but I will continue attempting to track her location through alternative methods."

"What options do I realistically have now?" I asked, feeling completely devastated by the impossible situation.

"I seriously doubt this psychotic woman is operating independently. She lacks the intelligence and resources for this level of sophisticated planning," Xavier observed with professional detachment.

"I have already briefed the team thoroughly. The detective team is proceeding to the Rossi estate now and will escort both parents to headquarters for intensive questioning. We have also issued an enhanced search alert with the kidnapper’s confirmed identity," one of the agents reported efficiently. "We have also secured court orders to examine her complete financial records immediately."

"She has avoided using any traceable cards or accounts, so that approach will prove completely useless," Felix Hayes demonstrated his exceptional technical expertise.

I asked Xavier to update the women on our limited progress while I took time to process this nightmare scenario. I stood and left the suffocating conference room, knowing I needed to manage my terror while maintaining strategic clarity. I walked to the empty rooftop terrace where peaceful silence surrounded me completely. I sat in solitude until my racing heart finally began to slow to a manageable rhythm.