**Mafia Mask 68**

Chapter 68 The Con Revealed

Caleb's POV

When Ivy and I finally collapsed onto the bed, dawn was already breaking through the reinforced windows of my private penthouse. We had spent hours lost in each other - I worshipped every curve of her body, kissed every inch of her skin, made her mine in ways that left us both breathless and trembling. We surrendered completely to the fire that burned between us, because now I knew with absolute certainty that the same desperate love consuming me was burning in her heart too.

I drifted off to sleep with Ivy curled against my chest, both of us exhausted from the intensity of our connection and the pure relief of being together again. The weight of my Beretta on the nightstand seemed less threatening with her warm body pressed against mine. But my happiness was so overwhelming that sleep couldn't claim me for long.

When I stirred awake, however, cold reality crashed over me like ice water. My brief moment of bliss shattered instantly. I jolted upright to find the bed empty beside me, frantically scanning the secured room and praying she might be in the bathroom or making espresso in the kitchen. Instead, I found a folded piece of paper on my nightstand, right next to my loaded gun.

My hands shook as I reached for the note - she had slipped past my security again.

"Caleb,

You set my soul on fire in ways I never imagined possible. Last night will be burned into my memory forever, but it was our final goodbye. I will always love you, but I cannot forgive you.

Ivy"

Stubborn woman! Hot tears stung my eyes before I could stop them. She had abandoned me once more, rejected me despite everything we had shared and every drop of blood I had spilled to protect her. The words she left behind cut through me like a switchblade and momentarily crushed every ounce of hope I had of earning her back.

I studied that note obsessively, reading it over and over until I was ready to put a bullet through my own skull. Then my gaze landed on those precious words where she admitted she would always love me. That single sentence became my lifeline. I would never stop fighting for her - I couldn't, I wouldn't know how to exist without trying, it was beyond my capability as a man who ruled through sheer force of will.

If she loved me, she would eventually find it in her heart to forgive me, regardless of how long it took or what torture I had to endure. I climbed out of bed and searched for my encrypted phone, finding it in the living room tossed carelessly on top of our discarded clothes by the bulletproof door.

I grabbed my phone and speed-dialed Xavier. He picked up after several rings.

"Don, how did the reconnaissance mission go last night?" His voice was cautious but hopeful.

"It was absolutely perfect and she walked out without forgiving me. I need to assemble the soldiers, I need backup."

"Copy that, you want me to round up the capos?"

"Yes. Gather Dominic, Jude, and Finn and meet me at the Community Guild shortly. Can you mobilize them?"

"Absolutely, Don. See you there."

I ended the call and headed for the shower to get ready for this emergency war council with my most trusted lieutenants. I was about to launch an all-out campaign to win Ivy's forgiveness, and they would be my army.

A short while later, I walked into the Community Guild where my capos were already seated around our usual secured table in the back corner, waiting for me like good soldiers.

"I hope I didn't disrupt anyone's morning operations," I said as I joined them at the table.

"Don’t worry about it, Ivy already took care of that," Finn said with an amused grin.

"What are you talking about?" I asked, immediately suspicious.

"She called Zoe at dawn demanding an emergency sisterhood meeting. According to Zoe, they were planning some lunch somewhere to strategize around Ivy. I’m confused though - you two left the bar together last night like you were heading to a safe house," Finn said, looking puzzled.

"Zoe contacted Nora too. She gave me the same intelligence and disappeared out the door. Right when I was about to initiate some enhanced interrogation techniques..." Jude said with a distant, dreamy expression.

"We definitely don’t need the intimate details of your domestic black ops, Jude," Xavier interrupted, making everyone erupt in laughter. "And you, Dominic, aren’t you going to complain that Gemma abandoned her post too?"

"Oh, I should be so fortunate," Dominic groaned. "What about you and Ruby?"

"I managed to get her contact information and that’s about it."

"You guys have gotten yourselves mixed up with some seriously dangerous women!" Finn teased. "Let me tell you something - Caleb better secure Ivy’s loyalty fast, or before we know it, even our established alliances will be compromised, Jude. These women operate like a crime family, trust me!"

"That’s precisely why I called this strategy meeting - I need to develop a battle plan! Zoe is supposedly feeding me intelligence, but I need more assets." I spoke with the gravity of someone planning a hostile takeover.

"Jesus Christ, Caleb, you’re completely clueless!" Finn said, slapping his palm against his forehead.

"What do you mean by that?" I couldn’t follow his reasoning.

"You actually believe Zoe is your informant?" Finn asked as if my stupidity was beyond comprehension. "She's been playing you like a mark! And she's been reporting everything back to Ivy. Port't you realized that everything she's had you do involves sending gifts and messages to Ivy? She hasn't arranged a single face-to-face meeting between you two. Yesterday, I was the one who leaked our location to Dominic. She's not trying to convince Ivy to forgive you - she's encouraging Ivy to make you suffer!"

"Are you kidding me! She's been running a con on me?" I was stunned.

"You better believe it! I worship my woman, but she's absolutely ruthless and completely calculating when someone crosses her crew! And she would never betray Ivy's trust." Finn said with a knowing smile while the others were practically falling off their chairs laughing. Fantastic, I had become their entertainment. "After we left the restaurant that day, she was practically glowing with satisfaction, said she was going to teach you an unforgettable lesson. The first thing she did was brief Ivy on everything."

"And here I thought I had someone on my payroll!" I couldn't believe a young woman had outmaneuvered a mafia don so completely.

"You have no idea what she and Ivy put me through when she suspected I had been cheating. But at least she acknowledged that you genuinely care about Max - that's progress." Finn shared this insight, and it truly was encouraging intelligence.

"So what's my next move?" I asked, uncertain whether to continue playing along with Zoe's operation.

"You're going to follow every single order she gives you, because you desperately need to grovel and because if you cross her or let her discover that you're onto her scheme, she'll castrate me and feed my balls to the fish." Finn said with complete seriousness. "But you won't limit yourself to just her assignments. I'll provide covert support, but she cannot discover our side operation."

"Well, then it's time to launch a secondary campaign," Dominic concluded.

"I think we need to organize more group activities," Xavier suggested strategically. "That way, Caleb, while you're negotiating your surrender to Ivy, Dominic and I might have better opportunities with our targets, and Finn and Jude can maintain their territories."

"That’s brilliant," Jude agreed. "Especially since none of them will make any moves without consulting the others for clearance and backup."

"Are you being serious?" Dominic stared at him in disbelief. "You’re telling me we now have to deal with some kind of female council where they’ll only associate with us if the syndicate gives their blessing?"

"I have a steady alliance, and Jude has a secured marriage contract. You guys just have women making you lose your tactical advantage," Finn mocked us. "But that’s exactly how their organization works. Zoe calls it sisterhood loyalty. Women protect each other like a crime family. And it’s going to get much more dangerous than that."

"How could it possibly get more dangerous?" Xavier was genuinely concerned.

"If one of them declares war on one of us, all the others turn hostile too and will retaliate against every single one of us," Jude explained, and seeing our bewildered expressions, he elaborated, "For example, Ivy has been wronged by Caleb, so all of them are hostile toward Caleb and will punish each of us simply because we’re Caleb’s soldiers."

"You two," Finn pointed at Dominic and Xavier, "won’t make any progress with your pursuits until Ivy grants this moron amnesty," he said, gesturing toward me. "Zoe and Nora will blackmail us into reporting everything you do and say, and support Ivy in whatever vendetta she wants, including putting bullets in your kneecaps, and if we don’t cooperate, they’ll cut off all supply lines, gentlemen."

"So you two are basically double agents?" Dominic couldn’t believe the sophisticated network these women had established.

"Right now it’s us. Next time someone screws up, it could be any of you or us," Jude confirmed. "The key is that we’ll have to feed them intelligence carefully. We don’t need to reveal everything, but we need to coordinate our stories because they’ll interrogate us relentlessly to extract what they want, and they’ll cross-reference information with each other."

"I think I’m starting to understand," Xavier rubbed his temples. "Man, running a multinational crime syndicate is simpler than navigating female psychology."

"Yeah, my friend, this week I discovered that women are definitely a high-maintenance investment!" Dominic said with raised eyebrows.

We all burst into laughter at the shell-shocked expressions on everyone’s faces. At least I was building a solid brotherhood of allies who would stand by me in this war. That knowledge helped ease some of the weight crushing my chest.