

Exposed to the CEO Behind the Mafia Mask

Chapter 8: Chapter 8 Preparing for War

Ivy's POV

The elevator doors opened, and I spotted Zoe immediately. Her blonde hair caught the evening light as she waved from her parked car, but I could see the worry etched in her expression.

"There's my corporate warrior!" she called out, opening her arms for a hug. "How was your first day in the big leagues?"

I collapsed against her with a shaky laugh. "I'm pretty sure I'm getting murdered tomorrow."

Zoe pulled back, her eyes widening with alarm. "What? Already? What the hell happened?"

"I went to war with my boss over the phone," I admitted, wincing at how suicidal it sounded when said out loud.

Zoe's eyes went wide before she burst into incredulous laughter. "You did what? Oh my God, Ivy! Do you have any idea who you're working for?"

"It's not funny!" I protested, but a reluctant smile tugged at my lips. "He was being an absolute tyrant."

"Mommy!" A high-pitched voice called from the backseat. I peered in to see my beautiful three-year-old son, his rare ice-blue eyes lighting up at the sight of me—eyes that still made my heart ache with memories I couldn't quite grasp.

"Hi, sweetheart!" I leaned in to plant kisses all over his chubby cheeks, my heart melting as it did every time I saw him. "Were you good for Aunt Zoe today?"

Max nodded enthusiastically, clutching his favorite toy dinosaur. "We got ice cream!"

I shot Zoe a look as I climbed into the passenger seat. "Before dinner? Really?"

"Don't start," Zoe warned, sliding behind the wheel. "Now, tell me everything. I want all the details about this boss from hell."

As she pulled into traffic, I recounted both phone calls with Caleb Thorne. By the time I finished, Zoe was staring at me with a mixture of horror and admiration.

"So this guy—who runs one of the most dangerous operations in the city—basically tried to intimidate you, and you told him to go fuck himself?" She gripped the steering wheel tighter. "That's my girl, but Jesus Christ, Ivy."

"Heidi said it was some kind of test," I explained, "but now he's coming in tomorrow, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to disappear into the harbor."

"Show me his message," Zoe demanded.

I pulled out my encrypted work phone and showed her his text: "Arriving tomorrow. We'll discuss your... duties. Prepare the chamomile tea."

"Ooh, he sounds lethal," Zoe whistled. "Please tell me he's not some crusty old monster. If you're going to die, at least let it be at the hands of someone attractive."

"I don't know!" I replied. "I haven't even seen him in person. Heidi mentioned he's quite young to be running such a... complex organization, but that's all I know."

Zoe grinned dangerously. "A young, powerful crime boss? This could get very interesting."

"Stop it," I warned. "I'm a single mom who desperately needs this job to keep us safe. The last thing I need is to get involved with someone that dangerous."

"Speaking of jobs," Zoe said, her smile growing wider, "guess who just got hired at that exclusive PR firm downtown?"

I gasped. "You did? Zoe, that's incredible!"

"I know! The interview went perfectly, and I start next week. We're both climbing the ladder now!"

We high-fived as Max giggled in the backseat, mimicking our excitement without understanding the dangerous world we were navigating.

"Where to now?" Zoe asked. "Home to plan your survival strategy?"

I checked my watch. "Actually, can we stop at the mall? I need to get a few things for Max's new daycare tomorrow."

Twenty minutes later, we were strolling through the upscale shopping center with Max between us, holding both our hands and occasionally jumping to make us swing him.

"Careful, baby," I cautioned as he nearly collided with a well-dressed woman. "Let's get your supplies first, then maybe we can look at a new toy if you're good."

"Dinosaur!" Max exclaimed hopefully.

"You have fifteen dinosaurs already," I laughed, ruffling his dark hair.

"But not a blue one," he argued with impeccable three-year-old logic.

After gathering Max's daycare supplies, we wandered past an expensive toy store where Max spotted a sophisticated building set.

"Mommy, look!" He pressed his face against the glass, his eyes wide with wonder.

The price tag made me wince, but my new salary was more than I'd ever imagined earning. For once, I could afford something special.

"Okay, birthday boy," I said, though his birthday was still months away.

Max's squeal of delight was worth every penny as we left the store with his treasure clutched tightly in his arms.

As we continued walking, a dress in an exclusive boutique window caught my eye. It was a deep emerald green that would perfectly complement my eyes, with a powerful cut that spoke of quiet authority. The kind of dress that could make someone take you seriously—or fear you—at first glance.

Zoe noticed my lingering gaze. "That would look lethal on you."

"It's beautiful," I agreed, reluctantly turning away. "And completely impractical."

"Why?" Zoe challenged, blocking my path. "You work for one of the most powerful men in the city now. You should look the part."

"It's too expensive," I protested.

Zoe checked the price tag through the window. "It's on sale! And with your new salary, you can afford it."

"I should be saving that money for Max's future, not wasting it on clothes."

Zoe put her hands on my shoulders. "Ivy, listen to me. This isn't frivolous spending. It's armor. You said yourself this boss is terrifying. Walking in there tomorrow looking like a queen will give you power."

I bit my lip, considering. "You think?"

"I know," Zoe insisted. "First impressions are everything, especially with men like Caleb Thorne. If you look dangerous, you'll feel dangerous."

Twenty minutes later, I was standing in the dressing room, staring at my reflection in disbelief. The dress fit like it was made for me, hugging my curves in all the right places while projecting an aura of untouchable elegance.

"Well?" Zoe called from outside.

I stepped out, and her jaw dropped.

"Holy shit, Ivy," she whispered, mindful of Max playing nearby with his new blocks. "You look absolutely deadly."

I turned to examine my reflection in the three-way mirror. For once, I didn't see the exhausted single mom struggling to survive in a dangerous world. I saw a formidable woman who could stand toe-to-toe with anyone—even a ruthless crime boss.

"I'll take it," I decided.

Zoe clapped her hands. "Now shoes! You need killer heels."

By the time we finished, I had not only the dress but also a pair of stunning black stilettos that made my legs look like weapons.

"One more thing," Zoe insisted, dragging me toward an exclusive lingerie boutique.

"Zoe, no," I protested. "Nobody's going to see my underwear at work."

"It's not about who sees it," she explained patiently. "It's about how it makes you feel. Confidence from the inside out. Trust me on this."

Twenty minutes later, we were heading to the parking lot with several shopping bags. Max was half-asleep in my arms, his head heavy on my shoulder.

"I can't believe I spent that much money on myself," I mused as we reached the car.

"Consider it battle gear," Zoe replied, helping me buckle Max into his car seat. "That man tried to intimidate you over the phone. Tomorrow, you'll walk in there and show him exactly what kind of woman he's dealing with."

"I just hope I survive long enough to make an impression," I admitted. "Max's daycare fees aren't cheap."

"You'll more than survive," Zoe said confidently. "If this Heidi person is right, he respects people who aren't afraid of him. And honey, you're about to show him fearless."

By the time we reached my apartment, Max was sound asleep. I carried him inside while Zoe brought in the bags, noting how the building's security seemed more sophisticated than I'd initially realized.

"Want me to stay and help you strategize for tomorrow?" she offered.

I shook my head, cradling my sleeping son. "I've got this. Thanks for today, Zoe. You always know exactly what I need."

"That's what best friends are for," she replied, giving me a fierce hug before leaving. "Go get 'em, tiger."

After putting Max to bed, I carefully hung up my new dress and set out my outfit for tomorrow. I was just about to take a shower when my work phone buzzed with a message.

My blood chilled as I read the text from Caleb Thorne: "Arriving tomorrow. We'll discuss your... duties. Prepare the chamomile tea."

Not coffee, I noted. Chamomile tea. Was that supposed to calm him down before he destroyed me? Or was it some kind of twisted peace offering?

I fell asleep that night with my heart racing, dreaming of dangerous ice-blue eyes judging me from across a desk. Little did I know, those eyes would soon turn my world upside down in ways I could never have imagined—and that they would look remarkably familiar.

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