Mafia Mask 171

Chapter 171 Intel Breakthrough

Caleb’s POV

"Time to start talking, Neil. Where the hell is Rossi hiding?" I demanded, my patience wearing thin after hours of this deadly game of cat and mouse in the basement interrogation room.

Neil leaned back in the metal chair, blood trickling from his split lip, still wearing that infuriating smirk I wanted to carve off his face permanently. "I’m not an idiot, Caleb. I want everything documented and guaranteed first. Full protection, no execution, and my offshore accounts stay untouched."

The audacity of this backstabbing piece of trash made my blood boil hotter than molten steel. "Neil, let me make something crystal clear before I decide whether to put a bullet in your skull or just break every bone in your body. First, you’re in no position to make demands when you’re chained to a chair in my family’s private dungeon. Second, what assets? Everything you think belongs to you was stolen from my operations. And third, you don’t negotiate terms with me. You talk, and I decide whether you live to see another sunrise."

"Then figure it out yourselves," Neil said, crossing his arms with that same insufferable smile that made me want to reach for my switchblade.

Xavier’s voice cut through the tension like a razor blade. "Fine. Enjoy your permanent vacation six feet underground. That’s assuming we bury you instead of feeding you to the harbor fish. In case you missed it during your betrayal spree, we’re talking embezzlement, conspiracy to commit murder, kidnapping, and treason against the family. You’re going down for all of it, plus obstruction of family justice. And I’m going to personally enjoy watching them nail your coffin shut."

He grabbed Neil’s arm and started dragging him toward the soundproof execution chamber.

"Wait! I never killed anyone or kidnapped anyone!" Neil shouted, panic finally cracking his arrogant facade as he realized we weren’t bluffing about the execution.

"But you knew about it and you're helping him escape from family justice," Xavier shot back without slowing his stride toward the door where our enforcer waited with his tools.

"I'll talk! But I want protection from rival families," Neil bargained desperately, sweat now pouring down his face.

"You'll get what mercy the family code allows if you give us everything. Complete confession, Neil. No half-truths, no games, or you'll wish I'd just put a clean bullet in your head," I warned, my hand resting on the grip of my Glock.

Neil's shoulders sagged in defeat as the reality of his situation finally sank in. "Alright. Rossi bought Jacob Costa's estate recently when the deal went through. You probably know the place. Costa went bankrupt after losing his construction contracts and sold it to Rossi for practically nothing."

From the corner where he'd been brooding since this interrogation started, Dominic suddenly straightened like a hunting dog catching a scent. "I know exactly where that is. Yara and I were there recently doing reconnaissance on their legitimate business fronts. I had no idea it had been sold to that bastard."

The moment Dominic finished speaking, Gemma appeared in the doorway like a shadow. Their eyes met across the blood-stained room, and I watched her expression harden to ice before she handed me a surveillance report and walked out without a word, her heels clicking like gunshots on the concrete floor.

"Damn it," Dominic muttered, jumping up to follow her like a lovesick fool.

Xavier's firm voice stopped him cold. "You already screwed up everything with your secrets and lies. This isn't the time for damage control with your woman. We need everything you know about the Costa compound right now, before Rossi realizes we're closing in."

"Xavier, I need to explain to her—"

"You think she's going to listen to explanations when she's this pissed?" I interrupted, my own frustration bleeding through. "Or that you'll have any chance at all if she finds out you've been holding

back intelligence that could save Ivy's life? Right now, all our women care about is getting Ivy back safely and watching Rossi bleed out slowly. So focus on that first, and then we'll help you grovel for forgiveness."

Dominic ran his hands through his hair in frustration, the weight of his mistakes clearly eating at him. "Fine. You're right. What I know is this: Jacob was a high-level contractor for several family construction projects before his company went under. He lost everything when the feds started sniffing around our building permits and never got his final payments. Now he's liquidating assets to keep his wife and daughters in their expensive lifestyle. But I didn't know about the estate sale. It's a massive compound with serious defensive potential."

Jude leaned forward intently, his scarred hands already reaching for paper. "I need you to write down everything you remember about that place. Layout, security systems, entry points, guard positions, weapon storage. If you can sketch a map of the grounds, even better for our assault planning."

"Absolutely," Dominic agreed, moving to the table where Jude had already set up intelligence materials and tactical maps.

Xavier stood up, clearly ready to coordinate the hit. "Unless our chained-up traitor here has more valuable information to trade for his miserable life, I need to gather our strike team."

Neil raised his hand quickly like a student desperate to avoid punishment. "One more thing about Rossi. He's got multiple forged identities. I connected him with the document specialist."

"Names on those papers?" Xavier demanded with lethal impatience.

"I don't know the aliases, just who created them," Neil said quickly, sweat still streaming down his face. "The guy operates under 'Baker Cool Head.' He runs his forgery operation out of apartment 1503 in the Orion Complex downtown. He's always there, but he's craftier than he appears."

Jude looked skeptical as he cleaned his knife. "Baker Cool Head? Seriously?"

"He responds to everything with ’stay cool,’" Neil explained nervously. "Weird little bastard. Average height, thick glasses, curly blonde hair to his shoulders. Relatively young, always high on something. I have no idea how he produces such quality documents for our network."

"I’ll send a cleanup crew there immediately," Xavier said, then turned to his lieutenant. "Can you put out alerts to all airports, harbors, bus terminals, and border checkpoints?"

"Already handled. We’re going to corner this rat and make him pay," Jude replied with quiet efficiency that promised violence.

"Perfect. Time to get our well-dressed traitor to record his full confession. If he remembers anything else useful, I’ll contact you immediately," Xavier said, snapping heavy shackles on Neil before dragging him toward our private confession booth.

Jude immediately gathered his tactical team and began coordinating the estate raid. When Dominic finished his detailed notes and sketches, he handed everything over to Jude, who already had our best soldiers standing by. Our military specialist would join the operation along with Daniel and his specialized assault unit.

"Caleb, this is where we part ways for now. The moment I have updates on the raid, you’ll know," Jude said, gripping my hand firmly before leaving with his team to hunt down Rossi.

As soon as the room emptied of our enforcement team, I collapsed onto the leather sofa, completely drained from the interrogation. Felix Hayes said goodbye to Scott but promised to return if needed for the final phase. Only Xavier, Finn, Jude, Dominic, and I remained in the war room.

"I’m thinking about recruiting Nora, Zoe, Lila, and Ruby as permanent family associates," I said, deliberately needling Dominic. "Those women are a lethal force when they work together. Absolutely impressive in a firefight."

Dominic looked up from his tactical brooding. "Are you seriously trying to poach my best surveillance operatives, Thorne?"

"Don’t worry, I’ll send Jude over to even things out in your crew," Xavier joked with dark humor.

"Hey, that hurts, boss," Jude protested with mock offense, checking his weapon systems.

"You're hired too, Finn," I said, giving him a firm punch on the arm in brotherhood.

"Thanks, but I'll pass. Working under Zoe's command is my personal nightmare. When she goes into tactical mode, she's more terrifying than a rival family's torture specialist," Finn said with an exaggerated shudder that made us all laugh despite the blood and violence surrounding us.

"Time to check on our wonderful, unstoppable, and absolutely terrifying women," Xavier said, standing up and adjusting his shoulder holster. We all followed him out, ready to face whatever fresh hell awaited us in this war.

Chapter 172 Safe in Daddy Arms

Caleb's POV

"But why are you all still here working?" I asked, scanning the bustling reception area where our entire crew had assembled, including Ivy and Scott, managing what appeared to be an endless stream of inquiries from legitimate business contacts.

"After the shitstorm of the recent days, we're drowning in damage control," Ivy explained, her usually composed demeanor showing signs of exhaustion. "We're rescheduling meetings with every legitimate client and supplier who got redirected to Rossi's bogus operation, plus dealing with our existing business partners who caught wind of what went down and are demanding explanations."

"Caleb, I've drafted an official statement for all our legitimate business contacts that needs to go out immediately," Scott announced, his fingers flying across his tablet screen. "I'm sending it to both your and Xavier's secure email right now."

"The faster you two sign off and release that statement, the quicker we can start containing this mess," Zoe added, her voice carrying an edge of urgency that matched the tension in the room.

"All of you need to head home and get some rest. That includes you, Scott," I said firmly, noting the exhaustion carved into their faces after days of crisis management.

"We'll crash as soon as we get this disaster contained, boss," Gemma assured me, then added with a slight smile, "Oh, and I've cleared your entire schedule for the coming days."

"Same goes for you, manwhore!" Zoe called out to Dominic, who responded with an exaggerated groan that had everyone chuckling despite the lingering tension.

"Are you ever going to stop calling me that, Zoe?" Dominic asked, though his tone suggested he already knew the answer.

"Not a chance in hell!" Zoe shot back with a defiant grin that sent us all into much-needed laughter.

"Hey Jude, maybe we should start behaving ourselves so we can earn sweet nicknames like Finn's," Xavier joked, referencing how Finn was often called prince by the women in our circle.

"Well Xavier, if Caleb gets labeled a clown and Dominic's stuck with manwhore, I'm terrified to imagine what creative names Zoe might conjure up for us," Jude said with mock horror.

"You better start behaving then," Zoe warned, her smile promising future mischief.

The elevator chimed and Dr. Taylor emerged with two companions trailing behind him.

"Good morning, everyone," Taylor called out cheerfully, his presence immediately lifting the mood in the room.

After exchanging greetings, Taylor introduced the pediatrician and nurse who had accompanied him for this house call.

"Let's head to Xavier's office where Max is waiting," I said, taking Ivy's hand and leading the group down the hallway toward our makeshift family reunion.

Once inside, Taylor greeted everyone warmly. Having practiced in Greenleaf for years, he knew our entire extended family and had been Ivy's doctor during her first pregnancy, making him one of the few medical professionals we trusted completely.

"So my sister-in-law turned into some kind of undercover operative?" Taylor asked Finn's mother with an amused grin.

"I'm seriously considering a career change to private investigation, brother-in-law. The adrenaline rush was absolutely incredible!" she replied with infectious enthusiasm that had everyone smiling.

Max was alert and sitting comfortably in his grandmother's lap. The moment he spotted me, his little arms shot up as he called out excitedly, "Daddyyyyy!"

"There's my boy! Daddy has missed you so much!" I said, scooping him up and holding him tight against my chest, feeling the overwhelming relief of having him safe in my arms again.

"I missed you too, Daddy! The scary lady took me away, and Caleb hurt Auntie Nana really bad."

Max launched into an animated account of his terrifying ordeal, describing how mean and loud the "scary ladies" had been throughout his captivity. I asked gentle questions to show I was listening intently while being careful not to let him dwell too deeply on the traumatic memories.

"Max, those scary people will never be able to take you again. Daddy gives you his solemn word on that."

"And nobody's going to hurt Auntie Nana anymore either, right Daddy? I really didn't like seeing that!"

"That's absolutely right, son. Auntie Carmen is completely safe now and no one will ever hurt her again."

"Daddy, Mommy told me that you and her have important jobs here." His curious little eyes sparkled with anticipation as he waited for my response.

"Yes son, that’s exactly right. Would you like to see where Daddy conducts his business?"

"Yessss!" he squealed with pure excitement, throwing his little arms up in the air. "Can I have an important job here with you too, Daddy?"

"Absolutely you can, once you’re all grown up and ready. But until then, you can visit whenever you want."

This whole experience was as new and overwhelming for me as it was for him. I called Taylor over to conduct examinations of both Max and Ivy in my office, then lifted my son into my arms to give him the grand tour as he peppered me with endless questions about everything he observed.

Back in my office, the pediatrician conducted a thorough examination of Max and drew blood samples for comprehensive testing, while Taylor checked on Ivy and collected samples for her medical evaluation as well.

"Caleb, you can breathe easy now. Both your son and girlfriend are in excellent health," Taylor reported with a reassuring smile that lifted a massive weight from my shoulders. "Ivy confirmed she wasn’t physically assaulted or injured in any falls during her captivity, so her pregnancy remains completely stable. The emergency room physician who initially treated her is a colleague of mine who performed an ultrasound confirming everything looks perfect. She forwarded me the complete medical file. Greenleaf hospital also sent me Max’s records. He’s showing mild dehydration, but that can be easily managed at home with proper care."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Taylor. You can’t imagine how relieved I am to hear that," I said, feeling like I could finally breathe normally again.

"My pleasure! Well, we need to head back to the hospital now. Ivy, I’m absolutely thrilled that everything turned out okay. I’ll contact you immediately when the test results come back." He embraced Ivy warmly before turning to Max, who was now settled comfortably in her lap. "And you, little champion, keep being such a good protector for your mommy."

"I will!" Max replied with a bright smile, enthusiastically giving him a high-five that had everyone in the room grinning.

Chapter 173 Stairwell Seduction

Dominic’s POV

I had been trying for days to get Gemma to hear me out, but learning that I was at the compound with Beatrix last week only deepened her fury. Sure, I planned to come clean, but her discovering it because she overheard me discussing it just made my impossible situation even more complicated. My day was already heading straight to hell.

Sitting in the Thorne Syndicate reception area, I racked my brain for ways to corner Gemma for a conversation without giving her an escape route and without Zoe threatening to castrate me with her favorite switchblade again.

What the hell was I thinking when I walked straight into Beatrix’s trap? Complete moron move. Beatrix showed up at my door claiming she needed protection from some rival family thugs, and like some white knight wannabe, I let her stay at my safehouse. Several bottles of whiskey later, with her pushing all my buttons and my brain switching off in favor of other body parts, I ended up in bed with a woman I cannot stand. As my mother always says, old habits die hard, and I have always been a player in this famiglia. But Gemma is different. I want her, need her more than I care to admit.

"Darling, I caught the earliest flight from Miami! How is Caleb holding up after that warehouse incident?" That familiar voice cut through my thoughts like nails on a chalkboard. Perfect, my day just reached rock bottom.

"Mom! What brings you here? Weren’t you supposed to be at that spa retreat in the Bahamas with the other famiglia wives?" I stood and approached my mother, allowing her to plant a kiss on my cheek.

"Sweetheart, don’t be ridiculous. Family comes first, and Caleb is family! I came to offer my support during this difficult time," she declared as if stating the obvious.

Glancing over my shoulder, I spotted a lineup of women watching me with barely concealed amusement: Zoe, Nora, Ruby, Lila, and Gemma. Their mocking smiles made my stomach clench. Zoe, being the worst of the bunch and knowing my mother well from years of famiglia gatherings, stepped forward first.

"Bee! How wonderful that you are here!" Zoe approached and exchanged air kisses with my mother. "Perhaps with you around, your son might actually behave like a civilized member of this organization."

"Oh, Zoe, I swear I tried my best raising this boy, but somewhere along the way things went sideways," my mother shot me a look of pure disappointment while I just exhaled heavily.

"Bee, that is not your fault," Nora chimed in, also familiar with my mother from the wives' auxiliary meetings, stepping forward with the same greeting ritual.

"Now tell me, ladies. Which one of you is Gemma?" my mother asked without missing a beat.

"Mom, aren't you here for Caleb?" I interjected, desperate to redirect her attention away from my personal disasters.

"But I have plenty of time to apologize to this young woman on your behalf!" My mother fixed me with that stern look I remembered from childhood, the same one she used when I brought home stray bullets in my backpack.

"I am Gemma, Mrs. Robinson." Gemma stepped forward and introduced herself politely, her voice carefully neutral.

"Oh my goodness, you are absolutely stunning, dear!" My mother beamed at Gemma. "Sweetheart, you better win her forgiveness quickly, because a beautiful young woman like this must have made men lining up around the block, even in our dangerous world." My mother's observation hit like a punch to the gut, reminding me of exactly what I stood to lose.

"I would love to know how you found out about this situation," I commented, though I already suspected the answer.

"Oh, darling, your mother and I have lengthy phone conversations about all the famiglia gossip!" Zoe smiled at me with pure malice, clearly enjoying my discomfort.

"Naturally!" I snorted and turned away, walking off. "So, my dear colleagues, you can handle my sweet mama and her interrogation techniques."

I retreated to the emergency stairwell, leaning against the cool wall while contemplating the disaster of my mother arriving while Gemma wanted to put a bullet between my eyes. That is when I heard Gemma's voice through the heavy steel door.

"Lila, I am just going to get some coffee from the break room. I will be right back."

I yanked open the door and in one swift motion grabbed Gemma's arm, pulling her into the stairwell. I pressed her against the concrete wall, molding my body against hers. She was so shocked by being grabbed that she froze, staring at me like I had lost my mind.

"Gemma, we need to talk," I said, looking directly into her dark eyes.

"About what, Dominic? About how I found you half-naked at your safehouse with that backstabbing witch? Or about whatever you were doing at the compound with that same witch? Either way, I refuse to discuss that woman! And I refuse to talk to you!" Gemma's eyes blazed with pure hatred.

"Gemma, please," I pleaded. "Let me explain what happened."

"You honestly believe what you did has some reasonable explanation?" She looked at me with complete disbelief.

"Yes. It might not be excusable, but it can be explained. And you need to give me the chance to apologize properly." I was practically begging, something I never did in this business.

"I do not need to give you anything!" she shot back. "And please, let me go!"

"Are you absolutely certain you want me to let you go?" I asked, pressing her more firmly against the wall. "Are you sure you do not miss me? Miss my kisses?"

I leaned down and captured her mouth before she could respond. I kissed her aggressively, my tongue claiming her mouth completely. She struggled against my hold initially, but eventually she returned the kiss with matching intensity. When we broke apart, both gasping for air, I spoke directly into her ear.

"Are you positive, Gemma, that you can resist my touch?" I sucked on her earlobe the same way I used to tease her most sensitive spots, drawing a moan from her lips. "Are you certain it is not worth listening to me, forgiving me, and giving me another chance?"

While speaking, I unbuttoned her black silk blouse and pushed down her bra cup, cupping her breast in my palm, massaging and teasing her nipple between my fingers.

"Are you sure you will find someone else in this famiglia who can make you feel the way I do?"

I continued my teasing, knowing she was close to the edge. Gemma was incredibly responsive, which drove me wild. I tangled my fingers in her dark hair at the base of her neck and lowered my mouth to her breasts, beginning my assault. I kissed and sucked her swollen nipples, giving gentle bites and long licks. Gemma began releasing those soft, low, intoxicating moans I craved.

I could have taken her right there against the stairwell wall, but that was not my goal. I wanted to watch her come undone from my touch, to remember how incredible we were together.

I continued worshipping her breasts while sliding my other hand up her thighs, lifting her skirt just enough to slip my hand beneath her panties. Gemma was already moving against my fingers, completely wet and burning with need. She was passionate and intense, sensual and seductive. It made me crazy. Just hearing her soft moans had me rock hard, remembering how amazing she felt wrapped around me.

My fingers worked relentlessly at her entrance and Gemma was slick, swollen and ready to explode. I slid my fingers deep inside her tight warmth and circled her sensitive spot with my thumb, while continuing to lavish attention on her breasts. It did not take long for Gemma to reach her climax, pulsing around my fingers as her release coated my hand.

She was breathing hard, eyes closed, slumped against the wall. I withdrew my fingers and sucked them clean one by one, savoring her taste. Her eyes flew open watching me lick my fingers.

"You taste incredible, Gemma."

I straightened her skirt, fixed her bra and rebuttoned her blouse. I smoothed her dark hair and kissed her mouth gently, pulling her into an embrace that melted our bodies together.

"Songbird, please give me the chance to fix the mess I made," I begged. My days without this woman had been pure torture in this dangerous world we inhabited.

"You should not have done it." Gemma pushed me away, wiped away a tear, and left me standing there alone.

I ran my hands through my hair in complete frustration. How was I going to win this woman back in a world where trust once broken could be deadly?

Chapter 174 Saturday Wedding Vows

Caleb's POV

After the medical team departed from our penthouse, I pulled Ivy against my chest, pressing my lips to Max's forehead as he rested in her arms. The terror that had consumed me during those hellish days finally began to recede, replaced by fierce relief that burned through my veins like fire. Never again would I allow them to slip through my fingers into enemy hands.

"My beautiful queen, you cannot comprehend the agony that tore through me these past few days. Knowing my entire world was trapped in Roman's filthy hands nearly shattered what remains of my sanity. The rage consumed every fiber of my being, threatening to burn down everything I had built if it meant getting you both back," I whispered against her hair, threading our fingers together as we found ourselves alone in the sanctuary of our home.

"I descended into madness the moment we discovered Roman had taken our son," Ivy's voice trembled with residual fear, her emerald eyes still reflecting the shadows of our recent nightmare.

I brushed my lips across her temple before carefully lifting Max into my arms, guiding Ivy to settle beside me on the leather sofa. Here we were, a complete family unit forged in blood and violence, basking in the overwhelming love that crackled between us like electricity in the storm. Sleep gradually claimed

our boy, his soft breathing creating a gentle rhythm against my chest while his small fingers splayed across the fabric of my shirt with complete trust. The warmth of my woman pressed against my side, her head finding its natural place on my shoulder, created a perfect moment of peace in our world of chaos and gunfire.

Family had been nothing but a distant memory since my parents fell to Roman's car bomb. How desperately I had craved this solid foundation, someone who could look past the blood on my hands and the bodies in my wake, who would stand by my side through any war while loving me without conditions. Gratitude and possessive joy swelled within my chest as we existed as one united force against the darkness.

"Tesoro, I need to make you my wife immediately. We should take advantage of your parents being here in the city. If you want anyone else from your hometown to witness our blood oath, I will have them flown in within hours," I murmured, placing another reverent kiss atop her silken hair.

"What exactly are you suggesting? A wedding this week? Because I seriously doubt my father has any intention of extending his stay beyond that timeframe," Ivy responded with that sharp edge I had grown to adore, though my expression remained deadly serious.

"I want to marry you today. Tomorrow is the absolute latest I can tolerate." Her eyes widened in shock at my declaration, surprise painting her beautiful features.

"You cannot be serious."

"I am completely serious," I stated with the same finality I used when ordering executions. "You mentioned wanting a garden ceremony at our estate. I have the resources and connections to orchestrate everything according to your exact specifications. But I refuse to wait any longer."

"Why such urgency, Caleb? This intensity seems extreme, especially since I have already moved into your fortress," Ivy studied my face with those intelligent green eyes, searching for hidden motives. I drew a deep breath before revealing the depths of my obsession.

"I need to marry you because you represent everything that keeps me human in this blood-soaked world. You breathe life into my blackened soul, providing purpose where only vengeance existed before. My life without your presence was nothing but calculated violence and empty conquest. You gave me

someone worth coming home to each night, someone to kill for, to cherish beyond reason or logic. You make me feel alive instead of merely existing as a monster. You exceed every fantasy I dared entertain, surpass what I believed my damned soul could deserve. I want to pledge my life, my empire, my undying devotion before our soldiers and before whatever gods still listen to men like me. I honor my oaths completely, Ivy, and I want what my parents shared before Roman murdered them. We are already bound by blood spilled together, by our son, by the enemies we have destroyed side by side, but I need to claim you in every way possible, including before heaven and hell themselves. My certainty is absolute, and waiting is torture."

Upon finishing my declaration, tears streamed down Ivy's face while she wore the most radiant smile I had ever witnessed. My desperate need for her answer intensified as she remained silent, simply beaming through her tears like sunlight breaking through storm clouds. Anxiety clawed at my composure until I could contain myself no longer.

"Answer me, tesoro. I am begging you." Ivy silenced my plea by capturing my mouth with hers in a kiss that tasted of promises and forever.

"What other answer could there be? Caleb, from the moment you entered my world, I was lost. My love began before we truly knew each other, from that first night at the auction house. When I glimpsed those incredible blue eyes beneath your mask, not even knowing who you were, you conquered my heart completely. Then, when I thought life would never offer such consuming passion again, our eyes met in that office, and choice became meaningless. You invaded every corner of my soul, becoming an absolute certainty within me. How could I not love you with everything I am? Because I only feel truly alive when I stand beside you in this darkness. I found myself through you. Never have I felt so complete, so fiercely protected, so deeply claimed. We have survived hell together in such a short time, yet we found our way back to each other. So yes, Caleb, I want to bind myself to you in every possible way."

Ivy's words drew tears of pure possession from my eyes, leaving me suspended in euphoria so intense that only our sleeping son prevented me from roaring my triumph to the city below. I claimed her mouth with a kiss that contained every ounce of obsession residing in my heart, needing her to feel the wild beating of my pulse, the absolute certainty of my devotion flowing through that connection. When we parted, I remained hovering above her lips, eyes closed, completely intoxicated by her breath.

"However," Ivy began as she nestled against my shoulder once more.

"Must there be conditions, my queen? Can you not simply surrender and remain blissfully mine forever?" I asked, hearing her soft laughter.

"However, I want our wedding this weekend afternoon in our garden," she announced, sending my heart racing wildly again. "I need time to plan every detail and find the perfect wedding dress."

"Agreed," I sighed with mock resignation. "I suppose I can endure waiting until then. We still have a few days."

We remained in our perfect sanctuary until knocking interrupted our peace. Ivy rose to answer the door, careful not to disturb Max. She pressed her finger to her lips, requesting silence from our family as they filled our living room with warmth and deadly loyalty.

Chapter 175 New Positions Offered

Ivy’s POV

After the elaborate family lunch concluded, I managed to convince Caleb that Max would be safer returning to the secured compound with my parents, Carmen and Walter. Mountains of syndicate business still awaited our attention, and Max desperately needed rest away from the constant tension of our operations. Our parents understood the dangerous nature of our world completely and finally departed after their prolonged farewells, escorted by armed guards.

Scott and Heidi retreated to the lower floors to finalize the remaining money laundering documentation from our recent audit.

"Thank God! I thought they’d never leave," Xavier groaned as the reinforced elevator doors sealed shut, collapsing into his leather chair behind the bulletproof desk.

A collective sigh swept through our inner circle. Caleb immediately summoned his capos into his private office for strategic discussions. Nora had already begun dismantling the elaborate security setup that had transformed our headquarters reception area, along with the emergency safe rooms in Xavier’s office, efficiently coordinating the restoration of normal syndicate operations. I retreated to my office alongside Ruby and Zoe to process the accumulation of urgent territory reports and financial transfers, while Gemma and Lila remained stationed at communications, managing encrypted messages, distributing coded directives, and rescheduling the meetings we’d been forced to postpone during the recent crisis.

Exhausting hours passed before we reconvened in the secure conference room for much-needed coffee. Fatigue weighed heavily on all of us, and the safety of our homes called temptingly, but critical family business still demanded our immediate attention.

"Ladies, we need to discuss something important with all of you. We're implementing some significant changes in our organizational structure," Caleb announced, immediately capturing our undivided attention.

"What kind of changes are you planning?" I inquired with growing curiosity.

"We're restructuring several of your current positions within the family hierarchy," Dominic explained matter-of-factly.

"What exactly does that mean?" Zoe pressed for clarification.

"Ruby, I want to offer you an executive position as personal aide to one of our territory commanders. It's essentially equivalent to the positions Zoe and Ivy currently hold," Caleb stated directly. "I've discussed this thoroughly with Dominic and secured his complete agreement. It's primarily administrative coordination, and I believe you possess exactly the profile we need for this operation. I require someone I can trust implicitly, someone with natural leadership capabilities who can handle sensitive information. I've observed your performance during our recent conflicts, Ruby, and you're absolutely perfect for this opportunity. Naturally, the compensation package reflects the position's responsibilities and the associated risks. If you're interested, you can begin Monday morning."

"Caleb, this sounds like an incredible advancement," Ruby responded with obvious interest. "Sweetie, you won't hold this transfer against me, will you?" Ruby asked Dominic teasingly, deliberately provoking him.

"Continue calling me sweetie, and I'll refuse to release you from your current assignment," Dominic grumbled threateningly, triggering laughter throughout the room.

"I accept completely, Caleb. I'm absolutely thrilled," Ruby declared excitedly. "This mysterious commander doesn't know about his new aide yet, does he?"

"He’s completely unaware he’s even being appointed to the position. But he’ll be delighted to have your assistance," Caleb smiled meaningfully at her, and she returned the expression as if they shared some enormous secret.

"Gemma, we’re also relocating you within the organization..."

"You can terminate my involvement if necessary, but I absolutely refuse to work directly under Dominic’s command," Gemma interrupted Caleb firmly, causing Dominic to snort with indignation.

"That’s not the plan at all, Gemma! We’re expanding operations to fill positions vacated by the elimination of those involved in the recent betrayal investigation, and we want to offer you a significant administrative role in our legitimate enterprises," Xavier clarified patiently. "Something that properly utilizes your qualifications and experience while keeping you removed from direct combat operations."

Gemma’s face transformed with a brilliant smile. "Are you serious?" she asked, barely containing her excitement.

"Absolutely serious. We want you to select your preferred sector. We have openings throughout our front operations - import businesses, financial consulting, property management, and administrative coordination. Each sector has an available supervisory position, which is precisely what we’re offering you," Caleb informed her, leaving Gemma practically euphoric.

"Import operations, Caleb, definitely import coordination!" she responded without hesitation.

"Import coordination it is, then," Caleb confirmed with satisfaction.

"Lila, you’re joining our inner circle as well. You’ll become our new executive communications coordinator, if you’re interested," Xavier announced to Lila.

"Are you dismissing me from your service, Don Donato?" Lila asked Dominic with mock concern.

"These idiots have decided to systematically steal all my most capable operatives," Dominic complained with exaggerated petulance. "But I negotiated terms with them, so yes, I’m releasing you as well.

Especially considering the position and compensation they're offering are substantially superior to anything I can provide. The final decision remains entirely yours whether to transfer or remain under my command."

"I think I'll definitely transfer!" Lila declared with undisguised enthusiasm.

"Are you planning to reassign me as well, you manipulative witch?" Zoe asked with feigned hurt.

"I cannot survive without you, you psychopathic, completely insane, profanity-spewing, unfiltered woman," Dominic grasped Zoe's hand across the table and smiled warmly at her.

"I've never been so delighted to receive such creative compliments!" Zoe broke into radiant laughter, infecting everyone else. "I cannot function without you either, my beloved pushover!"

"Should I be concerned about you recruiting my girlfriend, Dominic?" Finn asked with obvious jealousy.

"Relax completely, Finn, my connection with Zoe is purely professional!" Dominic joked and winked conspiratorially at my friend. "But Nora, I definitely want you on my team."

"Whoa, hold on there, Romeo! I'm blissfully married, and you're absolutely not my type," Nora hurried to clarify.

"What the hell, gorgeous! You're integral to our negotiated arrangement," Jude protested loudly.

"Jude, since when did I become a negotiable asset?" Nora questioned her husband as the men erupted in laughter.

"Crazy woman, you're stunning, but you're definitely not my type either," Dominic said through his laughter.

"I didn't realize you actually had a type, Dominic," Ruby commented dryly. "I always assumed you simply haven't settled down yet because you can't distinguish which prospects are actually female."

"How absolutely terrible, Ruby," Dominic feigned deep offense. "Nora, I know you've never wanted to work alongside Jude in family operations, so I'm offering you a position coordinating with my territory supervisor directly. You'll adore him. He's another eccentric who constantly entertains everyone!"

"You realize I currently have legitimate employment, right?" Nora announced as if revealing groundbreaking news.

"Which you've maintained for years without advancement opportunities or adequate protection," Jude added supportively.

"Fine. I accept," Nora surrendered without further argument.

"Everything is settled perfectly. You're all officially off duty until Monday morning. That includes you, Jude. You've worked incredibly hard during these past dangerous days, and I honestly don't know how we would have managed without your dedication and loyalty. I'll remain grateful for the rest of my life. You're the most amazing allies imaginable," Caleb said emotionally. "Actually, let me correct that statement. You're family, the most wonderful family possible!"

"How absolutely beautiful!" Xavier smiled and patted his friend's back affectionately.

We exchanged farewells, and I arranged with the girls to meet tomorrow to begin serious wedding preparations. Jude assured me once more before departing that I would have an engagement celebration befitting absolute royalty. I approached the elevator, but Caleb caught my arm, explaining he still had one pending matter requiring my personal attention.

Chapter 176 Wedding Announcement

Ivy's POV

When I pushed open Caleb's private office door at Thorne Syndicate headquarters, our tight-knit crew of mafia associates flooded into the room like a tactical breach.

"Dear God, I need to hold my precious godson! Is he sleeping?" Zoe's face crumpled with disappointment as she gazed at Max nestled securely in Caleb's arms.

"Ivy, for the love of all that's sacred, lock that door immediately." Finn burst through the entrance, his usual swagger replaced by something bordering on genuine terror.

"Finn, what the hell is wrong with you? You look like you've witnessed a federal raid." I couldn't hide my confusion as he twisted the deadbolt behind him with the desperation of someone barricading against a SWAT team.

"A raid would be preferable to what's actually downstairs. We're talking about my father from the Chicago outfit, your parents from witness protection, Zoe's family from the Portland syndicate, Caleb's foster parents from retirement, Xavier's old-school Italian famiglia, Dominic's socialite mother, and even Walter, Carmen, and little Katelyn from the neutral territories." Finn's face had drained of all color, like he'd witnessed an execution.

"Caleb's foster parents flew in?" My eyebrows shot up in surprise.

"Heidi and Scott caught the red-eye from Vegas this morning." Finn's explanation made warmth spread through my chest.

"Your famiglia made the trip too, Xavier? And your mother came, Dominic?" Caleb's curiosity was tinged with genuine affection.

"Yeah, boss, they got wind of everything through Finn's old man's connections and booked the first available charter. They wanted to be here for you during this territory consolidation. But I'm not gonna lie, they're pushing me to the breaking point!" Xavier ran his hands through his hair in exasperation.

"My mother pulled the same move. She was at some exclusive spa retreat with her society circle in the Hamptons, and she abandoned her detox treatments to race back here. But she's also determined to meet Gemma, and I'm not confident that encounter will end well for anyone involved." Dominic paced the room like a caged predator.

"What's your problem, Dominic? You might be a complete disaster with women, but your mother is charming and I genuinely enjoyed her company." Gemma's voice carried a sharp edge of irritation.

"The problem is my mother doesn't exactly approve of my bachelor lifestyle choices." Dominic met her glare head-on.

"You don't help your own reputation, you absolute player!" Zoe's correction sent ripples of laughter through the room.

"Alright, but why are you all hiding from what sounds like a perfectly normal family gathering?" Caleb's question was reasonable enough.

"Normal? Caleb, this isn't just a family gathering. These people are like a coordinated strike force with a master plan to reform each and every one of us into respectable citizens!" Finn's terror was so genuine it was almost endearing.

"Finn might be dramatizing slightly, but I'll be honest with you, even I was feeling overwhelmed by their unified front." Lila's admission painted a clear picture of the chaos waiting downstairs.

"Lila, my mother tried to personally serve me lunch because she thinks I'm neglecting my health! Look at me, do I appear malnourished?" Finn gestured wildly at his clearly muscular build, his physique evident even through his expensive suit.

"So how did you manage to escape their surveillance?" Caleb leaned forward with genuine interest.

"Ah, my friend, I orchestrated a magnificent catered lunch in the main conference room." Jude revealed their escape strategy with the pride of a master tactician. "Thank whatever higher power exists that my parents and Nora's famiglia are safely in Houston and completely unaware of this situation, or we'd have an even larger invasion on our hands."

"Well, since the family coalition is temporarily occupied with their feast, let's make the most of this brief window of freedom. Because I have a feeling they're going to be monitoring our every move for the rest of the week." My words triggered a chorus of horrified protests.

"Not happening, Ivy. I'm already having the private jet fueled to transport the entire East Coast delegation back where they came from." Xavier's voice held the desperation of a man at his breaking point.

"And I've already booked my mother on a luxury European tour that'll keep her occupied and away from my business for an extended period." Dominic's complaint carried equal weight.

"Unfortunately for all of you, those evacuation plans are going to have to wait. We need every single one of them to remain here until Sunday, minimum." My serious tone cut through their protests.

"Have you completely lost your sanity, Ivy! It took considerable strategic maneuvering to get my transfer approved specifically so my father couldn't oversee my every operation. And now you want him camping out in my territory until Sunday?" Finn's eyes were wide with disbelief.

"Listen, Ivy, I never thought I'd have to say this to you of all people, but it's going to be them or me! I can't survive much more of this maternal supervision!" Zoe's declaration was so dramatic I couldn't suppress my laughter.

"You're all being incredibly theatrical. But they're staying, and so are all of you." I paused for maximum effect.

"Come on, Ivy, you better have one hell of a convincing argument or I'm joining that European tour myself." Dominic's threat lacked conviction.

"You'd get kicked off for trying to charm the tour guide's grandmother," Gemma's jab at Dominic made him wince visibly. "So, Ivy, quit torturing us and reveal your hand. Why do they all have to remain in our territory?"

"Because Caleb and I are getting married this Saturday!" My announcement exploded through the room, followed immediately by cheers and applause that could probably be heard throughout the entire building.

"Excellent, you just startled my son awake. Easy there, Max, it's just your completely insane godmother making noise." Caleb's voice was gentle as he soothed our baby, who had jerked awake at the sudden commotion.

"Oh, sweet prince, godmommy is so sorry!" Zoe immediately swooped in to lift Max from Caleb's arms. "Step back, you overgrown enforcer," she commanded Caleb firmly when he attempted to protest losing his son.

"Finally! Welcome to the married life!" Nora practically bounced with excitement. "I was seriously considering asking Jude for a trial separation just so I could experience being single again."

"But why Saturday specifically?" Sarah's practical question cut through the celebration.

"Now there's someone who understands priorities!" Caleb's grin was infectious. "I lobbied hard for tomorrow, but Ivy insists she needs a few days to coordinate everything and find the perfect dress."

"My mind is already spinning with a thousand possibilities!" Ruby's eyes lit up with the fervor of someone who lived for high-stakes events. "You're officially off duty for the rest of the week, my friend. We're going to create a wedding that rivals royal ceremonies. Right, ladies?" The chorus of agreement was immediate and enthusiastic.

"Perfect timing, because I already cleared your entire schedule." Gemma's efficiency never ceased to amaze me.

"If you're looking for honeymoon suggestions, that European tour is still available," Dominic's joke sent everyone into fresh peals of laughter.

These people were everything to me. They were the kind of allies who would eliminate threats at a moment's notice, who had become the chosen famiglia we had built together, bound by loyalty rather than blood.

"But I need you all to keep this confidential for now. I want to do this properly and ask Ivy's parents for their blessing. Jude, could you arrange a private dinner?" Caleb's traditional approach touched something deep in my heart.

"Caleb, you don’t have to go through all that formality." I reached for his hand.

"I absolutely do. I want to honor your parents properly. Everything about this needs to be done the traditional way." His explanation was filled with conviction.

"Dinner tomorrow then, because today has already exhausted us all. And we’ll all be there because I wouldn’t miss this for the world." Jude’s enthusiasm was contagious.

"We’ll host it at my compound," Xavier immediately volunteered.

"Actually, no." I interrupted gently. "Let’s have it at our house. What do you think, love?"

"I think it sounds absolutely perfect!" Caleb’s smile could have powered the entire syndicate.

"But Ivy, that’s a massive crowd. I know your penthouse is spacious, but..." Jude’s practical concern was valid.

"I’m not talking about the penthouse. I mean the estate that belonged to Caleb’s parents." My words created a moment of tension as everyone’s eyes shifted to Caleb with concern.

"We visited there earlier this week. That’s where I want to build our legacy together and watch our children take their first steps." Caleb’s voice carried deep emotion.

"You actually went inside?" Xavier’s question acknowledged what everyone knew, that Caleb had avoided that estate for years. Caleb’s nod was firm.

"Then it’s settled. You’re going to have an engagement dinner worthy of syndicate royalty." Xavier’s declaration was final.

"But let us handle the dinner arrangements, boys." Nora’s suggestion was met with immediate resistance.

"Absolutely not! You ladies get the entire wedding to orchestrate. The engagement dinner belongs to us men!" Jude's competitive spirit wouldn't accept any negotiation.

"Ladies, consider yourselves officially on vacation for the rest of the week." Dominic addressed Zoe, Ruby, and Lila. "And clear my schedule too, Zoe."

"Already handled that, you shameless player." Zoe had clearly embraced her new favorite nickname for Dominic.

Our peaceful moment was short-lived as the door burst open and the family coalition streamed in, their worried faces scanning the room before they herded us toward the conference room where lunch was waiting. The brief respite was over, but somehow, with our wedding announcement still fresh in the air, even the prospect of managing our well-meaning but overwhelming parents seemed entirely manageable.

Chapter 177 Stolen Sanctuary

Caleb's POV

The family compound buzzed with constant movement as my lieutenants and their wives occupied every corner of the estate. Finding a moment alone with Ivy had become nearly impossible with the heightened security protocols and endless strategy meetings. I guided her toward my private study, the one room in this fortress where we could steal precious time together without interruption.

My fingers turned the heavy deadbolt with practiced precision. The metallic click resonated through the soundproofed space as I led her directly to my massive oak desk where I conducted the family's most sensitive business. My pulse hammered against my throat with an anticipation that had been consuming me since dawn.

"This place feels like a war council today and I refuse to wait any longer for everyone to clear out." My voice emerged rougher than intended as I leaned close to her ear. "You have invaded every corner of my mind. Every second apart from you has been agony, my beautiful queen."

Her radiant smile transformed her entire face. "The feeling has been completely mutual."

I claimed her mouth immediately, pulling her against me with an urgency that surprised even myself. My hands explored every curve I had memorized yet still desperately craved to rediscover. I settled into my leather chair and drew her down with me, positioning her so she straddled my lap. The movement caused her dress to slide up her thighs, revealing more of her silken skin.

The fire between us intensified as she pressed against me. I could feel her warmth through the thin barrier of our clothing, and my body responded instantly. My arousal strained against my pants, seeking the connection we both desperately needed. Our mouths moved together with increasing hunger as my hands roamed across her back and shoulders.

Time seemed suspended as I began removing each piece of her clothing with methodical care. My fingers worked the buttons of her blouse one by one, watching her breath quicken with each small victory. I pushed the fabric from her shoulders and let it flutter to the Persian carpet below. My palms traced circular patterns down her spine, making her arch into my touch, before finding the single button at her skirt's waistband.

The zipper yielded under my careful attention. I gathered the material in my hands, bunching it together before lifting it over her head in one fluid motion. The skirt joined her blouse on my office floor, leaving her in nothing but delicate lace undergarments that made my throat go dry.

Liquid fire coursed through my veins as she moved against me. Every subtle shift of her hips sent waves of sensation through my body, making me harder and more desperate for her. I could barely concentrate on anything beyond the exquisite friction between us and the way her breathing had become shallow and quick.

Her dampness seeped through the thin lace, and I knew she wanted this as much as I did. My hands found the clasp of her bra, and with practiced ease, I freed her from the constraint. My fingertips followed the straps down her arms with torturous slowness, savoring every inch of newly exposed skin before adding the garment to our growing pile of discarded clothes.

Unable to maintain my restraint any longer, I stood and swept her into my arms, pushing the chair aside with my hip. I placed her on the edge of my desk, never breaking the kiss that had become as essential as breathing. My hands mapped her body with renewed fervor, tracing her ribs and the gentle curve of her stomach that always made me smile.

When I reached her breasts, I took my time worshipping them with my palms and fingers. I alternated between gentle caresses and more insistent touches, rolling her nipples between my fingers until soft moans escaped her lips and vibrated against mine.

My hands traveled south again, hooking into the delicate strings of her panties. I pulled back just enough to meet her eyes and flashed what I hoped was a wicked grin.

"I should purchase an entire lingerie collection for you." Before she could respond, I tore the fragile material apart with one swift motion, making her laugh at my apparent inability to remove her underwear without destroying it.

She lay before me completely bare and breathtaking. When I touched her most intimate place, I found her slick with desire, ready for me. The discovery darkened my ice-blue eyes with raw desire, and I felt my control snap like a taut wire.

All patience abandoned me in that moment. I guided her back onto the desk surface, freed myself from my pants with hurried movements, and joined with her as if the world might end if I waited another second.

I buried myself completely inside her warmth with one powerful thrust, then remained perfectly still. I needed to feel every sensation, to memorize the way she surrounded me so perfectly. My lips found her neck, alternating between gentle kisses and playful nips that made her gasp beneath me.

The feeling of being completely enveloped by the woman I loved was almost overwhelming. But even as I savored the connection, I withdrew slowly, watching her face as she whimpered at the loss. A satisfied smile crossed my lips before I drove back into her, establishing a rhythm that started gentle but quickly became more demanding.

Our breathing grew ragged as I moved within her, the sounds of our passion filling the quiet office. Her hips rose to meet every thrust, our bodies finding a perfect synchronization that spoke to something deeper than physical desire.

When I felt her muscles begin to tighten around me, signaling her approaching climax, she threw her head back in abandon. Her legs trembled as they wrapped around my waist, pulling me deeper. The sight and sensation of her surrender pushed me over the edge, and I followed her into blissful release.

We remained tangled together afterward, her naked form pressed against my still-clothed body as we struggled to catch our breath. When our heart rates finally slowed, I stepped back and began removing my own clothes under her appreciative gaze. The afternoon was far from over, and I intended to make the most of our stolen time together in this sanctuary.

Chapter 178 Fresh Start Beckons

Martinez's POV

After the compound raid, our first stop was the safe house where the fugitive Rossi was supposedly hiding. The place turned out to be a dead end. According to our contacts, Rossi and his wife had been there earlier but vanished shortly before our arrival.

Exhaustion weighed on my shoulders like lead, but stopping wasn't an option. The interrogations of those idiots we'd arrested during the Thorne operation still awaited me. After that, I'd catch a flight back to my territory. I hadn't managed a proper conversation with Xavier yet, but I planned to call him once I got some rest. That petite woman I'd spotted at the Thorne compound kept nagging at my thoughts.

I dropped into the chair facing Lieutenant Adler's desk. She offered whiskey, which I accepted gratefully. The liquor might chase away some of this bone-deep fatigue.

"Adler, something stinks about Rossi disappearing right before we showed up. What's your take?" I asked, savoring the burning liquid.

"I hate it too," Adler settled into her chair with her own glass. "I keep circling back to the same conclusion. He's got an informant inside the Thorne Syndicate. Someone even his criminal partners don't know about."

"That tracks. You planning to warn Caleb?"

"Absolutely. This whole case is like untangling a spider web. Multiple betrayals running for years and nobody caught on."

"Yeah, honestly, I can’t figure out if Rossi’s motivated by greed, hatred, or jealousy."

"All three, Martinez."

The memory of finding that boy chained to the table hit me again. "What those two psychotic women did to that kid was beyond sick. He was shackled by his ankle, filthy, starving, crying. I wanted to empty my clip into both of them. Think they’ll cooperate?"

"Highly doubtful. We’re dealing with two seriously unhinged individuals. That Rossi woman is completely detached from reality." I recalled her meltdown during transport about the lack of proper accommodations. Adler nearly cried laughing when I told her. "My only regret is having to fly back to my territory after these interrogations. I’d really like to see this vendetta through to the finish."

"Martinez, you’ve got the time and experience for a specialized position in a bigger city. Why are you still stuck managing street operations?"

Adler leaned back, genuinely curious.

"Honestly, I’m not entirely sure myself," I admitted. "It’s home, I guess. Stayed out of convenience, being near family connections. But lately, I’ve been feeling restless. My territory’s too quiet and I love fieldwork like today’s operation. I’m built for action. After this case, when I get back, I’m calling the family council to see what’s available. Time for a change."

"You could come here. Our other enforcer retired recently, position’s open. I liked your field performance. You’d be valuable here. I’m getting too old to chase suspects, so we could help each other. We work well together, having a partner to command the other crew would be perfect."

"That would be incredible, Adler. We do click. But the council probably already has someone lined up. The specialized enforcement unit is extremely competitive."

Adler smiled and held up a finger. She grabbed the phone and called the family’s security coordinator. She explained the case, how I’d found the kidnapped boy, how crucial my help was during the compound search. She listened, smiled, hung up, and turned back to me.

"The coordinator’s an old friend. Maybe he can help bring you here," Adler explained, grinning.

"That would be amazing. Thanks for the support!"

We started the interrogations. Rossi’s daughter went first. As the fugitive’s child, maybe we could squeeze something useful from her. They brought her in restrained. The recorder positioned himself at the side table and began documenting.

"Rossi," Adler began, "you realize you’re in serious trouble, right?"

"I don’t know why. I didn’t do anything wrong. I was only at that awful place with the boy because my father sent me. Besides, it was just a harmless prank. Obviously, I wasn’t going to stay with the kid forever." Her voice was shrill, painfully high-pitched.

"You understand this constitutes kidnapping?" I asked, amazed by her cluelessness. "The penalty’s severe. Plus, you used the boy to prevent Caleb from marrying his woman." I glanced at Adler questioningly, making her chuckle. "I’m not sure if this qualifies as extortion by kidnapping or straight blackmail."

"Caleb belongs to me!" The deranged woman shrieked. "If that nobody Ivy hadn’t interfered, we’d already be married."

"So you thought kidnapping a child would make Caleb marry you?" Adler asked.

"He was going to marry me if you hadn’t meddled. By now I would’ve returned the brat."

"Why did you chain the boy?" I demanded, still furious about this detail.

"Because I wasn’t going to chase after him and Monica told me to tie him to the table leg," she responded as if it were perfectly normal. I wanted to throttle her, but Adler signaled me to stay calm.

"Rossi, where’s your father?"

"Daddy must be hiring the world's best fixers to get me out of here. He'll arrive soon and destroy you for treating me like this." She displayed her restrained wrists.

"I think you're mistaken. Your father's a fugitive," Adler stated.

"A fugitive from who? You're insane!" She laughed shortly.

"He's wanted for various crimes, including kidnapping Ivy, who's been found, naturally. But your father and mother fled. Apparently left their little girl behind."

"Daddy wouldn't do that," Rossi whimpered.

"Oh, he not only would, he did," I said cynically.

Rossi began wailing, volume escalating steadily. She cried with her mouth wide open, tears streaming like waterfalls. This woman crying was apocalyptic. She sobbed uninterrupted for an extended period while Adler and I sat as unwilling spectators. I thought she might dehydrate from crying so much.

We continued questioning, but each inquiry triggered fresh tears. Eventually, she claimed the kidnapping was Monica's idea, that she'd assured her it was just a harmless prank and they wouldn't hurt the boy. Beyond that, between crying like she was dying and complaining that she'd changed her appearance and he didn't even notice, which made no sense, her testimony was useless.

After Rossi was returned to her cell, they brought in Monica. She was shrewd. Monica possessed psychopathic coldness and refused to answer our questions. However, for certain questions, like why she kept the boy chained in those conditions, I caught a brief glimmer in her eyes and the shadow of a minimal smile, as if she was satisfied.

But at the interrogation's end, Adler asked a question that shattered her cold, indifferent facade.

"Monica, Rossi fled with his wife. It would benefit your situation if you provided information to help us find him."

"That moron ran away and left me here? He escaped with that stupid wife?" Monica was outraged. Her expression showed genuine perplexity. She truly didn't know her lover had abandoned her.

"That's how it appears," Adler observed. "Since you can't help with that, want to add anything to your statement? Your husband's outside wanting to see you."

"What's that idiot doing here? I don't want to see him! I filed for divorce recently."

"Fine. Take her back to the cell," Adler signaled the corner guard.

Next came Brodie, a despicable little worm. He didn't know much but said he'd met Rossi some years ago, occasionally did small jobs for him, and had arranged the location where they took Max. He refused to specify what work he did for Rossi and repeatedly called Ivy a slut and Max a bastard. I wanted to smash his face. Regarding Monica, he said he'd met her when he arrived at the location earlier and they'd been intimately involved since.

"I don't like the sound of these 'jobs' Brodie did for Rossi," I told Adler while waiting for one of the guards who'd been with Ivy.

"Me neither. We'll investigate that."

The interrogations of security guards Caleb and Fisher proved equally fruitless. Though they answered questions, they seemed like pawns doing grunt work. They needed employment but couldn't find it due to criminal records. They ended up working for the operation because their cousin knew Monica, who placed them there on condition they'd follow her orders when needed. They said the kidnappings were pre-planned and Rossi had promised good money, but they'd have to stay with Ivy until receiving orders. Rossi kept saying she was his guarantee. All communication happened by secure phone.

After finishing interrogations, it was time to head home. My phone rang repeatedly. I checked the screen and immediately answered the family coordinator. He informed me there was an opening at the enforcement station in Port Serenity and I'd be transferred there. He provided all information and asked if I had objections. When I said no, he told me to report to my new position Monday. I thanked him and looked at Adler with a huge smile.

"Your contact really is a great friend." I told her about my transfer and thanked her for everything. After saying goodbye, I headed to the airfield with my crew. Xavier had provided a private jet at our disposal, which was perfect.

Before leaving, I decided to call Xavier and thank him. I mentioned my transfer and said I'd like to see him when I returned. I took the opportunity to ask about the smiling short woman I'd seen at Thorne Syndicate reception. He told me her name was Lila and she was a friend of their associates. Now I had a name. When I moved, I'd have time to learn more about that cutie.

Chapter 179 Ring From The Vault

Caleb's POV

The morning sun cast long shadows across my office as I stared at the encrypted message from Detective Adler that had arrived during the night. Rossi remained at large, a venomous serpent slithering through the shadows of our territory. While I had been lost in Ivy's embrace, danger had been circling us like vultures waiting to feast on carrion.

I couldn't afford such distractions anymore. Not when my family faced mortal threats from every corner of this blood-soaked underworld.

My first call went to Fisher, my voice cutting through the dawn silence with deadly precision. "I need six of your most trusted soldiers at my compound within the hour. Full background verification, no exceptions."

"Already anticipated your needs, Don," Fisher's voice crackled through with practiced efficiency. "These men have served under me for years. I'd stake my life on their loyalty."

Soon after, a team of armed professionals arrived at my private residence. I observed as they systematically evaluated every entrance, every potential weakness in our defenses. Their presence should have provided comfort, but the knot of dread in my gut only tightened further.

I assembled my family in the main living area, Ivy cradling Max protectively while tension radiated from every line of her elegant frame. The security team leader, a scarred veteran named Anderson whose movements spoke of countless battlefield encounters, briefed us on the new operational protocols.

"Max doesn't move without two bodyguards," I commanded, my tone brooking absolutely no argument. "Ivy, you take a minimum of three armed escorts for any movement beyond these walls."

Ivy nodded without hesitation, and I could see the fear she was desperately trying to conceal behind her composed mask. She understood the gravity of our situation with the same clarity that I did.

"I'll be at headquarters handling some urgent family business," I informed her, pressing a tender kiss to her forehead. "My phone remains on at all times."

The drive to our legitimate front office felt interminable, every shadow seeming to conceal potential assassins. Once I arrived, I immediately contacted Detective Adler, my fingers drumming restlessly against my mahogany desk as the secure line connected.

"Detective, my apologies for the delayed response to your intelligence."

"No concerns, Thorne. I figured you needed time to process yesterday's developments."

"Regarding Rossi's escape from custody," I said, cutting directly to the heart of the matter. "Xavier mentioned he vanished just before your arrival. That timing suggests more than mere coincidence."

Detective Adler's pause carried weight. "I've been considering the same angle. Thorne, I believe you still harbor a traitor within your organization. Someone Rossi's known associates haven't identified. Someone who's been feeding him classified information."

The words struck me like physical blows. "You're informing me that after everything we've exposed, there's still a rat in my operation?"

"Search for someone who blends seamlessly into the background," Adler advised. "Someone with access to multiple departments, someone who observes more than they speak. The type of individual who becomes invisible precisely because they're always present."

I massaged my temples, feeling the crushing weight of perpetual betrayal pressing down on me. "I'll identify this snake."

"Exercise extreme caution, Thorne. Rossi has already demonstrated he'll eliminate anyone who threatens him. One additional matter - this Brodie character involved in the kidnapping operation. He was Ivy's former lover, correct?"

"Affirmative, they maintained a relationship for several years. She terminated it upon discovering his infidelity with her cousin."

"Fascinating. He claims he's maintained contact with Rossi for years. Does Ivy possess knowledge of this connection?"

"Absolutely not. She was completely devastated to learn of his involvement in Max's abduction."

"I suspected as much, but verification was necessary. Speaking of Ivy, when can I obtain her official testimony? I can visit your headquarters or she can come to the precinct."

"Could we arrange it for early next week at my office? I prefer limiting her exposure currently."

"Understood completely. I'll be there early next week."

After terminating the call, I immediately summoned Scott. Despite my instructions for him to take the weekend off, he'd insisted on working, claiming too many critical matters demanded attention. He arrived at my office within minutes, Heidi accompanying him.

I explained the situation regarding the potential infiltrator, watching as Scott's expression grew increasingly grave. "We must identify this individual rapidly. They're providing Rossi with dangerous tactical advantages."

"I'll initiate a comprehensive audit of all personnel immediately," Scott assured me. "I'll examine access records, communication patterns, everything."

"Excellent. However, Scott, there's another matter I wish to discuss." I leaned back in my leather chair, studying the man who had proven himself invaluable. "Your work here has been exceptional. You've resolved not just the embezzlement issues but identified numerous other operational problems. I want you to remain permanently."

Scott's eyes widened with surprise. "Are you offering me a position, Caleb?"

"I'm offering you a directorship. I want to establish an internal audit department with you as the head. You'd have complete autonomy and I'd also value your counsel as a business advisor."

The transformation in Scott's expression was remarkable. "When I lost everything, I thought my career was finished. The Morgans and Ivy threw me a lifeline, and when you requested my assistance, it restored my sense of purpose. This audit work has rebuilt my confidence, made me feel valuable again. But I was considering relocating to Boston to be closer to Heidi."

"Absolutely not!" Heidi interjected quickly, causing Scott's face to fall. "I mean, Scott should accept your proposal, Caleb. I have something to discuss with you as well."

I regarded Heidi expectantly, noting the determined set of her jaw.

"I want to return," she announced. "Boston hasn't fulfilled my expectations. My daughters are established there, but my life is here with you and Scott. I'd like to apply for the chief financial officer position."

The smile that spread across my face was genuine and broad. Having Heidi return exceeded my greatest hopes. "Heidi, you know any position here is yours. I simply need to arrange someone to replace you in Boston."

"Already handled. Sawyer is more than capable of assuming control of the Boston operations. I don't even need to return for transition."

"Then it’s settled. You’re our new chief financial officer, and we’ll conduct a video conference with Sawyer next week."

As the team began gathering in my office for our meeting, I shared the news about Scott and Heidi’s new appointments. The enthusiasm in the room was infectious, a bright moment in an otherwise tense situation.

As Heidi and Scott prepared to depart, I confirmed their dinner arrangements for the evening. "You’re both still joining us tonight, correct?"

"Wouldn’t miss it for anything," Heidi said, heading for the door. Then she paused, a mischievous glint in her eye. "Caleb, don’t forget to retrieve the engagement ring and wedding bands from the bank vault."

I stared at her in astonishment. "How could you possibly know about that?"

"I know you better than you realize, boy," Heidi said with a knowing smile, blowing me a kiss before disappearing through the door.

I settled back in my chair, marveling at how well those closest to me could read my intentions. Despite the threats surrounding us, despite the unknown traitor still lurking within my organization, I felt a moment of pure anticipation. Tonight would mark the beginning of a new Chapter, one where Ivy and I would face whatever came next as an officially engaged couple.

The ring waited for me at the bank, and soon it would rest on Ivy’s finger where it belonged.

Chapter 180 Vault of Memories

Caleb’s POV

After Heidi and Scott departed from the compound, I shifted my focus to my crew. I briefed them on Inspector Adler’s call and the harsh reality that we still had another rat lurking somewhere in our ranks. I explained Scott’s upcoming role managing the legitimate front operations and Heidi’s return as our financial overseer for the underground accounts.

"Finally, some damn good news!" Xavier burst out with genuine relief. "Boss, you and I were drowning in those money laundering operations without Heidi handling the books!"

"Absolutely, Xavier, but I had to honor the arrangement she made with the old Don," I said, running a hand through my hair.

"Good thing she couldn't stay away from the family either!" Jude grinned with satisfaction.

"Hey, check this out - Daniel got transferred back to our territory. He's partnering with Adler," Xavier mentioned casually. "If it's cool with you, I'd like to bring him into our poker games at the safe house."

"You don't need permission for that, Xavier. Daniel's more than welcome!" Dominic jumped in immediately, and we all nodded in agreement. "Just as long as he keeps his hands off Gemma. And remember, you promised to help me since I agreed to let Lila and Ruby go."

"Chill out, Dominic, we've got your back. Actually, I think Daniel might be interested in Lila anyway. He was asking questions about her," Xavier revealed with a knowing look.

"Really?" I raised an eyebrow. "When's he arriving in the territory?"

"This weekend, I think. Why?" Xavier's curiosity was obvious.

"Hold on." I pulled out my burner phone and sent Ivy a quick encrypted message, unable to suppress my smile at her response. "Xavier, I need to talk to Daniel. Can you set that up?"

Xavier called Inspector Martinez, and after exchanging pleasantries, he handed me the secure line. I wanted to express my gratitude for rescuing my son from Roman's men, and Ivy was thrilled about adding another member to our inner circle. So I asked Daniel to be one of my groomsmen and mentioned he'd be paired with Lila. He was genuinely excited, accepted without hesitation, and insisted on arriving early to join my bachelor party at the compound.

"Well, that solves a major headache for Zoe and me," Jude said with obvious relief, and we all stared at him blankly. "A partner for Lila, guys! Zoe made it crystal clear that fixing this was my responsibility."

"Ivy was stressing about that too," I admitted.

Jude dove into explaining everything already arranged for my engagement dinner. He'd secured catering from our Italian contacts, elegant decorations imported from Sicily, and a string quartet for ambient music during the meal. He also confirmed that our house manager Walter would spend the entire day at the estate coordinating services and receiving deliveries. Everything was perfectly positioned for me to ask Ivy's father for her hand in marriage, though in our world, it was more about showing respect than seeking permission.

Heidi's warning about Roman's remaining associates echoed in my mind, so I called our banker to schedule time for accessing the family vault to retrieve the wedding rings and engagement ring. Jude had also booked an appointment at our tailor for selecting my wedding suit.

Then Roman's menacing presence crept back into my thoughts, and I realized we needed enhanced security at the estate. The property sprawled across acres with extensive perimeter areas. A dedicated security team was essential for the coming days. I called Fisher into my office.

"Don Thorne, first, I must apologize for my failure in assigning Caleb and Fisher to protect Miss Ivy and your son," Fisher said as he entered, clearly mortified by recent events.

"Fisher, stop right there. You have nothing to apologize for. We were all deceived by that rat bastard Roman. Your performance has always been exemplary, so don't worry. This situation doesn't reflect poorly on your abilities whatsoever," I assured him firmly.

"Even so, sir, I apologize and would appreciate the opportunity to apologize to Miss Ivy personally," Fisher persisted with professional dignity.

"That's fine," I said. "Ivy returns early next week, and you can speak with her then, but I guarantee she'll tell you the same thing." Fisher offered a professional smile and respectful nod. "But I called you here because I need you to assess a situation and provide appropriate security measures."

"Absolutely, Don Thorne, I'm at your complete disposal."

"I'm hosting dinner at my parents' former estate tonight. Ivy and I are marrying this weekend in the mansion's garden, and we're relocating there permanently. I want ironclad protection for my family, especially since Roman's remaining associates are still out there."

"Congratulations, sir. You need a permanent security team stationed there. I'll assemble a team without compromising our other operations," Fisher proposed.

"That sounds perfect. Can you have this team ready today?"

"Yes, sir. I can assemble and deploy the team. They'll arrive before your dinner, conduct comprehensive sweeps of the entire property inside and out, then begin continuous surveillance," Fisher suggested, and I found his approach excellent. "I'll have Justin lead the team we place there."

"The same Justin who headed security during my father's time?" I asked, genuinely surprised.

"Exactly. He spent considerable time in Europe completing advanced tactical and surveillance training. Then he provided protection for a politician in witness protection before returning to the family," Fisher explained.

"That's absolutely perfect! I trust Justin completely, just like I trust you," I declared with confidence.

Fisher withdrew, assuring me he'd handle everything, which significantly eased my anxiety. After that, I accompanied the crew to our private vault as our scheduled appointment approached, and punctuality was crucial in family business.

At the vault, we were escorted to a private room adjacent to the main chamber, where I entered the combination and used my key to open the family safe. The contents were promptly brought to the room for my inspection.

Opening that safe felt like unleashing a flood of emotions. I traced my fingers across those numerous velvet boxes and couldn't contain the tears that escaped. There were my mother's precious jewelry, my

father's watches and family rings, and various small treasures. Items deeply personal to our bloodline, each carrying tremendous history.

Despite my happiness about marrying the love of my life, diving into the conspiracy investigation and discovering my parents' assassination was deliberate sabotage created an aching wound in my heart. I couldn't stop thinking that they should be here. I couldn't escape thoughts of everything Roman stole from me when he sabotaged my parents' car with that bomb. He murdered my parents and robbed them of experiencing this moment with me. He stole their chance to meet their grandchildren, to be moved by my children, and to become the wonderful grandparents they would have been.

Roman didn't just kill my parents, though that alone was devastating beyond measure. The assassination completely altered the trajectory of my life, Ivy's life, and Max's life. Without the hit, I wouldn't have lost Ivy that night at the auction. We would have remained together or at least maintained contact. I would have witnessed my son's birth, his first words, his first steps. They wouldn't have endured so many hardships or faced danger from rival families because Ivy had been a single mother in enemy territory.

Everything could have been different. But it wasn't! However, from this moment forward, I wouldn't allow anyone to harm my family again. I would make every moment with Ivy by my side meaningful. I would ensure my family's safety and happiness.

Lost in these thoughts, I didn't realize tears were streaming down my face until Xavier placed his hand on my shoulder, bringing me back to reality. Once again, my brother reminded me I was never alone and silently assured me of his unconditional loyalty and friendship, as he'd done countless times throughout our lives, especially after my parents were murdered. I looked at him, and with an embrace, I thanked the brother the streets had given me.

From that vault, I retrieved the box containing my mother's engagement ring, the box with matching wedding bands, cufflinks my father wore when he married my mother, my grandfather's watch, and another box I planned to give Ivy as a gift. Searching through all those velvet boxes, I discovered a small box at the bottom that I'd forgotten. Opening it, I immediately recognized the piece and decided to take it as well. I closed the vault, secured it properly, and thanked our banker for his usual discretion and efficiency.

From the bank, we headed to the jewelry store. I needed all pieces polished, the wedding rings engraved, the engagement ring and jewelry from the small box engraved, and the watch mechanism inspected. The owner, an old family friend who handled our legitimate transactions, recognized every

piece and was moved learning my intentions with them, reminding me how proud my parents were of me and that wherever they were, they were celebrating for me. He promised delivery by day's end.

Next, we visited the tailor, another longtime family associate. Mr. Bennett had crafted my grandfather's suits; his business passed from father to son and now to grandson. They all knew our family well. Bennett Jr. suggested a light blue suit, a stunning cobalt blue ensemble. He recommended wearing it with a white shirt and no tie, perfect for a daytime garden wedding.

Besides Daniel, Xavier, Dominic, Jude, and Finn would serve as my groomsmen, and I gave them complete freedom choosing their attire without imposing combinations or restrictions. Following Bennett Jr.'s suggestion, they selected blue pants in a slightly darker shade than my suit, matching ties, white shirts, and suspenders. Bennett, visibly excited, decided Max should dress like the groomsmen, except with a bow tie instead of a regular tie. Bennett guaranteed everything would be ready by the end of the week.

Jude immediately informed Zoe we'd purchased Max's outfit. She predictably threw a tantrum, but Ivy calmed her by explaining that I'd already missed many milestones in my son's life, so choosing his wedding outfit was only fair, and she trusted my taste completely. This made me incredibly happy.

"Now we're hitting the shoe store. No way you're getting married in old boots," Dominic declared, making me laugh. So many details existed; without my crew, I'd never remember everything.

At the shoe store, I bought a brown pair following Bennett's recommendation and purchased an almost identical model for my son. They were so tiny, and these were the first shoes I'd bought for him; actually, the first thing I'd purchased for him since discovering he was my son. The emotion overwhelmed me.

After our busy, hectic day, we stopped by the jewelry store late afternoon. Everything was ready and had turned out flawlessly. I thanked everyone for their efforts completing everything so quickly.

Everything was organized; now I just needed to prepare for dinner with my future in-laws.