Mafia Mask 161

Chapter 161 Into the Trap

Ivy's POV

I stood beside my mother when Xavier burst through the hospital room doors, his usually composed face etched with the kind of dread that made my blood freeze. As the Thorne family's consigliere recounted every chilling detail of that psychotic woman Yara's phone call, each word struck me like bullets from a rival family's gun. The more he revealed about her twisted demands and threats, the harder the tears flowed down my cheeks. After Xavier departed to coordinate the family's response, Mrs. Martinez pulled my mother into the corridor, explaining in hushed tones exactly who Yara Rossi was in the underworld hierarchy, while Ruby filled in the horrifying gaps about the Rossi family's reputation for brutality. My mind struggled to process this nightmare consuming our world.

The sharp buzz of my encrypted phone shattered the tense atmosphere. I snatched it immediately, recognizing Caleb's voice though something in his tone made my skin crawl with foreboding.

"Keep quiet. If any of Caleb's soldiers are around you, get away from them now. Call me back only when you're completely alone."

I lowered the phone, my hands trembling as I backed toward the door. His words felt like a death sentence pressing against my chest.

"Ivy, where are you going?" Zoe's worried voice stopped me at the threshold.

"I need to see Caleb," I managed, forcing the lie past my constricted throat. "I want some time with him."

I fled the room before she could press for details.

In the empty corridor between the elevators and the family meeting room, I raised the phone again with shaking fingers.

"Where is Caleb?"

"Easy there, sweetheart." The endearment that once seemed genuine now dripped with malice worthy of any capo. "Your boy is still breathing, but since your mafia king refuses to be reasonable, you're going to follow my instructions exactly. No conversations with Caleb's crew, no heroics, and maybe you'll see your child again."

The betrayal hit me like a sledgehammer to the gut. This man I had trusted with family secrets, shared meals with, confided in about the dangers of mafia life. How could I have been so blind to a snake in our midst?

"First, you're leaving this hospital. Head to that little Italian place from yesterday and wait. Keep this line open and don't breathe a word to anyone in the Thorne organization."

The reception area crawled with armed family members who would certainly notice the don's woman leaving unescorted. Instead, I headed for the corridor's end, my heart hammering as I pushed through the emergency exit into the stairwell. My footsteps echoed ominously as I descended several floors, finally reaching a nearly deserted medical wing.

The elevator felt like a coffin carrying me to my execution. When it finally arrived, I pressed myself against the wall as if I could disappear entirely. Each floor that passed brought me closer to whatever hell awaited outside these walls.

The street felt surreal, like walking through someone else's nightmare. A few blocks stretched endlessly before me, each step a betrayal of everyone in Caleb's family who would die protecting me, but what choice did I have? Max's innocent face filled my mind, driving me forward through this urban wasteland.

I had barely reached the Italian bistro when a black sedan with tinted windows materialized at the curb like something from a funeral procession. The window slid down, revealing Caleb's smile, but now I saw it for what it truly was—predatory and cold as any rival family assassin.

"Get in, sweetheart."

The moment I settled into the leather seat, a sickly sweet chemical smell invaded my nostrils. The world tilted sideways, darkness swallowing everything like the grave.

Consciousness returned slowly, accompanied by the acrid taste of whatever drug he had used to subdue me. I found myself in what could only be described as a concrete tomb straight out of a mob execution site. Brick blocked most of the single window, leaving just a narrow gap that mocked any hope of escape. The mattress beneath me reeked of mildew and worse substances I didn't want to identify.

Unfinished concrete walls surrounded me, rough and cold as any family dungeon. A single bare bulb dangled from exposed wiring, casting harsh shadows that made the space feel even more claustrophobic. The cement floor bore stains that told stories I refused to examine too closely. Near the reinforced door sat a solitary metal chair, the room's only other furniture.

I tested the door knowing full well what I would find. Locked tight, naturally, with a small reinforced window that could only be opened from the outside. I was caged like an enemy waiting for family justice.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. I had walked directly into his trap, so desperate to save my son that I had ignored every survival instinct the mafia world had taught me. The phone call should have been my first warning, but maternal panic had overridden years of street wisdom.

The door opened with a metallic screech that made me flinch. Caleb entered carrying a paper bag, his casual demeanor somehow more terrifying than outright violence would have been.

"There's my sleeping beauty. Brought you dinner like a gentleman."

"Where is Max?" I demanded, refusing to let him see how my legs shook beneath me. "I did exactly what you ordered."

"Oh, darling, this is just the opening move." He settled into the chair like a capo holding court. "You need to eat something. You look ready to collapse, and that won't serve my purposes."

"Answer me, Caleb. Why betray Caleb's family?"

His laugh held no warmth, cold as any made man discussing business. "The three pillars that rule our world, sweetheart. Love, money, and power. Money drives most of my decisions, but if I get to enjoy your company along the way, well, that's just a delicious bonus." The way his eyes traveled over me made my skin crawl with revulsion.

"Don't you dare touch me."

"I'm trying to maintain some class here, but my self-control has limits. Lucky for you, I have business calls to handle with certain interested parties first."

"Please, just give me back my son."

"I told you, he's with our mutual psychotic friend from the Rossi family. The kid's still breathing, still in one piece, so stop your worrying." He stood, placing the bag on the chair with theatrical care. "Eat up. And save your voice for more important conversations, we're miles from anyone who might hear you scream."

He left me alone with my terror and a greasy sandwich that might or might not contain something more than food. I stumbled to the window, peering through the narrow gap to see nothing but tall grass swaying in wind I couldn't feel. The isolation was absolute, perfect for mafia business.

I examined the food carefully, looking for any obvious tampering. Finding none, I forced myself to take a bite. If I was going to survive this ordeal and protect Max, I needed strength, and if Caleb wanted me dead, he wouldn't need poison to accomplish it in this concrete tomb.

Chapter 162 Vanished from Compound

Caleb's POV

When I stepped off the rooftop of our compound, my mind had finally cleared. Those minutes alone under the night sky, wrestling with my thoughts and begging whatever higher power existed to keep my son safe, had given me the steel I needed. Walking back into the main operations room of our family headquarters, I immediately barked at the first soldato I saw.

"Any updates?"

"Nothing yet, Don," came the reply.

I needed to check on Ivy. After everything that had happened with the family war brewing, she deserved my attention. I strode toward Xavier's office, expecting to find her curled up in a chair behind bulletproof glass, but the room was empty.

"Where the hell is Ivy?" My voice cut through the compound chatter like a blade.

Zoe looked up from her surveillance station, confusion creasing her features. "What do you mean? She told me she was going to spend time with you in the safe room."

"Well, she's not with me. She's not in my office, and she sure as hell isn't at the front security desk." The growl in my voice made every family member freeze. "So where is she?"

"Easy, Caleb," Nora said, rising from her chair near the weapons cache. "Maybe she went to grab coffee from the kitchen or hit the communications room."

Within seconds, the entire compound transformed into a search party. Armed men scattered in every direction, calling Ivy's name, checking every corner and crevice of our fortress-like headquarters.

I stormed back to the main security station, my heart hammering against my ribs. "Gemma, have you seen Ivy?"

Gemma shook her head, worry etching lines around her eyes. "I'm sorry, Caleb. It's been absolutely insane here today with all the territory disputes. What's happening?"

"I can't find her anywhere." The words tasted like ash in my mouth.

That's when Nora appeared, her face pale as death. "The emergency exit to the back alley is wide open."

"Fuck. No, no, no." If Ivy had gone through that exit, we were dealing with something far worse than a simple misunderstanding. She knew never to leave the compound without an escort during family conflicts. I sprinted to my office, adrenaline flooding my system. "Felix Hayes, get me the security footage from that emergency exit. Now."

The screens flickered to life, showing Ivy entering the back stairwell. Felix Hayes's fingers flew across the keyboard, switching between camera feeds without me having to ask. We watched her step into the service elevator, her phone pressed against her ear. Someone had called her out of that building.

The elevator doors opened on the ground floor. Ivy walked out and disappeared through the rear entrance that led to the street. The external cameras caught her for a few more seconds before she vanished completely from view into the maze of back alleys that surrounded our territory.

Damn you, Ivy. What have you gotten yourself into?

My composure shattered like glass hitting concrete. I couldn't form words, couldn't think straight. Felix Hayes stepped into the void my panic had created.

"Ivy left the compound a short while ago," he announced to the room. "Someone contacted her by phone first. We're going to find her, Caleb. I'm already working on tracking her cell through our underground network."

The wait felt endless before Felix Hayes delivered the news that made my blood run cold. Ivy's phone had been found smashed to pieces in a dumpster several blocks from our compound. When the dirty cops on our payroll tried to claim it as evidence, Felix Hayes shut them down with an authority that brooked no argument.

"I don't give a damn about your evidence protocols. That phone contains the key to finding her. I'm keeping it, and I'm going to recover every piece of data on it."

The corrupt officer didn't even attempt to argue.

While Felix Hayes worked his technological magic, time crawled forward and my desperation grew like a living thing inside my chest. The operations room had fallen into a strange paralysis. Ivy's father was

trying to console her mother, whose quiet sobs filled the air. Finn had his arm around Zoe, who kept muttering about how this was all her fault for not watching Ivy more carefully during such dangerous times.

I couldn’t stand seeing Zoe tear herself apart. I walked over and dropped into the chair beside her.

"Zoe, look at me. This isn’t you talking. Where’s our favorite chaos-causing soldier?" I managed a smile despite the terror clawing at my insides.

"It’s my fault, Caleb. I should never have let her wander off alone when we’re in the middle of a territory war."

"Bullshit. You gave her the space she needed, which is exactly what any rational person would do. You’re not to blame here." I leaned forward, catching her eyes. "You’re Ivy’s guardian angel. You’re my son’s guardian angel. You always know what’s best for them in this life we lead. Right now, I need you to be that for me too, because I’m about to lose my mind."

"What do you need me to do?" Zoe wiped her eyes and straightened in her chair.

"I need you to be the chaos-causing soldier. Stand up and take control of this room. Be the lieutenant who barks orders and keeps everyone in line. Point fingers, assign tasks, make everyone move. Can you do that for me?"

Zoe took a deep breath that seemed to fill her with renewed purpose. She stood up, and I could practically see the transformation happening.

"Consider it done. These idiots are about to learn what real military efficiency looks like."

"Show them who runs operations when I’m not around."

Zoe marched into my office with Finn and me trailing behind her, watching her metamorphosis with something approaching awe.

"Listen up, you useless excuses for soldiers. I’m running this operation now, and things are about to get very intense around here. Nobody sits idle for even one second." Her voice carried across the room like a whip crack. Within minutes, she had every family member moving with purpose, searching for Ivy and my son with renewed energy.

Dominic, Finn, and Zoe’s father gathered around me, all wearing expressions of impressed surprise.

"That assistant of mine is absolutely incredible," Dominic said with obvious pride, bringing the first genuine smiles we’d seen all day.

"I think I’m genuinely terrified of that girl," Scott commented as he approached with another man I didn’t recognize. "Caleb, I hate to add to your problems, but there’s something you need to know immediately. It’s not about Ivy."

"Perfect. Because this day clearly wasn’t complicated enough already." I sighed and walked to my desk, picking up the encrypted phone to call Xavier. "Go ahead, Scott. Let’s hear it."

Chapter 163 Blood Betrays Blood

Caleb’s POV

Scott’s face was carved from stone when he walked in with another man, the kind of expression that meant devastating news was heading my way. My gut twisted as he made the introductions.

"Caleb, this is Detective Nelson from the NYPD. He’s been working our parents’ car bombing case," Scott said, his voice carrying unusual weight.

Detective Nelson stepped forward, his weathered features grim. "Mr. Thorne, I wish I had better news. The car explosion that killed your parents years ago wasn’t a hit from a rival family. It was an inside job."

The words slammed into me like a physical blow. I gripped the edge of my desk, struggling to process what he’d just revealed.

"Our forensics team found evidence that the car bomb was planted by someone with intimate knowledge of your father's daily routes," the detective continued. "The device was placed precisely where it would cause maximum damage. The timing, the location, everything points to someone within your own organization. Given what we've uncovered about the money laundering operation, we believe the same people orchestrated both crimes."

"An inside job," I whispered, the words tasting like poison. "Someone in my own family murdered my parents."

The grief I'd been suppressing for years crashed over me like a tidal wave. I couldn't stop the rage-filled tears that came, couldn't contain the raw fury that tore through my chest. My parents hadn't died in some rival family's vendetta. They'd been coldly, methodically betrayed and murdered by someone they trusted.

"Detective, we want these bastards buried alive," Xavier said, stepping in when I couldn't speak. "Whatever resources you need, whatever information we have, it's yours."

"And you are?" Detective Nelson asked.

"Xavier Black. Caleb's consigliere and right hand."

"Good. I need complete access to everything related to this money laundering investigation. Every file, every lead, every piece of evidence. And frankly, Mr. Black, I think you should be my primary contact. Mr. Thorne is in no condition to handle the operational details right now."

"Absolutely. Let's start immediately."

"Thank you, brother," I managed to say to Xavier, grateful he was shouldering this burden.

Margaret had been standing quietly behind Scott, and I saw her dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief. She came to me without a word, wrapping me in her arms like the mother figure she'd become. I broke down completely then, sobbing against her shoulder like I hadn't since I was a child. Everything felt like it was crumbling around me.

"It feels like the whole world is ending," I whispered to her.

That’s when one of the soldiers spoke up from across the room. "Boss, we got a problem. The Gordon crew vanished. Their safehouse is cleaned out, and our guys saw them loading duffel bags into their car before dawn."

"Those treacherous sons of bitches!" I pulled away from Margaret, dragging my hands down my face in frustration.

Scott’s jaw was set with deadly determination. "Time to go nuclear. I’m calling every family member and associate involved in the skimming operation to the compound right now. The detective can arrest them all at once."

"Perfect. I’ll have Fisher lock down the entire estate and escort them all to the conference room. You coordinate with the cops." I grabbed my phone to call Fisher, my hands shaking with rage and adrenaline.

Soon after, we had rounded up every single person who had been stealing from family operations. Scott had contacted Detective Sullivan from organized crime, someone he’d worked with during his own family’s troubles. Sullivan arrived with a full tactical team, and I let Scott handle the interrogations while I checked on Ivy’s parents.

I found them in Xavier’s office, looking exhausted and defeated. Ivy’s father looked up when I entered.

"Son, you look like hell," he said with a weak smile.

"It’s been a day from hell," I admitted. "Still nothing on Ivy and Max. Look, it’s getting late, and I’m going to be here all night. I want you both to go to my penthouse and get some real rest. You’ll be more comfortable there, and I need you strong for when Ivy comes home."

"I feel so useless, Caleb," Ivy’s father said, his voice breaking. "My daughter and grandson are out there somewhere, and I can’t do anything to help."

"You think I know what I'm doing? I'm flying blind here too. But Zoe is running the search operation, and you know how relentless she is. We have cops, private muscle, and tactical teams ready to move the second we get a lead. What I need is for you to be rested and ready to help me take care of Ivy when this nightmare is over."

"You're right. Zoe will tear this city apart until she finds them," he said with a genuine laugh. "We'll go to your place. You'll call the moment you hear anything?"

"The second I know something, you'll know."

I turned to the others who had been waiting. "Walter, Carmen, I want you to go with them. Eat, sleep, take care of yourselves. When Ivy and Max get back, we're all going to need to be at full strength."

"Of course, Caleb. You can count on us," Walter said, squeezing my shoulder.

"Mrs. Martinez, please go with them. Stay at my penthouse tonight. I'll feel better knowing none of you are alone. Robert is helping Scott with the arrests, so Zoe will be working late too."

"I appreciate the hospitality, Caleb. Thomas and Diane need support right now, and honestly, I'm not much help here anyway," Mrs. Martinez agreed.

"Walter, do you need security escort?"

"No sir, I brought my own car. Ready, everyone?"

After they left, the family compound felt eerily quiet. I went to the reception area where my most trusted associates were still working.

"Girls, you should all go home and rest too..."

"Absolutely not, Caleb!" Nora cut me off before I could finish. "You're not getting rid of any of us!"

Ruby stepped forward with her usual efficiency. "We've already worked out a rotation system. Nora is helping Scott with the interrogations. I'll be providing support to Zoe's search operation. Gemma and Lila will handle communications and any urgent family business that comes up."

"Lila?" I asked, the name sounding familiar.

"Hey everyone! Ready to take on the world!" A petite woman with incredible energy appeared, gesturing enthusiastically as she spoke.

"Caleb, meet Lila," Ruby said. "She works with Dominic's crew. She's the one he mentioned meeting at the social club."

"Right! Sorry, Lila, my brain isn't firing on all cylinders right now," I said, remembering Dominic's glowing review of this woman. "But seriously, I can bring in other soldiers. You all need breaks."

"That's not happening, Caleb," Gemma said firmly. "Right now, we can't be sure who in the organization can be trusted. We're being very careful about who has access to this floor and sensitive information."

She was absolutely right. "Smart thinking, Gemma. Alright ladies, go show them how it's done. Lila, thank you for being here. The team will fill you in on everything."

"Don't worry about anything, boss," Lila said, her eyes sharp and focused.

Dominic appeared behind me just then. "Thanks for letting us borrow Lila, Dominic," Ruby said.

"Whatever you need, Ruby. And you, my friend, what can I do?" Dominic put his hand on my shoulder.

"You're all already doing more than I could ask for. Thank you." I looked at Gemma. "Gemma, anything urgent I need to handle for the family operations?"

"Everything's covered, Caleb. All meetings postponed until next week, our contacts have been notified and are showing their support. Xavier is handling documents that need your signature, and Margaret is managing the other territories. Your only job is finding Ivy and Max."

"You're all incredible. I don't know what I'd do without you." I headed toward my office with Dominic, feeling slightly less alone despite the darkness surrounding us.

Chapter 164 Intelligence Breakthrough

Caleb's POV

My private office at Thorne Syndicate headquarters transformed into a tactical command center within minutes. The controlled chaos of a coordinated manhunt filled every corner as Zoe barked orders while organizing the flood of incoming intelligence from our street informants and corrupt cops on the payroll. Finn, whose computer hacking skills had proven invaluable to our family operations, worked alongside Felix at dual workstations loaded with encrypted terminals.

"Boss, we successfully cracked into Ivy's phone," Felix announced, his fingers still flying across the keyboard. "We also obtained security footage from surrounding buildings and now have the license plate number of the vehicle that took her."

"Finally, some damn progress." The crushing weight pressing down on my chest lightened slightly. In this business, information was power, and power meant the difference between life and death.

"Don't celebrate yet, Don Thorne. The plate came back stolen, but we do have the make and model. We've already issued alerts to all our people on the street and our contacts in law enforcement," one of the corrupt detectives on our payroll cautioned, tempering my brief moment of relief.

"What about the phone data?" I demanded, positioning myself between Finn and Felix to monitor their screens. In the Thorne family, we left nothing to chance when it came to protecting our own.

Finn's phone buzzed with an incoming message. He glanced at it quickly before tossing the device onto the mahogany desk with obvious irritation. Jude, my trusted capo standing beside me, caught sight of the screen display.

"Finn, why did someone send you a picture of Monica?" Jude asked, confusion evident in his gravelly voice.

"Picture of what now?" Finn looked genuinely puzzled, momentarily distracted from his surveillance work.

"This photo that just came through," Jude pressed, pointing at the device with his scarred finger.

"Oh that garbage. It's Ivy's pathetic ex-boyfriend with his latest piece. My mother sent it thinking it might somehow be relevant to our situation, though I can't imagine why." Finn retrieved his phone and illuminated the screen, extending it toward Jude for a clearer view.

The image showed Ivy's ex-boyfriend Brodie with Monica at the same ice cream shop where we had spent that afternoon together before this nightmare began. Monica's hair was blonde in the photo, but her treacherous face was unmistakable. The accompanying text read: "Look who Brodie's new girlfriend turned out to be."

"Finn, that woman is Monica," I said, feeling my heart rate spike dangerously. The pieces of this twisted puzzle were finally clicking into place.

"How does Monica even know Ivy's ex-boyfriend? What business do they have together?" Jude wondered aloud while studying the photograph with the sharp eye of a seasoned soldier.

"Monica? The same backstabbing snake we've been hunting?" Finn asked, finally grasping the deadly significance of what we'd uncovered.

"Exactly. You've never met Monica face to face. Your mother probably knows her from some high-society charity function she attended with your father," I explained quickly. "Zoe!"

I showed the photograph to Zoe, who unleashed a string of colorful expletives that would make a dock worker blush before launching into full combat mode.

"Finn, forward that image to me immediately. Xavier, contact your detective friend in Greenleaf and put him on speaker. You two badges, I'm sending you the photo now and you need to alert every corrupt cop we own. We're adding two more targets to our hit list," she declared with the precision of a military commander coordinating a strike.

"Inspector Martinez speaking," came the response after several rings.

"Martinez, my friend, how's business?" Xavier greeted warmly. Martinez had been on our payroll for years, feeding us information in exchange for generous monthly payments.

"Xavier? What an honor, twice this week," Inspector Martinez responded with practiced cordiality.

"The honor's mine having you as an asset. I need another favor, and this one's life or death urgent."

"Just tell me what you need. I'm at the station right now and can dispatch units immediately," the detective replied, his tone shifting to professional focus.

"That's exactly what we need." Within minutes, Xavier, Zoe, and our crooked cops had briefed Inspector Martinez on our entire crisis situation.

"I'll need the official paperwork from your department to expand the investigation legally," the detective specified. "My team is already heading to the patrol cars, and I'll contact you the moment we locate the subjects."

"Inspector, I've already transmitted the official request to your station's secure email," one of the dirty cops in my office confirmed.

"Perfect. We're mobilizing now. Call me if you uncover anything else," Inspector Martinez concluded before ending the connection.

"Jude, remind me to send Finn's mother the finest jewelry when this bloodbath ends. And make sure she knows how grateful the Thorne family is, Finn." This was our first real breakthrough since this war began.

"Don’t worry, Boss, my mom’s thrilled to help the family," Finn answered his ringing phone. "Hi, mom?" He listened briefly, sighed heavily, and activated speaker mode. "Mom, what are you talking about?"

"Oh Finn, you’re hopeless! Let me speak to Zoe!" Finn’s mother sounded exasperated, and despite everything, I almost smiled at their dynamic.

"Mom, you’re on speaker with the whole crew," he informed her.

"Hi, mother-in-law, you’ve been incredibly helpful to our family, thank you so much," Zoe responded warmly.

"Zoe dear, I’m worried about Ivy. Something’s happened that might be nothing, but I felt I should report it to the family."

"What happened?" Zoe gave her complete attention.

"I was at the hair salon getting my weekly styling, you know the place. The woman next to me arrived as a blonde but dyed her hair black and got it cut into a short bob."

"What’s suspicious about that, mom? For crying out loud, we’re dealing with a war here," Finn interrupted impatiently.

"Don’t interrupt me, Finn," his mother scolded him sharply. "Zoe, this woman wasn’t local, and she had this grating voice, like nails on a chalkboard. She kept going on about dyeing her hair because her boyfriend prefers brunettes."

"Mother-in-law, you’re incredible. I know exactly who you’re describing, and we believe she’s the one holding Max," Zoe was already gesturing for Xavier to contact the detective again.

"But sweetheart, there’s more," Finn’s mother continued. "I became suspicious of this woman and followed her when she left the salon. You know that old abandoned farm at the town entrance?"

"The one with the well where that kid fell some time back?" Zoe asked for clarification.

"That's exactly the one. She went inside, and shortly after Brodie emerged. I'm hidden in my car on a side road maintaining surveillance, and she hasn't come back out. But I'm certain I heard a child crying," Finn's mother's voice carried genuine concern.

"Mother-in-law, you're better than any private investigator we've ever hired. But I need you to leave that location now, we're sending armed units."

"I'm not abandoning my post, Zoe. If that deranged woman has little Max, I won't let her escape."

"Fine, but stay on this call with us and don't take any unnecessary risks."

"Understood, I'll keep the line open," Finn's mother agreed.

"Xavier, contact the police immediately," Zoe commanded, and it was definitely a command.

Xavier called Inspector Martinez and relayed all the new intelligence. The detective confirmed he would personally investigate the farm location with a tactical unit. Now we had to wait, and waiting felt like slow torture.

"My mom has completely lost her mind," Finn muttered, though I felt nothing but gratitude for this fearless woman. "Wait, this is strange," Finn became absorbed in his computer screen. "This is completely confusing."

"What did you discover, Finn?" Felix inquired.

"I don't believe Ivy is in Greenleaf," Finn announced, rotating his screen toward Felix and capturing my immediate attention.

"They're not together?" I asked urgently.

"Probably not," Finn confirmed.

"Stay calm, Thorne. Finn, what did you uncover?" Zoe positioned herself in front of the computer. "Hey, you two badges, get over here." The two corrupt cops responded like obedient soldiers. "Look at these cell tower pings from the phone that contacted Ivy earlier. Any idea what location this represents?"

"We can determine that," one of them responded.

"Then get moving! I can't believe I have to manage everything myself!" Zoe's voice rose as they were already contacting headquarters and pulling up their own encrypted terminals. It was almost amusing to observe our deadly crime family operating with such precision.

Chapter 165 Raid and Capture

Veronica's POV

God, what a nightmare this backwater hellhole turned out to be. The underground salon I visited today was decent enough, but these people are complete amateurs compared to the high-end establishments in the Thorne family territory. I needed to escape this pathetic safe house as soon as possible.

"Monica, shut that screaming brat up. His wailing is echoing through the entire warehouse," I snapped while stepping into this decrepit hideout my father had somehow managed to secure for us in the neutral zone. "So, what's the verdict?" I struck a pose to show off my fresh transformation.

"Perfect, it's identical to Ivy's style," Monica nodded approvingly while checking the security monitors. "But that salon trip was reckless. The Thorne syndicate has eyes everywhere."

"Exactly the reaction I was hoping for. When my gorgeous Don discovers that witch betrayed him, he'll lose his mind seeing me like this." My pulse quickened thinking about running into Caleb. "Plus, I'm a complete stranger in this territory."

"This child never stops his tantrum. He was so much calmer when we first snatched him from that daycare," Monica complained while pacing near the reinforced windows.

"Just slip him something from my stash. I've got enough sedatives right here in my bag, interested?" I suggested casually while checking my reflection in the cracked mirror.

"Have you lost your mind? We can't eliminate the kid before Caleb fulfills our demands. Let him exhaust himself with all that screaming."

"Honestly Monica, maternal instincts clearly aren't your forte." I burst into laughter watching her revolted expression toward the child. "You should have seen yourself when you grabbed him from the playground."

"He simply can't stand looking at you," Monica shot back venomously while adjusting her shoulder holster. "Your father should have secured better accommodations. This place is absolutely revolting."

"My thoughts exactly, but he insisted we needed to blend into the shadows here. Still, I'm going out of my mind with boredom."

A sharp rap at the reinforced door interrupted us. That useful idiot Brodie had arrived with supplies. Monica rushed to let him through the multiple security locks, and he immediately pulled her against him. At least he brought provisions and ammunition. She dragged him toward the back room, and I knew precisely what that desperate woman was planning. Within minutes, her shameless moaning filled the air like some animal in heat.

After a while, Brodie departed through the emergency exit, leaving Monica hiding in the bedroom like a coward. I demanded she handle the screaming child, but she told me to manage it myself. The audacity nearly made me strike her across the face with my concealed knife.

I tossed a package of crackers at the little monster, and he hurled every single one back at my face with surprising accuracy. My rage was boiling over like molten steel. Fine, I would secure this obnoxious kid to the support beam and abandon him there while I slept. His problems weren't mine to solve.

I retreated to my makeshift room, plugged in my headphones to block his endless crying, and pulled my silk sleep mask over my eyes. Tomorrow I needed to look absolutely stunning for my reunion with my darling Don.

"Stop violently shaking me, you beast!" I shrieked in absolute terror.

A massive hand tore the mask from my face. My room was filled with enormous intimidating men in tactical gear, their assault rifles trained on me.

"Someone help me! Monica, they're going to execute me, help!" I screamed in absolute terror, convinced my life was ending in this godforsaken warehouse.

"Silence, you worthless piece of trash!" one of them roared through his tactical mask. "Federal task force, you criminal scum! On your feet, you're coming to headquarters. Child abduction of a mafia heir, really? Maximum security prison is calling your name!"

Suddenly a massive German Shepherd was snarling directly above me, its fangs gleaming in the harsh spotlight. I went completely rigid with fear. Federal agents? What were they accusing me of? I spotted Monica in the doorway with her arms restrained behind her back in professional zip ties, and tears started streaming down my cheeks. "Monica, please tell me this is some twisted nightmare."

"You think this is entertainment, you complete fool? We're caught, you absolute moron! Your salon adventure did this, I specifically warned you against going into Thorne territory, you thoughtless idiot!"

"Don't you dare speak to me that way, Monica! What is this freezing thing?" I felt something metallic clicking around my wrists with mechanical precision.

"Jewelry fit for federal custody!" One of the agents laughed mockingly while tightening the restraints.

"I don't understand," I whispered in confusion as the reality crashed over me.

"Federal handcuffs, you brain-dead fool. We're under arrest for kidnapping the heir to the most powerful syndicate on the East Coast, you circus act!" Monica screamed furiously while struggling against her bonds.

"Time for your luxury transportation to federal holding," another agent announced while shoving me forward roughly toward the exit.

They forced us from the warehouse and stuffed us into an actual armored transport vehicle with reinforced cage compartments. Before being crammed into that claustrophobic federal prison on wheels, I glimpsed the screaming child now peacefully nestled in the arms of an incredibly dangerous-looking man with ice-blue eyes and facial scars. Miraculously, the kid had finally stopped his endless crying the moment he saw his rescuer.

The reality crashed over me like ice water from the Hudson River. My carefully constructed plan had crumbled completely against federal surveillance. Caleb would never see my perfect transformation now. Instead of winning back the most feared Don on the Eastern seaboard, I was heading to a maximum security federal facility. The neutral territory I had dismissed as insignificant had somehow been under federal surveillance despite our precautions and my father's connections.

As the armored transport pulled away from our compromised hideout, I pressed my face against the cold reinforced bars of our mobile federal prison. Everything I had worked toward was dissolving before my eyes like smoke. My father's elaborate kidnapping scheme had failed spectacularly against federal task force operations, and now we would face the consequences of our desperate gamble against the Thorne syndicate.

The child I had treated as merely an inconvenient bargaining chip was safe now, rescued from our incompetent custody by what appeared to be his actual father. Meanwhile, Monica and I were trapped like animals in federal custody, heading toward an uncertain fate in maximum security that would likely separate me from Caleb forever.

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Relief flooded through me. "Thank God. Madeline, you need to get out of there immediately."

"Absolutely not. I'm perfectly safe in my position. I'm staying put," she declared with stubborn determination that reminded me why Finn's family had earned their place in our inner circle.

"Mrs. Taylor, you can't see anything in this darkness anyway," Finn protested from beside me in our command center.

"Actually, while I was waiting by the safe house entrance, I had Martha fetch your surveillance binoculars. I'm quite fond of them now, so you'll need to purchase another pair because these are mine now. They have excellent night vision capabilities." Madeline's matter-of-fact tone was remarkable given the circumstances.

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"I'm superior to any federal agent. Our Don confirmed it." Despite the overwhelming tension, Madeline somehow managed to draw laughter from everyone in our war room.

"Madeline, you're absolutely incredible. I can't thank you enough," I said with genuine gratitude toward this brave woman who had risked everything for my family.

"Don Thorne, sweetheart, everything will work out perfectly. Keep your faith strong," she responded warmly through our encrypted line. "They're emerging now. Two women are being escorted into our transport vehicles."

My radio crackled to life. "Boss, what's your status?"

"Max is safe in my custody right now, Don Thorne. He appears unharmed, but I'm transporting him to our private medical facility first for evaluation and a complete health assessment. After that, we'll convoy back to Port Serenity. We have three captives secured, but given the sensitive nature of this family matter, we'll handle interrogation here before deciding their fate," Daniel explained.

"Daniel, can't you arrange air transport? We're extremely anxious about Max," Xavier pressed from across the room.

"I could arrange that, Xavier, but coordinating clearance through our aviation contacts would consume too much time."

"I'll charter private aircraft immediately so you can return as quickly as possible. How many passengers will you have?" Xavier asked without hesitation, already reaching for his phone to contact our pilots.

"Having wealthy allies certainly has its advantages," Daniel chuckled through the static. "Proceed with that arrangement and provide me the logistics. My party includes myself, Max, the three prisoners, and three of my men."

"Daniel, inform him I'm heading to the medical facility to check on little Max's condition. He recognizes me, and I can provide comfort to the poor child," Madeline spoke rapidly into her secure phone.

"Did you catch that, Daniel? Her name is Madeline Taylor," Xavier relayed through our communication network.

"Her presence at our facility would be tremendously helpful. Max is genuinely terrified after what those animals put him through," the captain confirmed, making my chest tighten with concern for my son.

"Excellent. I'll contact you within minutes," Xavier disconnected while Jude was already coordinating the aircraft charter with our aviation subsidiary.

All logistics were arranged and information exchanged through our secure channels. Hours after his rescue, my son was airborne, returning to me aboard one of our family jets. Finn's parents chose to accompany the flight since Max refused to leave Madeline's protective embrace after encountering her at the medical facility.

Madeline initiated a video call through our encrypted system, allowing Max to speak with us briefly. Emotion overwhelmed everyone in our command center. I contacted our estate, instructing Walter to notify all family members that Max had been recovered safely. I requested they remain at the compound, as I would bring Max there for their care while we continued our operation to locate Ivy.

Now I needed to find my queen. The search operation was still active, but the terrain proved challenging and was hampering our ground teams' efforts.

Gemma approached and addressed me with the deference befitting my position. "Don Thorne, I apologize for the interruption, but Mr. Loxley is requesting an urgent audience with you. He claims it concerns sensitive family business. He's called repeatedly today and is currently in our lobby."

"How peculiar. What could he possibly want with our family?" Xavier wondered, his suspicious nature immediately activated.

"Don Thorne, he only mentioned urgent business matters, but emphasized it was extremely time-sensitive," Gemma clarified. "He wouldn't elaborate further to my security team."

"Gemma, clear him through our screening process. I'll meet him in Jude's office," I decided, finding Loxley's persistence intriguing given his usual distance from our operations.

Xavier and I proceeded to Jude's secured office within our headquarters. When Loxley arrived, Gemma escorted him inside after our security sweep confirmed he was unarmed.

"Loxley, I apologize, but today has been extraordinarily complicated for our family," I said while greeting him with measured caution.

"Don Thorne, I heard about Ivy and your son's situation through our mutual associates. Is there any assistance my family can provide?" Loxley asked with what appeared to be genuine concern.

"I don't believe there's anything more we can accomplish through outside channels," I exhaled heavily, still processing the day's events.

After studying me momentarily, Loxley continued with obvious nervousness:

"Don Thorne, I regret disturbing you during this crisis, but I spoke with my wife in Norway and described your circumstances, mentioning the Rossi faction's suspected involvement in the kidnapping. She insisted I deliver this to you immediately. I have no understanding of its contents. She claims ignorance as well, but she explained that Patricia Rossi entrusted her with this container years ago, requesting she safeguard it, and if anything befell Patricia, to deliver the container directly to you."

"What exactly are you saying, Loxley?" This seemed absolutely bizarre given the Rossi family's position as our most dangerous internal enemy.

"I’m uncertain, Don Thorne. I don’t comprehend it either. What I do understand is that my wife and Patricia developed an unlikely friendship at some point. They attended private yoga sessions together at the country club. That was some time ago. My wife described how Patricia arrived one day appearing genuinely frightened, presenting her with a bag containing this sealed container, stating specifically that she needed complete secrecy in safeguarding this evidence, and if anything happened to her, to bring the container to you personally."

"How extraordinary," Xavier observed, his strategist mind already analyzing the implications.

"My thoughts exactly, Xavier. I actually argued with my wife about harboring potential evidence. But she ultimately kept it hidden, and with all these developments regarding the kidnapping and the Rossi family’s betrayal, she demanded I deliver this to our Don. I barely located the container. My wife had concealed it in a false compartment in our home’s safe room."

"You mentioned this occurred years ago?" I inquired, remembering that timeline corresponded with increasing tensions within our organization.

"Correct, I remember those yoga sessions clearly. My wife was enthusiastic about them, but the arrangement didn’t continue beyond several months," Loxley commented.

I positioned the container on Jude’s desk and asked Gemma to summon Scott and Inspector Martinez, one of our most trusted contacts within law enforcement. When they entered, I introduced the inspector to Loxley and requested he repeat his account for official documentation.

"Well, let’s examine this container’s contents," Inspector Martinez said, taking the wooden box secured with an old-fashioned padlock and forcing the mechanism until it snapped with a metallic crack.

When opened, we discovered multiple organized folders, primarily containing information about offshore accounts, the shell company that had been stealing our clients and territory, and properties distributed across multiple states. However, one folder was distinctive - red leather and labeled "Aviation Incident."

The inspector opened the folder with latex gloves, revealing evidence that had vanished from the official investigation into my parents’ deaths, various notes containing names, phone numbers, coded messages, bank deposit receipts, and a sealed flash drive. I took the device and connected it to our

secured computer system. It contained a single file titled "Confession" - a video recording that I immediately activated.

After a lengthy period, tears streamed down my face. In the recording, Roman Rossi was speaking candidly with his wife Patricia, explaining in horrifying detail how he had sabotaged my parents' private helicopter, describing his methods and twisted motivations with sickening pride. He laughed gleefully about the closed-casket funeral, since the aircraft had exploded midair and my parents were burned beyond recognition. Roman wanted my parents eliminated, and me as well, because he intended to seize control of our entire criminal organization. He had even prepared fraudulent succession documents, but I had disrupted his schemes by not accompanying my parents on that fatal flight.

I wept realizing that Ivy had unknowingly preserved my life that day, because only my presence with her had prevented me from joining my parents and escaping Roman's murderous trap.

The video concluded with Roman stating that I continued disrupting his plans because I had appointed Xavier as my underboss and maintained my position as head of the family when he had worked tirelessly to make me despondent and guilt-ridden about surviving. Xavier had destroyed his succession plans by encouraging me to fight back against my grief and reclaim my rightful authority.

Roman also admitted to embezzling family funds and identified his network of accomplices throughout our organization. He provided explicit details about his schemes and planned takeover. I was astounded by the scope of his treachery.

"This resolves numerous mysteries that have plagued our family," Xavier said, approaching the computer terminal. "I've copied the video to our secure servers." He removed the flash drive, placed it in the container, and handed everything to Scott. "Can you manage the legal aspects of this evidence?"

"Absolutely, Xavier!" Scott responded, accepting the container with reverent care.

"I want every one of these traitors dealt with according to family law!" I told Inspector Martinez, my voice carrying the cold authority of absolute power.

"Don't worry, they'll be leaving in body bags or chains," Inspector Martinez guaranteed with the grim satisfaction of a man who understood true justice. "And you, Mr. Loxley, must accompany me to provide a formal statement, and I'll need to interview your wife as well for our files."

"Certainly, whatever our Don requires," Loxley turned toward me with newfound respect. "Don Thorne, I apologize that members of my extended family network have caused you such suffering."

"Loxley, actually today you've provided me the peace I've sought for years. My family owes you a debt of gratitude." I shook his hand firmly as we parted. "Let's proceed, Xavier. I still must find my queen."

I returned to our command center where Zoe updated me about the search operation, explaining that the target region was in the rural territory of Blue Creek, a small town approximately one hundred ten miles from Port Serenity, an area that straddled the border between our territory and neutral ground.

"Blue Creek?" Xavier asked sharply, and Zoe confirmed the location. Xavier rushed out, returning minutes later with property documentation from our real estate intelligence files. "The Rossi faction acquired property there through shell corporations over recent years. Verify if it falls within the communication perimeter."

One of our tech specialists took the paperwork, entered the data into our tracking system, and confirmed the property fell within the cell tower's range. They immediately contacted Daniel and transmitted the coordinates to our ground teams.

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"Excellent! I can't wait for this war to conclude and to have my family safely under our protection again."

Chapter 166 Truth From Ashes

Caleb's POV

My nerves were stretched to the breaking point as I waited for updates from my enforcers. The surveillance team had pinpointed the cell tower location and established a search radius. Multiple crews were already mobilizing toward the target area across our territory.

My secure phone buzzed with an incoming call from Madeline, Finn's mother and one of our most trusted family associates.

"Don Thorne, it's Madeline."

"Our soldiers just arrived with their tracking specialists. They're moving in now."

Relief flooded through me. "Thank God. Madeline, you need to get out of there immediately."

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Chapter 167 Flight to Freedom

Ivy's POV

I pressed my face against the grimy window and saw complete darkness had swallowed the abandoned warehouse district. Dear God, how is Max holding up right now?

The entire day had been consumed by desperate prayers for my little boy's safety. Caleb must be losing his mind searching for us. I had vanished from the Thorne estate without any warning, snatched right from our own territory. But my terror for Max's wellbeing had consumed every rational thought. I felt utterly helpless in this nightmare.

After Caleb had shoved that stale sandwich through the door and disappeared, an eerie silence had settled over the warehouse. I assumed both Roman's men had left to report back to their traitorous boss. But then came the unmistakable creak of the loading dock door, followed by hushed voices drifting through the concrete walls. They had returned from whatever dark business they'd been conducting. Lord, please keep me safe from whatever twisted plans they're hatching.

"Here's your dinner, princess." Fisher cracked the steel door open just enough to slide a paper bag across the concrete floor before slamming it shut with a metallic clang.

I immediately pressed my ear against the cold metal. I had to discover what Roman's endgame was with this kidnapping operation.

"Zane, something's not adding up. I keep trying to reach Romy and getting radio silence," Caleb's voice carried through the thin warehouse walls.

"You need to ditch that burner phone immediately," Fisher's tone was sharp with paranoia.

"Relax, Thorne's soldiers will never trace this frequency. We destroyed the woman's phone completely. They've got nothing to track us with," Caleb sounded almost casual about their criminal enterprise. "So how long are we babysitting Caleb's woman?"

"Boss Rossi didn't give us a timeline. Just said to keep her breathing and don't leave any marks the Don might recognize. She's our insurance policy to make sure that bastard Thorne surrenders his territory and hands over the family's offshore accounts," Fisher explained with cold calculation.

"I thought the kid was supposed to be our real leverage?"

"No, the boy was just bait to reel in this woman. Thorne's attachment to the kid only exists because of her. If she disappears permanently, he'll write off the boy as acceptable collateral damage in a turf war."

They were completely unaware of the blood connection between Caleb and Max. I couldn't decide if this ignorance was a blessing or a deadly miscalculation. Roman Rossi's betrayal and hunger for power knew no boundaries in the Thorne family hierarchy.

"I'm heading out to the perimeter to get better cell reception and check in with our backup crew," Caleb announced, and I heard the heavy warehouse door slide shut behind him.

Time dragged by before the sound of deep snoring echoed from the main floor. This was my window of opportunity. I grabbed the paper bag and examined its meager contents. A sandwich and juice box. Basic fuel for what I prayed would be my successful escape attempt. I forced myself to consume every morsel, knowing I would need the energy for whatever came next.

The door suddenly burst open and Caleb stepped inside my concrete cell, sealing us in together once again.

"Smart girl, finishing your meal like an obedient hostage," he said, approaching with predatory steps. "You know what, Ivy? You're incredibly trusting for a mafia queen. You believe every lie people feed you, follow every command without questioning the consequences. Today was perfect proof when you walked right into our trap at the marina." Caleb reached out and ran his fingers through my hair with disturbing familiarity. "You're absolutely stunning. I've been obsessed with you since you first entered our world. I wanted to put a bullet in that arrogant Don who kept you locked away in his fortress. But now you're trapped here with me, and we're going to be together for as long as Roman needs you alive. So why don't we make this situation more enjoyable? I promise you'll experience pleasures that cold-blooded Thorne never gave you."

"Please, Caleb, don't lay a hand on me," my voice trembled with rising terror.

"Come on, beautiful, I'm going to make you scream my name."

"Stay away from me."

"Not happening." Caleb seized my arm and hurled me onto the filthy mattress, his weight crashing down on me.

"Get off me, Caleb, get off!" My screams pierced the warehouse air.

The door exploded inward and Fisher yanked his partner off me with savage force.

"Once Rossi collects his ransom and eliminates Thorne, you can do whatever sick things you want to this woman, but until then, keep your hands to yourself or I'll cut them off." Fisher had Caleb pinned against the concrete wall like a rag doll.

In that split second of chaos, opportunity presented itself. I launched myself upward and bolted through the doorway, yanking it closed behind me and sliding the external bolt into place. Several gunshots immediately punched through the steel door. My God, in my desperation to flee, I hadn't fully considered they might be armed with military-grade weapons. The sound of them kicking and ramming the reinforced door spurred me forward as I burst out of the warehouse.

No vehicles were visible anywhere around the industrial complex. I had no idea which direction led back to Thorne territory or neutral ground. A narrow service road stretched before me, bordered by abandoned shipping containers on both sides. I decided to follow it as fast as my legs could carry me through this maze of criminal enterprises.

I had covered considerable distance when I collided directly into a figure dressed entirely in tactical black gear. A scream tore from my throat instinctively. He grabbed hold of me, and I fought desperately to break free, but his grip was unshakeable. Panic consumed me entirely. The man held me firmly while speaking in measured, professional tones:

"Easy now, ma'am. I'm Detective Tyler with the organized crime task force. You need to calm down. Are you Ivy Brooks?"

"Y-y-yes," I stuttered, trying to control my breathing.

"Did you just escape from that warehouse facility?" I managed a nod. "Is anyone still inside that structure?"

"The two men who kidnapped me. I managed to escape the room where they were holding me, locked them inside, and ran. They have automatic weapons." The detective immediately radioed for backup, reporting that he had located me and confirming the suspects were contained in the building.

"Come with me, Miss Brooks. I'm getting you to safety." We walked for a while before reaching the main highway. Multiple police cruisers lined the road with their lights flashing, and tactical officers were positioned everywhere. "Inspector, I've got the victim."

"Good evening, I'm Inspector Adler with the FBI's organized crime division. We've been coordinating with Mr. Thorne to locate you, Ivy." The federal agent offered a reassuring smile as he approached. "How are you holding up? Did they assault you in any way?"

"No, they almost did. They only used chloroform when they first grabbed me from the marina," I replied, still feeling disoriented.

"Understood. We need to transport you to the medical facility for a complete examination and evidence collection, then we'll take your official statement before returning you to Thorne protection," the inspector explained while guiding me toward one of the patrol vehicles.

"Inspector, is all of this really necessary? I'm desperate to know about my son and Caleb."

"Just one moment." The inspector pulled out his encrypted cell phone and initiated a video call. "Is Mr. Thorne available? Miss Brooks needs immediate confirmation of his location."

Chapter 168 Safe Return Home

Caleb's POV

I paced across the penthouse suite floor when my encrypted phone buzzed. Detective Sanchez, one of our contacts inside the police, was calling through a secure channel. My pulse hammered against my ribs as I answered.

"Sanchez here, Mr. Thorne."

"Detective." My voice came out rougher than intended, the tension of the past days weighing heavily.

"Sir, please sit down for this." Sanchez's voice faded as he spoke to someone off-camera. The secure video feed shifted, and my world stopped spinning.

Ivy's face filled the screen.

"Caleb! Thank God!" I choked out, my vision blurring as relief crashed over me like a tidal wave. "Everyone, we found her!"

The room erupted in cheers and applause from my capos and their wives gathered behind me.

"I'm safe, Caleb, but please tell me about Max. Have they found our son?" Her voice cracked with the same desperation that had been eating me alive.

"He’s safe, tesoro. They extracted him from Greenleaf territory. He’s flying here now with the Taylor family operatives." I watched her shoulders collapse with relief, tears streaming down her beautiful face.

"Oh thank God. I was so terrified, Caleb. I thought those animals might have hurt him."

"It’s over now. Let me speak with Sanchez." She handed the secure phone back to our inside man. "Detective, when can you bring her home to me?"

"We need to make a stop at our safe house medical facility for examination, then a brief debrief at the station for appearances. After that, she’s free to return to your protection."

"Does this all have to happen tonight? She’s carrying our child, and she’s been through hell."

"Given her delicate condition, I’ll personally escort her to the medical check, but we can postpone the formal statement until tomorrow morning. Does that work for you, Don Thorne?"

"Perfect. I’m in your debt, Sanchez."

"She’ll be back in your arms within a few hours, sir."

"That feels like an eternity."

"Mr. Thorne, we’re a long distance from Port Serenity, plus the medical examination. Contact me directly if you need anything."

"Understood. What about the animals who took her?"

"We arrested both contractors. Brothers named Caleb and Fisher. They’re being held in isolation pending your family’s decision on their fate."

"Excellent. Now we just need to corner that snake Rossi and end this war."

I terminated the call and immediately contacted our safe house to update our security team and staff. Walter confirmed all preparations were in place for their return.

"Caleb, now that Ivy and Max are secured, I'm restructuring our tactical operations." Zoe approached with updated intelligence reports. "Sanchez confirmed Rossi is still at large with a handful of loyalists, so he remains our primary target."

"Agreed." I collapsed onto the leather sofa, burying my face in my hands. "Can you coordinate the hunt for now? I won't be able to focus until I have them both safe in my territory."

"Leave it to me, monster." Zoe jabbed my shoulder with her usual irreverence.

"I'm actually growing fond of that nickname."

"And I love being your resident psychopath." She grinned wickedly. "We make one hell of a team protecting your family."

"Damn right we do."

"Listen up, people!" Zoe turned to address the room full of capos and soldiers. "The hired muscle has been neutralized. Ivy and Max are safe and coming home. Now we hunt down the mastermind himself. All resources focus on tracking Rossi and his remaining cells."

I walked to the bar and poured myself a generous measure of whiskey. In the early morning hours, Detective Adler called to confirm Ivy was finishing her medical examination and would be delivered to me soon. Shortly after, Xavier informed me that our allies from the Taylor family had just landed at our private airstrip. They were here with Max!

I headed to the lobby and began pacing again. I couldn't go collect my son because I was waiting for Ivy's escort. I couldn't go find Ivy because I was expecting Max's arrival. The helplessness was driving me insane.

I was practically wearing grooves in the marble floor when the private elevator chimed. The doors opened and Ivy rushed out, flying into my arms with a sob. I held her against me, unable to stop the tears of relief.

"Are you hurt? Did those bastards touch you? Is our baby safe?" The questions tumbled out frantically.

"We're both fine. No one harmed me." She clung to me like I might vanish into smoke.

When we finally separated, I turned to the officer who'd accompanied her.

"Good morning, Don Thorne. Detective Adler." The corrupt cop who'd helped orchestrate her rescue looked exhausted. "Apologies for the delay returning her to your protection."

"Detective, what matters is she's here and unharmed."

"I heard my colleague from Greenleaf pulled off outstanding work with help from a very impressive undercover operative." Adler had clearly been briefed on the entire operation.

"Madeline Taylor could teach our best soldiers a thing or two." I smiled grimly. "Detective, please make yourself comfortable. There's food and coffee. You must be exhausted."

"Much appreciated, Don Thorne. Never refuse good coffee when you're in this line of work." Adler was seasoned, a veteran with the calm demeanor of someone who'd survived decades in the dirty intersection of law and organized crime. "I'd also like to check in with my team."

"Of course. Gemma, please escort Detective Adler to my office and get him whatever he needs."

I watched Gemma wipe away tears as she embraced Ivy with obvious relief.

Lila also rose from the strategy table to hug her friend, though she kept it brief, saying she had urgent family business to handle.

I pulled Ivy close again when the elevator opened once more. A tall man in tactical gear stepped out, followed by figures I recognized from the Taylor crime family. Madeline Taylor, the most dangerous undercover operative in the northeast, held my sleeping son. Max looked peaceful in the arms of the woman who'd saved his life. Ivy immediately ran to them while I stood frozen, my body finally beginning to release the tension that had gripped me for days.

"Caleb." Wyatt's father, Dr. Taylor's brother, greeted me with his family's characteristic dignity. "Allow me to introduce Detective Daniel from Greenleaf territory."

"Detective, I owe you everything." I shook his hand firmly, meaning every word.

"Just doing my job, Don Thorne. Besides, Xavier's an old friend, which makes you family."

I thanked him and asked Gemma to escort the detective to refreshments.

I approached Ivy and wrapped my arms around her and my sleeping son, then embraced Madeline Taylor.

"Madeline, there are no words for what you did today. You saved my heir."

"Sweetheart, I'm a mother myself. This little angel could melt anyone's heart. I'd never let those animals harm him." Madeline's smile was warm despite the steel beneath.

"You're the deadliest undercover operative on the East Coast."

Zoe and Finn approached, both visibly emotional, needing to see Ivy and Max with their own eyes to believe they were truly safe and home.

Chapter 169 Branded by Chains

Ivy's POV

After endless embraces from the family soldiers and capos who expressed their relief that Max and I had survived the kidnapping, Xavier escorted me toward his private office in the Thorne compound.

I carefully placed Max, who was sleeping deeply from exhaustion, onto one of the reinforced beds that Xavier kept in his office for emergency situations. As I pulled the heavy blanket up to cover him, my eyes caught something that made my blood run cold. A dark, rope-burned mark encircled his tiny right ankle like a brand of the nightmare we had endured.

"Xavier, what is this mark on Max's ankle?" My voice shook as I traced the air above the horrible evidence, afraid to touch what looked like proof of unspeakable cruelty inflicted on my baby.

Xavier's expression turned murderous as he approached our sleeping son. His scarred hands hovered over the mark with infinite gentleness, as if his touch could somehow erase the memory of what those animals had done. He drew in a ragged breath, tucked the blanket more securely around Max, and pressed a tender kiss to his forehead before guiding me to the leather sofa where he conducted his most sensitive family business.

He pulled me onto his lap, his powerful arms wrapping around me like an unbreachable fortress.

"My tesoro, the conditions we found Max in were beyond barbaric." His voice carried the weight of barely restrained violence that promised retribution. "Detective Martinez briefed me during the extraction operation. Thank God there are no other marks on his little body, no signs of physical abuse, which means they didn't torture him in other ways. But Ivy, those sick bastards had him chained to a table leg like he was some kind of captive animal."

A single tear rolled down Xavier's scarred cheek as the words left his lips.

The rage that exploded inside me was unlike anything I had ever experienced in my years surviving the streets. "You're telling me those monsters chained up my baby?" The words came out as a broken sob that echoed off the bulletproof windows. "He's barely more than a toddler! How could anyone do such a thing to an innocent child?"

"Human evil knows no limits, tesoro. Some people are capable of cruelty that defies all logic and humanity. The scum who took you both clearly value their own twisted schemes above basic decency."

Xavier’s hand moved in soothing circles along my spine while his deadly gaze remained fixed on our peacefully sleeping son.

"I cannot comprehend this level of depravity. How do you harm an innocent child, a baby who knows nothing but love and trust?" My tears soaked into the fabric of his expensive suit as I buried my face against his neck, inhaling the familiar scent of gunpowder and expensive cologne that always clung to him.

"I don’t understand it either. When Martinez’s tactical team breached the safe house, Max was filthy, starving, and severely dehydrated. Those deranged bitches didn’t even bother to change his diaper or feed him properly. Nothing. Martinez said he was crying hysterically when they kicked down the door." Xavier’s jaw clenched as he relived the detective’s brutal report.

"Wait, you said multiple women. Besides Rossi, who else was involved in this operation?"

"Monica. And they had assistance from Brodie as well."

The name hit me like a physical blow from a rival family’s enforcer. "Brodie? My former boyfriend Brodie? Are you seriously telling me that my ex is part of this nightmare conspiracy?"

Xavier nodded grimly, his dark eyes hardening like winter steel. "I wish I were making this up, but the evidence is undeniable."

"Dear God, why would he do this? What could he possibly gain from targeting our family? I’ve known Brodie since we were kids running the same neighborhood streets. His family was practically part of mine back then. The idea that he would orchestrate something this vicious against us is beyond comprehension."

"Honestly, nothing about that piece of shit surprises me anymore. He betrayed you with your own cousin for power and position in the organization. Someone with that kind of moral bankruptcy is capable of anything." Xavier’s assessment was harsh but accurate given our world’s brutal realities.

"There’s a massive difference between sleeping around for advancement and kidnapping the family children, Xavier."

"True. But the foundation is the same - complete lack of honor and loyalty. My conversation with Martinez was brief and focused entirely on Max's condition and your safety. The interrogations haven't begun yet, so I don't have details about their motivations or who else might be involved."

"Well, now that our son is secure, I want every single detail about this conspiracy." The fury coursing through me felt powerful enough to bring down rival families. "But first, we need to have Max examined by our family doctor to ensure there are no hidden injuries."

"Already arranged. The emergency clinic in Greenleaf did an initial assessment and confirmed that aside from dehydration and that terrible mark around his ankle, he appears physically unharmed. But I've scheduled Dr. Taylor to conduct a thorough examination tomorrow morning. He'll come here to the compound for security reasons."

"Perfect choice," I agreed wholeheartedly. "Though why are we meeting here instead of going home to the estate?"

"Because returning to the estate isn't safe right now. There are developments about the family situation that you need to know about, and I'll explain everything once you've had some rest. But Ivy, I cannot let you and Max out of my sight again."

"I don't want to be separated from you either. But please, tell me what's happening with the organization now."

Xavier released a heavy sigh before beginning his explanation.

"Tesoro, we've discovered that Rossi sabotaged my parents' private helicopter. Roman and his wife have disappeared completely from their usual haunts. We're currently in the process of exposing the audit findings about the missing shipments, and everyone we've identified as being involved in this conspiracy is being questioned in the secure rooms throughout this floor. Scott is running point on the interrogations with Miller's assistance."

"Rossi destroyed the helicopter intentionally?" The horror in my voice was unmistakable as I processed this revelation about his parents' deaths.

"Yes. My parents were murdered in cold blood by our own people." Xavier's composure finally cracked, and tears streamed down his battle-scarred face. "Yesterday, Loxley, who is Veronica's father, delivered a secured package containing the missing evidence about the so-called accident, along with extensive additional documentation. Inside was Rossi's recorded confession and a letter from his wife exposing numerous details about their treacherous activities against our family."

"Hold on, is Veronica somehow connected to this conspiracy against us?" My fury was reaching dangerous levels as I considered every possible threat.

"No, absolutely not. Veronica is living peacefully in Norway with her mother and brother. You can relax about that angle. But her mother participated in the same fitness classes as Rossi's wife. They developed a friendship, and one day Rossi's wife asked Veronica's mother to safeguard the package, with instructions to deliver it to me if anything ever happened to her."

"So why did Loxley bring you the evidence now?"

"Because Dr. Taylor informed him about the kidnappings during a medical consultation, and Loxley mentioned it to his wife during their overseas call. She panicked and told him about the package, insisting he bring it to me immediately. This woman has been sitting on all the answers we desperately needed this entire time without realizing the significance of what she was protecting."

"This entire situation is absolutely insane." The shock and outrage were overwhelming my already exhausted system.

"My tesoro, what about you? Are you truly unharmed? Did those animals hurt you in any way?"

"I'm fine, physically at least. They kept me locked in a room inside some kind of unfinished safe house in an isolated location outside the city. They were following Rossi's specific orders, and from what I overheard, their instructions were explicit - don't touch me unless Rossi specifically authorized it, because I was his insurance policy for escaping the family's retaliation. They had no idea Max was your biological son. They took him simply as additional leverage to control me." The memories of that nightmare came flooding back with crystal clarity. "But at one point, Caleb entered my room with clear intentions of sexually assaulting me. When he grabbed me, Fisher burst through the door and physically restrained him, shoving him against the wall and reminding him not to touch me without Rossi's explicit authorization. I seized the opportunity to escape, locked both of them in the room, ran outside, and

kept running until I encountered a patrol officer. That’s how they were able to locate me and coordinate the rescue."

"That perverted bastard tried to assault you?" Xavier’s eyes blazed with the kind of murderous intent that had made him legendary in our world.

"Xavier, please keep your voice down. Max is sleeping right there," I reminded him softly, gesturing toward our son.

"I’m going to destroy that sick animal with my bare hands." Xavier’s fist clenched so tightly his knuckles turned white, and I could feel every muscle in his powerful body coiling with barely restrained violence.

A gentle knock interrupted our conversation. Xavier carefully lifted me from his lap and positioned me on the sofa before opening the reinforced door to admit Ruby, who rushed directly to embrace me.

"Thank the saints you’re safe, sweetheart. I just received word that you’d arrived at the compound," she said while holding me tightly. "Xavier, your presence is urgently needed in the main conference room. I’m sorry I can’t stay with you right now, honey. I have to return to assist Scott with the interrogations of the remaining conspirators."

"Don’t apologize, Ruby. Thank you for everything you’re doing for our family. It’s critically important. Please go handle business."

At that moment, the office filled with concerned faces as my parents, Zoe’s mother, Walter and Carmen, and Finn’s mother all entered together. Their expressions showed the anxiety and relief they had been carrying since learning about our disappearance.

"Xavier, you found them both safe! Thank you from the bottom of my heart, son," my father said with raw emotion, pulling Xavier into a grateful embrace.

"They are my entire world, Dad," Xavier replied with a smile that didn’t quite reach his still-worried eyes. "My tesoro, I’m leaving you with the best possible protection, but I need you to rest."

"I will," I promised, understanding the enormous pressure he was under to handle this crisis decisively.

"Let's go handle this situation, Ruby," he called as they departed to manage the interrogations and evidence gathering that would determine our family's response to this betrayal.

Chapter 170 Final Judgment Day

Caleb's POV

The private meeting room in the Thorne family compound buzzed with deadly tension as I stepped inside. Bodies packed every available space, but these weren't board members or executives. Along the back wall, a row of chairs held the family's middle management from smuggling operations, money laundering, territory collections, and arms dealing. These faces had been familiar fixtures in my criminal empire for years. Now they sat with downcast eyes, caught red-handed in Roman's elaborate betrayal network.

My gaze moved to the single chair positioned opposite the others. Marcus Fuller slumped there, the weak link we had originally planned to use in our infiltration operation. Before Max and Ivy's kidnapping forced us to accelerate our timeline, this man had been our secret weapon. His fatal flaw was his ego. He couldn't resist showing off his newfound wealth from skimming family profits, purchasing luxury items that screamed betrayal to anyone paying attention. His loose tongue and reckless spending had made him the perfect target.

The room held more than just family traitors. Scott stood near the conference table with Miller and members of Scott's forensic accounting team. The anti-fraud specialists had sent their best people, including the chief investigator who was simultaneously probing my parents' car bomb murders. Additional armed guards completed our security presence. The overcrowded space felt suffocating with the weight of impending justice.

"You wanted to see me, Scott?" I announced my arrival, my voice carrying the authority that made lesser men tremble.

"Don Thorne, perfect timing. We're finishing up the preliminary interrogations, but I need your decision on how to proceed," Scott responded, his professional demeanor intact despite the late hour and the gravity of family betrayal.

"My decision about what exactly?" Confusion colored my voice, though I suspected what was coming.

"Beyond Roman, we've confirmed lieutenants and soldiers participated in the embezzlement scheme. Everyone you see here played a role in the betrayal." Scott's hand landed firmly on Marcus's shoulder. "Mr. Fuller has expressed willingness to cooperate fully. The question is whether you want maximum punishment for everyone or if you're open to deals for information. The chief investigator wants your input before moving forward with family justice."

Rage burned through my chest as I surveyed the room full of traitors. These weren't outsiders who had infiltrated our organization. These were men who had sworn blood oaths to my family, who had eaten at our table and shared in our profits. Their betrayal cut deeper than any enemy's bullet.

"Execute every single one of them according to family law. I'm pursuing full restitution to recover every stolen dollar down to the ammunition they wasted," my voice carried the weight of absolute authority and fury. "You people swore loyalty to my bloodline for years. Your theft wasn't just against me, it was against my father's memory and the honor of our family name. You repaid our protection and generosity by stabbing us in the back while we slept."

Marcus's voice cracked as he leaned forward desperately, his hands shaking. "Don Thorne, please consider the arrangement. I can provide crucial information about the entire conspiracy. My involvement started when my son needed expensive medical treatment for his addiction. The rehabilitation costs were crushing us financially. Once I took Roman's money, his people wouldn't let me walk away. They threatened to kill my family."

"So stealing from your Don felt more reasonable than asking for help?" My laugh held zero humor. "You better possess information we don't already have, because our investigation uncovered plenty. If your testimony proves worthless, forget any mercy."

"I guarantee my information will prove valuable," Marcus insisted, sweat beading on his forehead. "I know things about Roman's network that could bring down enemies you don't even know exist."

"Fine, Scott. Cut a deal with this piece of scum, but he's permanently banned from our territory and our protection." My conditions were non-negotiable. "He lives only because his information might save family blood."

Neil from the money laundering operation suddenly spoke up, desperation making his voice shrill. "Don Thorne, I want to negotiate too. I have information worth trading for my life."

"Really, Neil? What could you possibly know that Marcus doesn't?" Sarcasm dripped from every word as I turned my cold stare on him.

"I know Roman's current safe house location," Neil shouted, playing what he believed was his trump card.

That got my attention immediately. I crossed the room and grabbed Neil by his shirt collar, pulling him close enough to see the terror in his eyes. The other captives flinched at the display of raw violence barely contained beneath my civilized exterior.

"You better not be lying to save your worthless hide." My stare bored into him like ice picks. "Investigator, can we hold this particular rat until we verify his claims?"

The chief investigator nodded approvingly. "Absolutely, Don Thorne. We've documented preliminary statements from the entire group. My team can transport the others to our secure holding facility while I remain here with one officer to hear what this suspect has to offer. I also need to coordinate with the kidnapping task force detective waiting in your office."

"He's been briefing my security chief for the past hour," I confirmed. "Let's see if this garbage actually has useful intelligence before we make any agreements with the devil."

"Excellent. My transport team is standing by at the compound gates," the investigator confirmed as Scott granted building access through our security protocols. "Mr. Fuller will be processed and held pending judicial review of his cooperation agreement. Assuming his information proves valuable, he should be released to protective custody soon."

The armed guards moved efficiently through the room, securing zip-tie restraints on pairs of defendants before escorting them toward the service elevators. Watching these longtime family members led away in bonds triggered conflicting emotions. Relief that justice was finally being served mixed with profound disappointment at their betrayal. These weren't strangers who had infiltrated our organization. These were men I had shared Christmas dinners with, celebrated victories with, trusted with sensitive family business.

"What happens next, Scott?" The immediate crisis was handled, but massive challenges remained. "The family structure is completely compromised at multiple levels."

"I need to complete the comprehensive financial audit and prepare the final investigative report," Scott explained methodically. "Once that's finished, I can release the temporary specialists we brought in, and you can begin rebuilding your operations. The recovery process will take time, but we should reclaim most of your diverted assets through seizure and restitution orders."

A critical concern occurred to me. "What about the territory contracts Roman redirected to his shell operations?"

Scott's quick thinking impressed me again. "I've developed a strategy for that situation. Since Roman's front businesses will be dismantled, I recommend scheduling immediate meetings with affected partners. We'll explain the leadership change honestly and offer better terms to maintain their loyalty. I can coordinate those meetings if you approve."

"Make it happen," I agreed immediately. "But don't dismiss your specialist team yet. Keep everyone on the family payroll until we can discuss the next phase. I have expansion plans I want to run past you once this chaos settles."

"Understood. I await your instructions," Scott confirmed. "I'll also contact your personal attorney to handle the criminal proceedings. He has more experience with RICO cases than our internal counsel. Ruby, would you mind organizing all the documentation for the legal team?"

Ruby beamed at the request. "It would be my pleasure, Mr. Scott."

Miller, who had remained quietly observant throughout the proceedings, finally spoke with genuine admiration. "Scott, I'm truly impressed with your work here. You've become the most skilled financial crime investigator I've encountered in my years with this family."

"Hard experience taught me never to trust blindly again," Scott replied with obvious gratitude. "Ivy deserves credit for my professional development. After my previous employer collapsed under federal investigation, she encouraged me to pursue advanced training in forensic accounting. She

recommended specific courses that transformed my approach to financial security. Ivy is truly remarkable."

"Ivy is indeed special," Miller agreed warmly. "Speaking of which, have Max and Ivy recovered safely from their ordeal, Caleb? I'm eager to see them both and confirm they're unharmed."

"They're here, resting in my private quarters under medical supervision. Please, make yourself comfortable, Miller." Despite everything, I managed a genuine smile at the thought of my family's safety.

Dawn was breaking over the city skyline when I returned to my office with the remaining investigator, one armed guard, and Neil. The kidnapping task force had worked through the night searching for Roman, who seemed to have vanished completely into the underground networks of our enemies.

After final briefings on the investigation's current status and coordination with federal authorities, the moment arrived to hear Neil's supposed bombshell information about Roman's whereabouts.