Mafia Mask 191

Chapter 191 Sinister Doll Threat

Ivy's POV

I drifted back to consciousness sprawled across the leather couch in Caleb's private office, his tailored Armani jacket draped over my bare legs like a protective shield. The memory of what we'd just done sent heat flooding through my veins again. He'd claimed me completely on his mahogany desk, leaving me boneless and thoroughly satisfied in the aftermath of our passionate encounter while the rest of the Thorne Syndicate continued their legitimate business operations just floors below.

My eyes found him seated behind that imposing desk, looking every inch the powerful Don as he reviewed territory reports with laser focus. His crisp white dress shirt and charcoal vest gave him an air of complete authority, as if he hadn't just been buried deep inside me minutes ago while discussing arms shipments. The way he absently touched his lips while scanning intelligence briefings made my pulse quicken all over again. God, he was absolutely devastating when he shifted between lover and ruthless crime lord.

Those piercing blue eyes lifted to meet mine, and his smile could have melted the concrete foundations of our fortified headquarters. My heart did that familiar flip it always did when he looked at me like I was his most precious treasure.

"How are you feeling, tesoro?" His voice carried that rough edge that never failed to make my knees weak, even after everything we'd been through in this blood-soaked underworld.

"Absolutely perfect," I breathed, stretching like a satisfied cat across the Italian leather that had probably cost more than most people's cars.

"Is that so?" He chuckled, abandoning his smuggling manifests to stalk toward me with that predatory grace that marked him as one of the most dangerous men in North America. "And what exactly has you feeling so perfect?"

"Well, I just got thoroughly claimed by my incredibly talented Don," I said with mock innocence, as if discussing tomorrow's weather forecast rather than our explosive chemistry.

"Lucky bastard," he growled, dark humor dancing in those ice-blue eyes that could freeze blood or ignite passion depending on his mood.

"Oh, he definitely is. Especially since he's ridiculously dangerous and knows exactly how to use those skilled hands for more than just torture sessions."

"Sounds like I should be jealous of this Don of yours."

I couldn't stop the laughter that bubbled up. "You're absolutely ridiculous for a feared crime lord."

"But seriously, Ivy," his expression grew tender as he cupped my face with hands that had spilled blood for our family's honor, "what I feel for you sometimes scares me with its intensity. In this world of violence and betrayal, it's almost too incredible to be real."

I pressed my palm against his chest, feeling his heartbeat thunder beneath my touch like war drums. He leaned down to capture my lips in a kiss that tasted like promises and forever, even in our world where forever was never guaranteed.

"Do you feel that?" he whispered against my mouth. I nodded, lost in the moment despite the distant sound of enforcers moving through our compound. "This is real. I love you beyond reason, beyond the boundaries of our blood-soaked territory, angel."

The harsh ring of his encrypted office phone shattered our bubble. Caleb cursed in Italian under his breath before reluctantly answering while I slipped into his private bathroom to freshen up and make myself presentable for whatever crisis demanded his immediate attention.

When I emerged, Xavier stood in the center of the office, eyeing every piece of furniture with obvious suspicion and barely concealed amusement at our obvious activities.

"I'm not even going to ask why our Don mysteriously vanished from the arms dealers meeting with the Chinese suppliers today, Ivy. But I do need to know where exactly I can sit without traumatizing myself in this den of sin."

"Anywhere you'd like, Xavier," I replied sweetly, fighting back a wicked grin while adjusting my blouse.

Xavier approached one of the client chairs, but Caleb's predatory smirk made him pause mid-step. He cursed creatively and moved to lean against the mahogany desk instead, only to have Caleb clear his throat meaningfully. The leather couch was his next attempt, but my husband's subtle headshake sent him toward the coffee table with growing frustration.

"For the love of all that's sacred in this godforsaken crime family, is there any surface in this entire office where you two haven't engaged in your territorial marking rituals?"

"The window's still untouched," Caleb interrupted with that devilish grin, his eyes finding mine with unmistakable heat and promise.

Xavier's jaw dropped in mock horror. "That's it. We're relocating to my office before you corrupt every inch of this building."

"Don't be so dramatic, Xavier. The right chair is completely pristine," Caleb laughed, gesturing to the untouched seat with theatrical flair.

Grumbling about the sacrifices he made for this crime family, Xavier finally settled in and launched into urgent business about the missed arms negotiation and upcoming territorial expansion strategies. When they finished discussing protection rackets and money laundering operations, I returned to my own office, first making sure all my clothing was properly arranged and my appearance befitted a Don's wife.

Lila appeared in my doorway carrying a large, unmarked package with obvious concern etched across her features.

"Ivy, this just arrived through our security screening. Something feels extremely wrong about it though—no return address, no courier identification, and our front desk guards swear they didn't accept any unmarked deliveries today. It somehow bypassed our entire security protocol."

"Maybe Caleb sent it?" I suggested, though doubt crept into my voice like ice water. In our world, mysterious packages often contained severed fingers or worse.

"I’m calling him right now. Something about this gives me a terrible feeling. Please don’t open it until we verify its origin," Lila’s anxiety was palpable, her hand already reaching for the encrypted phone line.

"It’s just a box, Lila. I’m sure it’s nothing our security team can’t handle."

Before she could protest further, I pulled the package onto my desk and lifted the lid. The scream that tore from my throat echoed through the reinforced office walls as horror crashed over me like freezing blood. My hands shook violently as tears began streaming down my face at the grotesque sight.

Lila quickly slammed the box shut and pulled it away from me, but not before I managed to grab the small card nestled inside like a serpent’s calling card. Within seconds, Caleb burst through my office door, his face wild with lethal panic as he dropped to his knees beside my chair.

"What happened? Ivy, talk to me," he demanded, his hands framing my tear-stained face while his eyes scanned for immediate threats.

"I’m so sorry, Caleb," Lila whispered, guilt heavy in her voice as she held the offensive package like contaminated evidence.

Xavier moved to examine the contents, his expression darkening with murderous rage as he lifted the lid. "What kind of sick bastard would send this to a pregnant woman?"

Caleb rose to look for himself, his entire body going rigid with the kind of fury that had built his reputation across the underworld. Inside lay a mangled doll, its head partially severed, one glassy eye missing, an arm torn away with stuffing spilling from the wounds like grotesque entrails. The whole thing was filthy and destroyed, a deliberate nightmare crafted to terrorize an expectant mother.

"There’s a card," I managed between sobs, my voice breaking.

Caleb took it from my trembling fingers, his expression growing absolutely murderous as he read. He slammed his fist against my desk hard enough to rattle the reinforced glass, the sound echoing like a gunshot.

"Lila, take that abomination to my office immediately and get Fisher on the encrypted line. Call Scott too. Emergency protocols, now."

"I'll handle this, tesoro. I promise on my father's grave," he assured me, but I caught him trying to pocket the threatening card.

"Let me see it, Caleb. Don't hide this from me. I'm part of this family now."

Reluctantly, he handed over the card with visible reluctance. The printed message made my blood turn to arctic ice:

"Ivy, congratulations on your pregnancy. You're nothing but a whore who destroyed my carefully laid plans for this family. What I did to this doll is child's play compared to what I'll do to your spawn. Your army of armed bodyguards won't save you, because eventually, you'll come to me willingly to save them."

"Max," I gasped, terror for my son overwhelming every other emotion. "Caleb, we have to make sure Max's safe immediately."

He was already dialing our secure compound line, and Carmen's reassuring voice filled the speaker as she confirmed Max was perfectly safe, even sending a live video feed of him absorbed in his afternoon cartoons under heavy guard. Caleb immediately called Justin to triple security at our fortified family estate.

"I don't want you leaving this building today. Cancel everything on your schedule," Caleb commanded with absolute authority.

"Actually, Caleb, I think Ivy should proceed with the evening plans as scheduled. It might help her process this psychological warfare," Xavier interjected thoughtfully. "Ruby mentioned the Social Union event, and that venue has fortress-level security. I can contact the manager, explain our situation, and arrange for our armed security team to blend in with the civilian crowd."

"It would be beneficial to maintain some normalcy after this violation," I agreed, needing to feel like more than a caged bird in our crime family's golden prison.

"Fine. But I refuse to be the controlling husband who locks you away. Lila, get Ruby and Gemma in here immediately, plus Jude. I want everyone briefed on this threat within the hour."

Xavier was already coordinating with Daniel through encrypted channels, but his expression grew increasingly troubled as he received updates.

"What is it?" Caleb demanded with deadly quiet.

"Daniel's intelligence suggests Rossi might target one of the other women to get leverage against Ivy. They're all fiercely loyal to each other, which makes them potential bargaining chips in his twisted game."

"Then we protect all of them with lethal force," Caleb decided without hesitation. "I'm calling Dominic about Zoe and Nora. Ivy, why don't you visit Katelyn for some calming tea while we organize our defensive strategy?"

"Absolutely not. I want to know exactly how we're handling this threat to our family," I said with steel in my voice, finding my strength again.

We reconvened in Caleb's office as everyone arrived, with Dominic, Zoe, and Nora joining via secure video conference along with Finn and Daniel. Caleb efficiently briefed everyone on the situation and made it crystal clear that every woman would have personal armed security, with no room for arguments or negotiation.

"Scott, what's the current status on finding our intelligence leak? Too much sensitive family business is walking out of our organization," Caleb pressed with barely contained violence.

"They're expertly hidden, but we'll flush them out with extreme prejudice," Scott promised darkly.

"Fisher, I want to know exactly how that package bypassed our military-grade security, and I want guarantees it never happens again," Caleb ordered.

"I'm positioning unmarked patrol units at the Social Union and your residential compound, plus additional surveillance teams at this building. Complete twenty-four-seven coverage with shoot-to-kill authorization," Daniel confirmed grimly. "I'll also brief the club manager about Rossi's threat personally."

"Ladies, maximum vigilance at all times. We need constant location updates, companion information, and detailed schedules. This isn't about control—it's about keeping you breathing," Xavier warned with deadly seriousness. "Ginger, you're moving into my secured apartment tonight. This is non-negotiable."

"Xavier, that seems excessive," Ruby protested weakly.

"Either you come to my place, or I move armed guards into yours permanently. Your choice, but you're not sleeping alone."

"It's the intelligent strategy, Ru. Please," I asked, and she reluctantly agreed to the protective custody.

"Lila and Gemma should stay in our compound's guest wing too. Living alone isn't safe with Rossi escalating his psychological warfare," Caleb decided with finality.

"I'll take personal responsibility for the little spitfire," Daniel volunteered quickly, making Lila's eyes widen in shock at the unexpected development.

"And Gemma comes to my secured penthouse immediately," Dominic added decisively through the video feed.

"Have you completely lost your mind, Dominic?" Gemma exploded with predictable fury.

"Listen carefully, Gemma. I've been patient about our complicated situation, and I know I made serious mistakes before. But you're going to cooperate and stay at my heavily guarded residence until this

threat is neutralized, or I'll carry you there over my shoulder and lock you in my bedroom until you see reason."

"Caveman! Absolutely barbaric behavior!" Gemma huffed indignantly, though everyone else chuckled at the familiar exchange of wills.

"Well, that settles our protective custody arrangements. Personal security details will shadow all of you like lethal shadows," Caleb concluded with grim satisfaction.

"Caleb, let my organization handle Zoe and Nora's protection. They know my company's defensive protocols inside and out. I'll have my head of security coordinate directly with yours," Dominic offered.

"Agreed completely. Ladies, enjoy your evening out, but stay razor sharp and trust your instincts," Caleb warned as we prepared to face whatever twisted game Rossi had planned for our crime family next.

Chapter 192 Girls Night Confessions

Ivy's POV

We gathered at the Thorne estate's private dining room, our usual sanctuary where crystal chandeliers cast warm light over marble tables. Armed guards maintained their watchful positions around the perimeter of the family compound, but they respected our need for privacy during our weekly gathering. My friends were practically vibrating with curiosity about my wedding night with Caleb, and I was more than willing to indulge them with every romantic detail of how tender and passionate my mafia don husband had been.

"Enough about me," I said, turning to Zoe with a knowing smile. "How's domestic life treating you with Finn?"

"Ivy, Finn is absolutely divine," Zoe practically glowed. "He brings me coffee in bed every morning, plans these incredible surprise dates, and treats me like I'm the most precious thing in his world."

"Finn's always been a true gentleman," Nora nodded approvingly from her seat at our private table.

Ruby shifted her attention to Gemma. "What about you and Hunter? I thought you two might hit it off."

Gemma shrugged, though I caught a flicker of disappointment in her eyes. "We went out a few times, but I couldn't relax around him. When nothing physical happened, he basically told me he wasn't interested in waiting around for me to figure things out."

"God, I'm so sorry, Gemma. I had no idea he'd be such an ass about it. Xavier tore him a new one when he found out," Ruby apologized, genuine regret coloring her voice.

"It's fine, really. At least he was upfront about it," Gemma said. "Besides, I can't stop thinking about Dominic. His mother cornered me at the wedding and said some things that got me thinking. We had lunch today and he seemed so sincere when he apologized. I told him we could try being friends, but now he's invited me to stay at his family's safe house and I have no idea what to expect."

"That sounds promising, Gemma. You'll be able to see if he's really changed," Zoe suggested, though her tone carried an edge I recognized from our years navigating the dangerous world of mafia relationships.

Nora raised an eyebrow. "Since when are you so supportive, Zoe?"

"Who says I'm being supportive?" Zoe's grin turned wicked. "I'm thinking she can test his resolve. Drive him absolutely crazy, make him beg for her attention, then pull back when he least expects it."

Gemma's eyes lit up with mischief. "I'm listening. What exactly did you have in mind?"

"Are you going there tonight?" Zoe asked.

"Looks like it. I already packed and my bags are in the armored car," Gemma sighed.

"Ruby and Lila had to do the same thing with their men, and look how well that worked out," I pointed out encouragingly, remembering how dangerous courtships worked in our world.

"Here’s what you do," Zoe leaned forward conspiratorially. "Wear the most seductive pajamas you own and parade around in front of him. Tell him you can’t sleep and ask him to keep you company. Tease him until he’s practically coming out of his skin, then suddenly get tired and leave him hanging."

"I like where this is going," Gemma’s smile turned predatory. "I think I can work with that strategy."

"Your turn, sweetie," Zoe turned to Lila. "You called this emergency meeting. What did our sexy Capo do to you?"

"Well, for starters, he did this." Lila pulled down her collar to reveal an enormous purple mark on her neck. "Not that I’m complaining, but..."

"Christ almighty, Lila! That man’s going to devour you whole," Nora exclaimed, making us all burst into laughter. "Look at the size of that thing! It’s making me hot just looking at it."

"He definitely has that raw, primal energy that runs in mafia families," Zoe observed with appreciation. "But he told you he could be gentle, right? So what’s the problem?"

"He is gentle, but there’s something else I can’t quite put into words," Lila’s cheeks flushed crimson.

"What do you mean you can’t explain it?" I pressed gently.

"He walked me home after the wedding and we kissed," Lila’s voice dropped to almost a whisper, her face now matching her neck. "It’s just that I don’t know how to..."

"Wait a minute," Nora interrupted, studying Lila’s expression carefully. "That was your first kiss, wasn’t it? I recognize that look, Lila. You’ve never kissed anyone before."

"Yes," Lila whispered, looking like she might cry from embarrassment as we all stared at her in shock.

"Hold on," Ruby said slowly. "Are you telling us you’re a virgin?"

"Well obviously! If I'd never even kissed someone, what do you think the chances are I've done anything else?" Lila snapped, her embarrassment making her defensive.

"But surely you've at least explored your own body?" Zoe asked bluntly, and when Lila shook her head, Zoe's jaw dropped. "Holy hell! And we just threw you to the wolves with a guy who screams sexual intensity!"

Despite the tension, we couldn't help laughing at Zoe's outrage.

"The thing is, guys usually run when they find out I'm inexperienced," Lila admitted sadly. "Beckett, the one you set me up with, basically ghosted me the moment he figured it out."

"What the hell is wrong with Xavier's associates? Have they all turned into complete jerks?" Ruby fumed.

"Well, I can't complain about Jude. He's incredible," Nora said, drawing our attention. "But we're not here to talk about me. We need to help Lila. So did the Capo figure it out and bolt?"

"No, he doesn't know the full extent, but he suspects I'm inexperienced," Lila explained. "When he touched my chest while we were kissing, I kind of freaked out." She went on to describe how Daniel had sensed her inexperience and told her about his preferences in bed, how he liked things rough and intense. "Then he said since I was obviously new to all this, I should take time to think about whether I really wanted to get involved with him. But how can I make that decision when I have no idea what any of it is actually like?"

After Lila finished her lengthy explanation, we sat in stunned silence, processing everything she'd shared.

"Lila, how did this happen? How are you this age and have never experienced any of this?" Ruby asked gently.

"I grew up in a tiny town with very traditional parents, especially my mother. She controlled everything I did," Lila's voice grew thick with emotion. "And I was never the pretty girl, you know, not until you all helped transform me."

"You’re our beautiful butterfly," Zoe pulled her into a fierce hug.

"Lila, physical intimacy can be amazing, but you’ll only discover what you like through experience," I said carefully, drawing from my own journey with Caleb. "Start with this: how did kissing Daniel feel?"

"It was incredible. My stomach fluttered and I felt this tingling sensation between my legs that I’d never experienced before," Lila tried to explain despite her obvious discomfort.

"Say the word properly, you prude," Zoe demanded. "Come on, repeat after me: pussy."

"Zoe!" Lila looked mortified.

"Honestly, Lila, you never struck me as the shy, sheltered type," Gemma commented.

"I’m not sheltered exactly. I understand how things work, I just haven’t done them," Lila clarified. "I came to college here specifically to escape my mother’s suffocating control. My father supported my decision, but she didn’t speak to me for months afterward."

"Then this is phase two of your transformation," Zoe declared. "We’re going to help you shed these outdated inhibitions."

"But first, you absolutely must tell Daniel you’re a virgin," I insisted. "Especially since you’re going to his place tonight."

"Oh God," Lila buried her face in her hands.

"Lila, you need to watch some educational videos," Zoe suggested excitedly.

"No porn, Zoe," I laughed, remembering our disastrous movie marathon before our own first times. "That definitely didn’t help us."

"You’re right, that was a terrible idea," Zoe giggled.

"Lila, you enjoyed his kiss and his touch. That’s your body’s natural response," I explained. "If you hadn’t liked it, you would have felt uncomfortable or wrong. The fact that you found it pleasurable means something."

"But what if he runs away like Beckett did?" Lila asked anxiously.

"Beckett was an immature idiot," Ruby said firmly. "But Daniel is a grown man who knows what he wants. A little inexperience isn’t going to scare him off."

"You really think so? Because I definitely want him to kiss me again," Lila admitted.

"Look at you, already smitten," Zoe teased. "Tell him exactly that. March up to him tonight and say ’Here’s the situation: I’m a virgin, but I want to kiss you again’ and then grab him."

We dissolved into laughter, but I could see Lila seriously considering Zoe’s bold suggestion.

Chapter 193 Hearts on Table

Caleb’s POV

I couldn’t shake my concern about the women, so I persuaded them that while they enjoyed their evening at the Syndicate’s private social club, we’d remain nearby playing poker in our family’s casino. We wouldn’t interfere with their night, but we’d be within reach if any rival families tried anything. Despite their protests about being overprotected, I left them little room for negotiation. Eventually they conceded, with the stipulation that we stay away from the dining area and wait for their signal when they were ready to leave.

The cards held our attention while conversation naturally drifted to our women, until we reached Finn, who was practically glowing about his life with Zoe. He’d just sold his fortified apartment to Daniel, complete with its state-of-the-art security system.

"I assumed my brother would crash at my safe house for a while longer, but he packed up and moved out yesterday," Xavier grumbled, dealing another hand.

"Xavier, Finn offered me a deal I couldn't refuse. The place is incredible, fully equipped with everything brand new, including reinforced walls and surveillance. I had to jump on it," Daniel chuckled, organizing his chips.

"Fine, I'll let it slide because it really was an amazing deal, and that fortress is impenetrable and comfortable. Plus Finn even hooked you up with a trusted housekeeper who's been vetted by our security," Xavier conceded.

"That was perfect timing, especially with what's happening in our territory. I'm planning to bring the little one there," Daniel mentioned, his expression turning serious as he glanced around the smoke-filled private room.

"Why the long face? Did your little bird already turn you down?" Finn ribbed Daniel, taking a swig of his whiskey.

"Not yet, but I'm expecting it."

"What makes you think that?" Dominic leaned forward with curiosity, his gold rings catching the dim light.

"I think I spooked her. After the wedding, I drove her home in the armored car and kissed her, but she was so tense. Guys, I'm not accustomed to innocent women, and she's extremely innocent. It's not just her age, it's her complete lack of experience with our world."

"What do you mean inexperienced?" Dominic questioned. "Lila is one of the sharpest people I know. She's got street instincts, even a streak of cunning that could serve her well in the family business."

"That may be true, Dominic, but when it comes to intimacy she's completely green. I'm certain of it," Daniel stated firmly, stubbing out his cigarette.

"Are you saying she’s untouched?" Jude raised an eyebrow, pausing mid-shuffle.

"Not necessarily untouched, at least I don’t believe so. Come on, she’s young, living independently in our protection, away from blood family. The odds of her being untouched are practically nonexistent, right?" Daniel’s voice carried doubt despite his words.

"Looks like the enforcer needs to do some investigating," Xavier teased his brother, earning chuckles around the table.

"What exactly went down? Because the moment Ivy walked into the office today, Lila immediately called for an emergency sisterhood gathering. That’s why their regular weekly meeting got moved to today," I observed, dealing the next round.

"We’re in deep trouble," Finn dragged his hand down his face. "An emergency meeting spells disaster for all of us. We were already dealing with Dominic’s situation, unable to keep his activities with Gemma under control, and now our enforcer has created chaos too?"

"Finn, maybe we should distance ourselves from them," Jude said with complete seriousness, and Finn nodded in agreement. "Caleb, perhaps you should join us in exile." Laughter erupted around the table, echoing off the leather-paneled walls.

"Listen, I’m serious about making things right with Gemma. Having her stay at my secured place will be perfect. It’ll give me more opportunities to prove my commitment to the family and to her," Dominic explained, adjusting his cufflinks.

"In my situation, I’m not sure bringing Lila to my fortress is wise, but I need to ensure that girl’s safety from rival families," Daniel admitted, his jaw tightening.

"Why are you convinced Lila will reject you?" Dominic pressed, leaning back in his chair.

"Young, inexperienced girls like her prefer guys with romantic, gentle approaches, and I’m definitely rough around the edges. Hell, I torture people for information," Daniel explained with brutal honesty.

"Brother, let me share some experience," Finn began, setting down his cards. "I've been with Zoe since she was quite young, and I'm her only relationship. She loved, and still loves, romantic and gentle treatment. But one night, we hadn't been together very long, we attended a family gathering where I drank, which rarely happens. Afterward, I brought Zoe to my place while my parents were handling business overseas. I was rough with her, quite primitive as you put it. Initially she was startled, but within minutes she was consumed with desire. So my brother, she might be inexperienced, but she could surprise you."

"You, rough, Finn? Man, you're practically royalty in this family, everyone knows that," Xavier mocked, dealing himself another card.

"Do you honestly think a woman like Zoe, confident, commanding, and knowing exactly what she wants, would stay with a guy who was gentle in every aspect for this long?" Finn challenged.

"Absolutely not. Zoe is a real woman who can handle our world," Xavier responded with respect.

"I think you're the one who appears inexperienced, Daniel," I decided to voice my thoughts while studying my hand. "Women desire passion as much as we do. The key is how much pleasure and protection we can provide our women. If we can make them feel cherished and completely safe in our dangerous world, they'll trust us with everything."

"I'm not convinced Lila is like that. Besides, I enjoy explicit talk during intimacy, I prefer intense encounters, and Lila panicked just because I gently touched her," Daniel expressed his genuine concern, his scarred knuckles gripping his glass.

"Did you know that most women actually enjoy hearing explicit talk in bed? Yeah, I was shocked by that information too," Jude commented, noticing our surprised expressions. "Nora educated me about it. She explained it enhances the experience by engaging another sense."

"You should have an honest conversation with her. Communication is essential in our line of work and in relationships," I recommended, thinking of my own experiences with Ivy.

"Recently I was completely honest with her about who I am, what I do for the family, I explained what I enjoy," Daniel shared.

"How did she respond?" I inquired, genuinely curious.

"She said nothing. I spoke my piece, told her to think about what she wanted from this life, and left," Daniel confessed.

"We've identified the problem, gentlemen," Xavier mocked. "You need to listen to her, my brother. Women require being heard, especially in our world where they sacrifice normal lives."

"But what if she rejects me? What if she can't handle what we are? I don't understand what this little woman has done to me, but I'm completely obsessed with her," Daniel looked defeated, more vulnerable than I'd ever seen our enforcer.

"You mentioned kissing her. Do you think she enjoyed the kiss? Because the kiss reveals everything and is extremely important," Finn sounded like a relationship counselor.

"I think she enjoyed it. Hell yes, she enjoyed it, she absolutely loved it," Daniel said with a brilliant smile and sparkling eyes for the first time tonight.

"Then your prospects are excellent. And depending on what you shared with her about our family business, the women might become your allies, because they share everything with each other," Jude declared knowingly.

"I'll speak with her tonight when we return to the compound," Daniel decided, straightening his shoulders with newfound determination. "Damn, now I'm nervous like a teenager about to make his first kill."

We erupted in laughter, completely understanding his feelings. These women had this effect on us, these magnificent creatures who had completely enchanted us and somehow agreed to live in our violent, shadowy world.

Chapter 194 Murder Unearthed

Ivy's POV

Last night with the women was exactly what I needed after weeks of tension within the Thorne family operations. I laughed until my ribs ached and managed to push away the disturbing package that had arrived at our compound from my thoughts entirely. When we decided to end the evening, I sent word to my husband through the family's secure channels. Almost immediately, imposing soldiers materialized from the shadows like deadly specters. Lila protested when Daniel suggested she return to the safe house with him, but he simply lifted her over his shoulder as if she weighed nothing. Dominic gave Gemma a similar ultimatum, and she wisely chose to walk out under her own power rather than be carried.

Back at the Thorne compound, Caleb fulfilled every promise he had whispered against my ear that morning. His hands claimed every inch of my body with relentless hunger, barely allowing me a moment to catch my breath.

"I never tire of watching you prepare for the day," Caleb murmured from our bed.

He reclined against the headboard, chest bare and magnificent, a thin sheet draped across his hips. His arms were folded behind his head, displaying the intricate tattoos and defined muscles of his torso. My husband was absolutely devastating.

"Really? And what exactly captivates you so much?" I approached him wearing only delicate lingerie, thigh-high stockings, and mint green stilettos.

"Because I know I get to strip every piece off you later. You are my favorite prize to unwrap," he said, his lips finding the curve of my breast through the sheer lace while his palm traced gentle circles on my growing belly.

"Your prize is expanding by the day," I teased.

"You will be the most beautiful and sensual woman carrying my heir," Caleb pressed tender kisses to my bump. "Good morning, little soldier. Your father is already completely devoted to you."

Caleb spoke to our unborn child constantly. Every morning he shared breakfast with Max, and every evening he dedicated time to bonding with him. Their relationship grew stronger each day. Max remained unaware of my pregnancy, and anxiety gnawed at me about revealing the truth. I had no idea how he would react to becoming a big brother, but I could not keep this secret much longer.

The medication Dr. Taylor prescribed had finally conquered the relentless morning sickness. However, exhaustion clung to me like a heavy blanket, and my appetite had become absolutely ravenous.

At the legitimate Thorne Group offices, Lila greeted us with an unusually bright smile. I was desperate to hear about her evening with the detective. The moment Caleb disappeared into his private office, I messaged Gemma and Ruby to join us for coffee and summoned Lila. We had arranged an impromptu virtual gathering so Gemma and Lila could share details about their romantic encounters.

Settled in the break room with steaming mugs, I grabbed the tablet and video called Zoe, who was already waiting with Nora.

"Alright ladies, did everyone drive their men completely wild last night? Because mine looks thoroughly exhausted today," Zoe began with her signature boldness.

"Caleb barely let me sleep. I am running on pure willpower," I complained.

"I had to wear a turtleneck to conceal the evidence," Nora laughed, touching her neck self-consciously. "I was actually envious of Lila's situation."

"I can barely walk straight. Sweet Xavier, that man has incredible stamina," Ruby tried unsuccessfully to hide her satisfaction.

"I tormented Dominic all night long. Every time he became aroused, I made sure he could not take care of himself. He had to endure an ice-cold shower this morning," Gemma grinned wickedly.

"That explains his absolutely foul mood today. I had to reprimand him multiple times already. He is prowling around like a caged animal," Zoe observed.

"But how can you be certain he did not handle things himself in the shower?" Lila asked innocently.

"Because I joined him in there. I told him I had already seen every magnificent inch of that body, and what a body it is. I nearly climaxed just watching that gorgeous man under the hot water," Gemma actually closed her eyes at the memory.

"Enough about us, Lila. How did things progress with the detective?" I asked eagerly.

"It was wonderful," she replied, suddenly bashful.

"Details, woman!" Zoe demanded. "We need the intimate specifics. That delicious giant must have completely overwhelmed you."

"Actually, it was not quite like that," Lila blushed deeper.

"Do not tell me that ridiculously attractive man does not know how to use what nature gave him," Nora asked, making us all dissolve into laughter.

"Oh ladies, I honestly do not know," Lila squirmed uncomfortably. "We did not have sex. We just talked extensively."

"What do you mean you only talked?" Gemma pressed.

"We did more than talk, but we limited ourselves to conversation and kissing," Lila clarified.

"Kissing how exactly?" Nora looked stunned.

"We made out intensely, lots of passionate kissing, wandering hands, and he is impressively endowed everywhere. But he insists on being gentle and taking things slowly," Lila explained.

"I am going to tell Xavier that I found someone to handle your virginity situation," Ruby commented mischievously.

"Why would you do that?" Lila looked confused.

"Because then your hot detective will abandon this gentleman nonsense and take you right on his desk," Ruby suggested, sending us into hysterics.

After our gossip session, we returned to work where mountains of legitimate business and underground operations awaited my attention. Caleb stopped by my desk to mention he was having lunch with his captains but would bring me dessert afterward. That promise sent delicious anticipation coursing through me. Lunch with the women involved more laughter and stories about their previous evening adventures. The afternoon passed surprisingly quickly.

Caleb had just finished putting Max to bed when his encrypted phone rang. I watched his entire demeanor shift as he listened to the voice on the other end. When he ended the call, he approached me with deeply troubled eyes.

"Tesoro, that was Xavier with updates on the Rossi investigation. Remember I mentioned the document forger who created fake identities for Roman? Baker Stay Chill?" he asked carefully.

"Yes, I remember. What about him?" I asked, dread already building in my chest.

"He was arrested this morning," Caleb said grimly. "Xavier discussed it during lunch. This Baker character confessed everything during interrogation and revealed all the fraudulent documents he created for Roman. Not just passports, but extensive corporate paperwork as well."

"So this man possesses significant information," I observed.

"Exactly, and he is eager to cooperate fully. He provided federal agents with every alias used in fake documentation for Roman and his wife. That breakthrough allowed them to trace a fraudulent credit card Patricia used and obtain an address," Caleb continued, and I sensed this news was about to take a dark turn.

"And?" I prompted anxiously.

"They raided the location this afternoon. A remote ranch outside the city limits. Roman was not there. However, they discovered disturbed earth in the garden and decided to investigate further. They excavated and found Patricia's body. She died from asphyxiation, still had the plastic bag secured over her head when they unearthed her. The coroner estimates she was murdered several days ago, the same day she used that credit card. Roman killed his own wife. He remains at large," Caleb finished, visibly shaken.

I bolted to the bathroom and vomited everything I had eaten for dinner. The horror was overwhelming. Terror and nausea consumed me simultaneously. Caleb held me as I trembled, whispering reassurances that our security team would protect us. He guided me to bed and brought warm milk with cookies, insisting I needed to eat something since my stomach was completely empty. Sleep brought nothing but vivid nightmares of plastic bags and shallow graves.

Chapter 195 Shattered Illusions

Yara's POV

This nightmare feels endless! They have trapped me in this disgusting cesspit for what seems like an eternity, surrounded by the dregs of society. The stench, the screaming, the constant threat of violence - every moment makes my skin crawl. And the worst part? They stuck me in the same cage as that repulsive creature Monica. Every fiber of my being wants to rip her throat out with my bare hands.

"Rossi, you got a visitor! Some fancy suit wants to have a word with you!" The corrections officer barked at our cell door like the savage animal she truly is. Her grating voice scrapes against my nerves like nails on a chalkboard.

"Finally! Daddy sent his best attorney to get me out of this hellhole." Relief flooded through my veins as I practically leaped off the filthy mattress with pure excitement.

The barbaric guard forced me to turn around and extend my wrists, snapping those cold metal restraints around them before unlocking our cage door. As she secured the bars behind me, Monica slithered down from her upper bunk and hissed at me through the steel.

"Listen here, spoiled little princess. Make sure that lawyer tells your precious daddy that if he doesn't get me out of this dump too, I'm going to start singing like a canary about every dirty Thorne family secret I know."

"You dare threaten my father? Have you completely lost what little mind you had left?" I shot back, trying to intimidate this pathetic woman into submission.

"Your daddy's the one who seems to have forgotten exactly what kind of damage I can unleash. Because when I start talking to the FBI, I won't just destroy his empire - I'll tear you apart piece by piece, you painted little doll!" Monica shrieked as the guard roughly shoved me down the concrete corridor.

The humiliating strip search that followed made me feel like livestock being inspected at market. Finally, we reached the visitation room divided into cramped booths, each equipped with a metal stool and ancient telephone system. The guard secured my handcuffs in front of my body and pointed me toward the last booth. Through the thick, scratched bulletproof glass, I froze when I recognized the face staring back at me. He gestured for me to sit and pick up the receiver.

"What kind of sick joke is this? They told me an attorney was here to see me," I demanded, my confusion rapidly turning to fury.

"Have you forgotten already, Yara? I am a licensed attorney," Austin responded from his side of the partition, his voice distorted through the cheap phone system.

"What possible reason could you have for coming to this godforsaken place?" My patience was already wearing dangerously thin.

"I needed to have a conversation with you about us."

"About what exactly?"

"I need to understand what I actually meant to you, Yara. I was completely devoted to you since we were children in the same social circle. Then suddenly I discover you're engaged to that Thorne heir and supposedly carrying his child. For a moment, I even wondered if the baby might be mine, but you weren't actually pregnant at all. So please, for the sake of everything we once shared, tell me the truth - what did I really mean to you?"

"Austin, you're pleasant enough company. Being with you was entertaining for a while. But you can't even compete with Caleb Thorne. He's like an emperor with his own criminal empire, and you're just... ordinary. Sweet but predictable, still living under your family's protection," I told him with brutal honesty. "You need to accept that it's over because the moment I walk out of here, I'm going to become the Thorne family's queen."

"Dear God, you've completely lost touch with reality!" Austin burst into laughter that echoed through the phone. "Let me bring you up to speed on current events. That little boy you snatched? He's Caleb's biological son with his new wife Ivy. Apparently, they met at some underground auction where neither knew the other's identity, and she became pregnant. They only discovered the truth about each other right before you pulled your kidnapping stunt."

"What are you talking about?" I screamed at this pathetic excuse for a man.

"That's right. From what I understand, they had an encounter at this masked auction without exchanging names or seeing each other's faces. Ivy got pregnant and, by some twist of fate, ended up working directly for her child's father in his money laundering operation."

"That's impossible."

"Oh, but there's more beautiful irony. Ivy is expecting Caleb's second child now. Actually pregnant this time with his legitimate heir!" Austin announced with obvious satisfaction.

"You're lying! All of this is complete fabrication!" Tears of pure rage began streaming down my face.

"No, Rossi, every word is true. And here's the most beautiful part - Caleb and Ivy are now married in a blood ceremony and ruling the Thorne syndicate together." Austin's grin stretched across his entire face.

"Stop lying to me! I refuse to believe any of this!" I started screaming so loudly that the female guard burst into the room and threatened to throw me into solitary confinement if I didn't control myself immediately. The memory of that punishment cell made me shut my mouth instantly.

"Take a deep breath, Rossi. I brought you a newspaper so you can read the facts yourself." Austin pressed the paper against the glass, and I scanned the headlines with growing horror, unable to accept

that this woman had stolen everything that belonged to me. When I finished reading, Austin pulled the paper away. "They're blissfully happy together. Caleb is a good man, Yara, and he deserves a genuine woman like Ivy. She's absolutely perfect for someone of his caliber!"

"Shut your mouth, Austin! I don't want to hear another word!"

"Fair enough. I only came here to confirm what I suspected about your feelings. Thank you for being so brutally honest. Now I can finally close this Chapter and move forward with my life. Actually, Yara, I'm grateful for finally seeing how twisted you really are."

"You're pathetic, Austin. A trust fund baby who lets his family make all his decisions. I would never seriously commit to someone like you."

"Once again, thank you, Yara. I genuinely hope prison transforms you into a decent human being." Austin was about to hang up when I remembered something crucial.

"Austin, wait. Since you made the effort to visit and seem to know everything that's happening, do you have any information about my father? He still hasn't sent any legal representation."

"You haven't heard?" Austin's smile vanished completely, and he looked deeply uncomfortable with my question.

"Heard what? What am I missing?" I asked with growing dread.

"Listen, Yara, despite our history, I really didn't want to be the one to deliver this news..." Austin seemed to be struggling with how to phrase something devastating.

"What news, Austin? Please just tell me directly."

"Your father is currently running from federal agents, facing charges for multiple serious crimes, including the assassination of Caleb's parents."

"But that was supposed to look like an accident."

"The car bomb was deliberately planted, and your father bribed law enforcement officials to classify the investigation as accidental."

"What other charges is my father facing, Austin?"

"Kidnapping the boy, kidnapping Ivy, money laundering, arms trafficking..."

"My father kidnapped that woman?"

"Yes. You really didn't know?"

"Obviously not!"

"Then why did you get involved in any of this, Yara?"

"Because I just wanted to marry Caleb Thorne. I wasn't planning to hurt the child - I was just going to hold onto him until Caleb agreed to our family alliance, then return him safely. Is there more?"

"My God, you never think anything through... But yes, there's much more. Your father is also charged with massive embezzlement from Thorne Group, document forgery, and... this is going to devastate you... he's also charged with murdering your mother."

"WHAT?" I screamed and shot to my feet, sending my chair crashing backward.

The female guard returned and Austin gestured for her to take the phone. He explained what he had just revealed to me. I think she felt some pity for my situation. She uprighted my chair, told me to sit down and compose myself, then left us alone again. I was sobbing from pain, fury, grief, and complete betrayal. I knew my father was ruthless in business, but matricide crossed every line imaginable.

"Yara, your mother's body was discovered recently in a shallow grave on rural property outside the city. She died from suffocation, and investigators found your father's DNA on the plastic bag that covered her head. She was killed shortly before the discovery," Austin seemed genuinely uncomfortable delivering this information.

"My father murdered my mother... how is that possible?" I was weeping uncontrollably - this had to be some horrible nightmare.

Austin held up another newspaper against the glass. The front page detailed every aspect of the federal investigation, cataloging all of my father's alleged crimes. It filled the entire page. When I finished reading, Austin removed the paper. I felt completely empty and utterly abandoned.

"Look, Yara, I'm sorry this is happening, but I don't believe your father is going to help you. Honestly, you brought this on yourself. I'm sorry it's ending this way for you," Austin said while I stared at him with vacant eyes. "Well, I'm leaving now. This is the last time we'll ever see each other, Yara. After today, I'm erasing you from my existence completely. Good luck - I hope this experience forces you to examine yourself."

Austin disappeared from view and I barely remember the walk back to my cell. My body moved automatically while my mind shut down completely. When I returned, Monica immediately started pestering me with questions about the visit, but I simply ignored her existence, collapsed onto my thin mattress, and turned toward the wall.

Too much devastating information to process. I needed time to absorb everything that had just completely destroyed my world.

Chapter 196 Four Hearts Beat

Ivy's POV

The week melted into a careful routine of reviewing territorial reports and quiet evenings in our heavily fortified penthouse, both Caleb and I settling into the rhythm of our new existence as the undisputed rulers of the Thorne empire. One morning brought Lieutenant Walter knocking on our reinforced bedroom door with news that made my heart leap with anticipation.

"The compound is fully secured, Mrs. Thorne. You can move in whenever you're ready."

We spent the weekend orchestrating our relocation with military precision that would make even seasoned capos impressed. Caleb insisted on deploying our most trusted soldiers as movers while I directed operations from an armored chair, watching our loyal associates transform chaos into order. By late that weekend, we were hosting an impromptu gathering in our new compound's secured backyard, the scent of grilled steaks mixing with gunpowder residue and nervous laughter from our inner circle.

I smoothed down my new flowing dress, grateful for the extra fabric around my expanding middle. Being well into my pregnancy meant my regular clothes had become instruments of torture, cutting into my growing waistline like razor wire. The shopping expedition with the wives earlier had been a tactical necessity, not luxury.

But exhaustion clung to me like dried blood these days. Caleb had started his relentless campaign to get me to step back from family operations, his protective instincts firing on all cylinders every time he caught me yawning during strategy meetings or rubbing my aching lower back.

"This pregnancy feels different, tesoro," he'd say, concern etching deep lines around his dangerous eyes. "With Max, you were unstoppable. Now you can barely make it through lunch without collapsing."

He wasn't wrong. My first pregnancy had been smooth as silk compared to this bone-deep fatigue that made even reviewing ledgers feel monumental. I'd agreed to discuss it with Dr. Taylor at my upcoming appointment.

The morning of the appointment arrived with Caleb practically vibrating with barely contained nervous energy. He paced our bedroom like a caged predator while I got dressed, checking his titanium watch constantly.

"We should leave early," he announced for the third time. "Traffic might be heavy."

"Caleb, we live a short drive from the private medical facility."

"But what if there's a police checkpoint? Or a rival family surveillance? What if someone tries to—"

I silenced him with a kiss that tasted like espresso and violence. "Breathe. Everything's under control."

Dr. Taylor greeted us with her trademark professionalism at the family's private medical wing, her trained eyes immediately dropping to my midsection. "Ivy, look at you. That belly is significantly more prominent than it was with Max at this stage."

"Trust me, I've noticed," I said, settling onto the examination table surrounded by bulletproof walls. "I feel like I'm carrying a concrete block. And I'm constantly starving. I wake up in the early morning hours demanding entire meals."

Caleb chuckled darkly. "She devoured an entire roasted chicken yesterday. By herself. With her bare hands."

"Every pregnancy tells its own story," Dr. Taylor said, preparing her equipment with surgical precision. "Let's run some blood work first, then we'll take a look at this little one with the ultrasound."

As she drew blood with expert efficiency, Caleb drummed his scarred fingers against his thigh, radiating anticipation like a loaded gun. When she finally wheeled over the ultrasound machine, he practically launched himself out of his chair like a missile.

Dr. Taylor applied the cold gel to my belly, her expression shifting as she moved the probe across my skin. The easy professionalism faded, replaced by intense concentration. She paused, adjusted the screen, then looked again with surgical focus.

My stomach dropped like a stone. "Is something wrong?"

"Caleb, please sit down," she said quietly, not taking her eyes off the monitor.

"What? Why? Is the baby in danger?" Caleb's voice pitched higher with lethal edge.

"Sit down first."

Caleb sank into the chair beside me like a controlled detonation, his hand finding mine in a desperate grip. I could feel his pulse hammering against my palm like automatic gunfire.

Dr. Taylor turned the screen toward us, pointing with her stylus like indicating targets on a battlefield map. "Do you see these two distinct sacs here?"

"Twins?" I whispered, my throat suddenly dry as dust.

She shook her head slowly. "Not twins, Ivy. Quadruplets."

The word hung in the air like smoke from a discharged weapon.

"Four?" Caleb's voice cracked like splintering glass. "Four babies?"

"Four babies," Dr. Taylor confirmed, adjusting the image with clinical precision. "Two here, two there. Two separate placentas, which is actually excellent news for their development."

Caleb went completely still beside me, his face draining of all color. Then, as if someone had flipped a switch, he erupted like a grenade.

"Four babies!" He shot to his feet, nearly knocking over his chair with explosive force. "Ivy, do you understand this? Four! We're having four babies!"

Tears started streaming down my face, but they weren't tears of joy. They were tears of overwhelming panic that felt like drowning.

"How am I supposed to handle four newborns?" The words tumbled out between sobs like confessions under interrogation. "I can barely function with this pregnancy. Four babies crying, four babies needing to eat, four sets of diapers—"

"Hey, hey," Caleb was beside me instantly, his hands cupping my face like precious contraband. "We'll handle it together. You're not fighting this war alone."

"Would you like to know the genders?" Dr. Taylor asked with gentle professionalism.

Through my tears, I managed to nod.

"One boy and one girl in each placenta. Perfect balance."

"Can we hear their heartbeats?" Caleb asked, his voice thick with dangerous emotion.

When the rapid flutter of four tiny hearts filled the room like machine gun fire, Caleb completely lost his legendary composure. He buried his face in his hands and sobbed like his heart was breaking open with violent joy.

After we'd collected ourselves, Dr. Taylor's tone grew serious as a death sentence. "Quadruplet pregnancies are extremely rare and high-risk. Complete bed rest for the remainder of your pregnancy is non-negotiable. The babies will likely arrive prematurely, possibly quite early."

We left the medical facility with a pharmaceutical list longer than our enemy kill count and Caleb treating me like I was made of priceless crystal. He wouldn't even let me walk to the armored vehicle.

Back at the compound, Caleb immediately started making calls, summoning our entire inner circle for an emergency dinner. No matter how much Zoe threatened over the encrypted line, he refused to reveal the intelligence.

"It's classified information," he kept saying, his grin threatening to split his dangerous face in half.

We told Max first, watching his eyes grow wide with innocent wonder.

"Four babies, Mommy? Like a whole army?"

"Something like that, sweetheart."

He immediately pressed his ear to my belly, chattering away about all the missions they'd run together.

By dinner time, Caleb had procured a wheelchair from somewhere, refusing to let me walk even short distances through our own secured territory.

"What the hell happened?" Zoe burst through the compound doors, her face pale with worry. "Why are you in a wheelchair? Are you under attack?"

"I'm fine," I assured her, shooting Caleb a look sharp enough to kill. "Your cousin has just gone into full protective mode. Dr. Taylor ordered bed rest, and Caleb decided that means I can't use my legs."

"Bed rest?" Gemma's brow furrowed with concern. "That seems extreme for a normal pregnancy."

"Well, it's not exactly normal," Caleb said, unable to contain his explosive excitement any longer. He knelt beside my chair with Max in his arms like displaying trophies. "Tell them, buddy."

"Mommy has four babies in her tummy!" Max announced proudly like revealing state secrets.

The room went dead silent as a tomb.

Zoe's mouth fell open. "Four? Like, four separate babies?"

"Two boys and two girls," Caleb confirmed, practically glowing with predatory satisfaction.

The silence stretched on until Jude finally spoke like a man witnessing a miracle. "You're serious. You're actually serious."

"Dead serious," Caleb laughed with lethal joy. "And since you're all here, we've solved the godparent situation. Each couple gets one baby to protect."

The explosion of voices that followed was deafening, everyone talking at once, asking questions, expressing shock and excitement like a war room briefing. Through it all, Caleb beamed like he'd just conquered an entire city.

"Walter," he called toward the kitchen with commanding authority, "better prepare extra food. I still have to call Ivy's parents."

Chapter 197 Prison Revelation

Caleb's POV

The Thorne family compound had become my fortress over the recent weeks, and honestly, I thrived in the chaos of running our operations from within these walls. Every day brought new challenges, new territories to secure, new opportunities to expand our influence. My lieutenants respected my methods, and my partnership with our veteran consigliere Adler had evolved into something irreplaceable. The old-timer treated me like the son he never had, mentoring me with the kind of wisdom that only comes from decades in the family business. His reputation was spotless, his loyalty unquestionable. But one thing gnawed at me constantly - Rossi's father remained a ghost in the wind.

I pushed through Adler's office door, balancing a box of those cheese croissants he'd become obsessed with. The man had simple pleasures, and I'd learned that small gestures went a long way in maintaining the bonds that kept our family strong.

"Morning, Adler! Brought your addiction fuel," I announced, setting the box on his cluttered desk.

His weathered face broke into a genuine grin. "You're golden, kid. The whole family's talking about how you've stepped up since taking over." He stood, moving to the ancient espresso machine that somehow still produced perfect Italian brew. "Actually, your timing's perfect. Got something that might interest you, besides the caffeine."

Adler poured two steaming cups, the rich aroma filling his cramped office. He settled back into his chair, selecting a croissant and taking an almost reverent bite, eyes closing in appreciation.

"These things are dangerous. Your lady has ruined my diet completely." Ever since the family had witnessed Zoe take charge during Ivy's crisis, Adler had dubbed her "boss lady" with obvious admiration. Their friendship had grown naturally, and he never missed a chance to sing her praises. "That woman's got steel in her spine."

"She’s something else entirely," I agreed, warmth spreading through my chest at the thought of her. "So what’s this gift you mentioned?"

"Remember Rossi’s daughter?" Adler’s tone shifted, becoming more serious.

"Hard to forget that performance. Woman could shatter glass with those sobs." The memory of her dramatic breakdown when we’d captured her still made me wince.

"Warden from the private facility reached out recently. Seems our dramatic princess wants an audience with you specifically." He leaned forward, elbows on his desk. "Apparently she’s been demanding this meeting for some time. Warden finally took notice because she’s... different somehow. Even requested a cell transfer to get away from Monica."

That detail caught my attention immediately. Rossi changing her behavior voluntarily seemed impossible, yet here we were.

"Different how?"

"Calmer, according to the warden. Participating in programs, working in the craft shop, playing nice with other inmates. Complete personality flip." Adler shrugged. "Could be an act, could be genuine. Either way, she claims she has important information about her father."

The possibilities raced through my mind. Rossi had always been our wild card, unpredictable and self-serving. But if she genuinely had intel on her father’s whereabouts...

"I’m heading over there now."

The private correctional facility always felt oppressive, all concrete and steel and barely contained tension. The warden confirmed what Adler had described - Rossi’s transformation seemed legitimate. She’d become a model prisoner almost overnight, participating in rehabilitation programs and maintaining peaceful relationships with other inmates. When they brought her to the warden’s office, the change was immediately visible.

Gone was the hysterical, entitled mob princess who'd sobbed her way through previous encounters. Her hair was neatly pulled back, her posture composed, her voice steady when she spoke.

"Don Thorne, thank you for coming." She settled into the chair across from me with surprising grace.

"You've certainly made an impression here, Rossi. What's prompted this change?"

"Prison has a way of forcing perspective, doesn't it?" Her smile was sad but genuine. "I was spoiled, Don Thorne. Completely out of touch with reality. I thought the family owed me everything I wanted, and I hurt people trying to take it." She paused, hands folded in her lap. "But I'm here now, and I need to face what I've done."

Her sincerity caught me off guard. This wasn't the manipulative performance I'd expected.

"I appreciate your honesty. What did you want to discuss?"

"I want you to catch my mother's killer." Tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't let them fall. "I want justice for her."

"Rossi, we both know who killed your mother."

"That monster who calls himself my father." Her voice hardened with genuine hatred. "I can't believe he murdered the woman who stood by him for decades, then abandoned his own daughter like garbage. He's a coward who deserves to rot in hell."

The pain in her voice was raw, real. Whatever game Rossi had been playing before, this wasn't part of it.

"We're doing everything possible to locate him, but he has resources. We suspect he might have fled the country."

"He didn't run." Her certainty was absolute, sending ice through my veins. "I guarantee it."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because he won't leave until you and your entire family are dead." The casual way she delivered this death sentence made my blood freeze. "He's obsessed, Don Thorne. This isn't over for him."

"Do you have any idea where we might find him?"

"He kept a place for his affairs. A little apartment where he'd meet his mistresses, including that witch Monica." Rossi's disgust was palpable. "I can give you the address."

"How did our surveillance miss this property?"

"It's not in his name. I only discovered it because I suspected he was cheating and followed him one evening." She looked almost embarrassed by the admission. "I was so naive then, thinking infidelity was the worst thing he could do."

For the next while, Rossi provided detailed intelligence about her father's habits, contacts, and resources. She gave me addresses, names, behavioral patterns - everything she could remember. It was more progress than we'd made in recent weeks.

Before leaving, I promised to keep her informed about our hunt and to ensure her father faced justice for her mother's murder. Her gratitude was genuine, and I left feeling cautiously optimistic for the first time in days.

I called Adler before I'd even reached my car, briefing him on Rossi's information. By the time I returned to the compound, he'd already assembled our tactical approach. We'd conduct surveillance until we could take the old man down cleanly.

The target building was an upscale residential complex in the city's financial district. We positioned our team strategically while Bella handled reconnaissance at the front desk. His report confirmed our worst fears and best hopes simultaneously.

"He’s here, registered under Max Fox." The sick irony of using my son’s name as an alias made my stomach turn. "Shaved head, full beard. Left earlier according to the concierge, but the security footage confirms it’s definitely him."

"Perfect. Bella, did you get the master key?"

He handed over the key card and room number. "Got it, boss. And this place isn’t exactly a fleabag motel - penthouse accommodations. Bastard’s living like royalty."

"Adler, Burke, Lopes - let’s search his hideout."

The apartment revealed Rossi’s father’s desperation and resources in equal measure. We catalogued documents, electronic devices, cash, and weapons - enough evidence to build a solid case. But as we prepared to leave, fate handed us an unexpected gift.

The old man appeared at the building entrance, oblivious to our presence. I signaled the team, and we moved to intercept. But the bastard was quick, bolting toward an adjacent parking garage the moment he spotted us.

We swept that structure systematically, checking every level, every hiding spot, every possible escape route. Rossi’s father had vanished like smoke, leaving us with nothing but frustration and the certainty that he wouldn’t return to the apartment.

We planted surveillance equipment throughout his room and positioned unmarked units for continuous monitoring. It was a long shot now, but sometimes long shots paid off.

Back at the compound, I immediately contacted our network, updating them on Rossi’s cooperation and our near-miss with her father. The hunt was intensifying, and I could feel we were closing in.

Chapter 198 Brutal Retaliation

Caleb’s POV

Several days had passed since Underboss Daniel delivered the grim news about the coordinated assault on Roman Rossi's remaining strongholds and his unexpected infiltration into our territory. I shared the intelligence with Ivy that rival families were closing in on our operations. She grew increasingly restless from the mandatory confinement that stretched deep into her final trimester. Extended weeks locked within our fortress had left her visibly drained, her swelling belly making even basic movements exhausting. Her strength ebbed daily, forcing me to conduct all family business from our private quarters. I refused to leave her exposed and vulnerable. Our inner circle maintained constant surveillance, rotating armed guards throughout each day and night.

The afternoon sun filtered through bulletproof windows as I prepared for an unavoidable meeting at our downtown front operation. I pressed a tender kiss to Ivy's lips, then bent to caress the gentle curve where our twins developed. Max, our remarkable boy, lay beside his mother on the reinforced bed, his small hand protective over her arm. His sworn promise to guard her during my absence warmed my cold heart. Despite his youth, he displayed the loyalty and instincts that would make him a formidable heir. His sharp eyes and calculating nature made him the perfect companion for Ivy during these dangerous weeks.

The office atmosphere felt charged despite my attempts to maintain normal business facades. Xavier and I were reviewing territorial expansion plans over espresso when my encrypted phone shattered the relative quiet. Daniel's name flashed on the screen, immediately putting me on high alert.

"Underboss Daniel, this is unexpected," I answered, forcing casualness into my voice. The intelligence that followed drained every drop of warmth from my veins. I absorbed his detailed briefing while my blood turned to ice, assuring him I would mobilize our entire network immediately.

Xavier studied my expression with growing alarm. "Boss, your face has gone completely white. What's the situation?"

"It's catastrophic, Xavier," I managed through clenched teeth. "Finn's been brutally beaten. Our street contacts found him unconscious near his cover job, worked over within an inch of his life. He's being rushed to our family physician in critical condition. We need to assemble everyone immediately and get to Dominic's legitimate business. I have to deliver this news to Zoe personally. Under no circumstances can this intelligence reach Ivy, especially not now."

The realization hit me like a sledgehammer. Ivy's secure phone could be buzzing with panicked calls and coded messages. I speed-dialed Carmen, my voice urgent with desperation.

"Carmen, I need you to move fast. Check on Ivy immediately. Remove her communication devices from the bedroom. Don't allow her to receive any calls or messages, no matter the source. I'll explain everything later, but this is critical. Please, tell me you understand."

Relief flooded through me when Carmen confirmed both Ivy and Max were resting peacefully. She assured me all devices were safely secured and promised to maintain the communication blackout.

After briefing Heidi and Scott on the emergency protocols for running our legitimate fronts, I gathered Gemma, Lila, Ruby, and Jude. The drive to Dominic's corporate office felt interminable, each red light an obstacle between us and Zoe. I contacted Dominic during the journey, instructing him to alert Nora about our imminent arrival.

"Did you finally come begging for legitimate employment, Thorne?" Zoe's sarcastic greeting typically would have amused me. Today, her ignorance of the bloodshed felt heartbreaking.

"Actually, I'm here to steal your boss away," I attempted our usual banter, but my voice betrayed my emotional state.

Her sharp intuition immediately detected something deadly wrong. "Thorne, what's really happening? You look like you've witnessed a massacre."

"We need Dominic's office, Zoe. Now." The tremor in my voice sent visible alarm through her entire body.

In the privacy of Dominic's office, I delivered the devastating intelligence with as much gentleness as possible. Zoe's face crumpled as I explained Finn's condition and asked whether she wanted Ivy informed immediately. Through her tears, she insisted Ivy remain unaware until we knew more. The stress could trigger premature labor or worse complications. Her protective instincts toward Ivy, even while facing her own nightmare, demonstrated the depth of their sisterhood.

The medical facility corridors echoed with our hurried footsteps as we rushed toward the surgical wing. I contacted our physician during the journey, learning he had already summoned his specialist team. Without hesitation, I arranged for my private jet to transport them immediately.

The surgical waiting area became our temporary prison. Time crawled by as we waited for updates on Finn's condition. The medical team's initial assessment painted a grim picture: fractured ribs, punctured lung, compound fractures in his arm and leg, and most terrifyingly, brain bleeding. Zoe maintained remarkable composure despite the tears streaming down her face. Her strength in the face of such brutality reminded me why Ivy treasured their friendship.

"Caleb, return home to Ivy. Don't breathe a word of this bloodshed to her," Zoe commanded through her grief.

"I've already arranged for extended coverage with Carmen, and our family physician will accompany me when I tell Ivy everything. She'll demand to be here supporting you, and I won't prevent that," I replied firmly.

"Caleb, the stress could harm her and the babies," Zoe protested desperately.

"Precisely why I'm ensuring medical supervision. But Caleb's instincts are correct. Keeping this secret would destroy Ivy's trust in both of you permanently," our physician interjected supportively.

"When Finn's discharged, you're both moving into our compound during his entire recovery period. And Zoe, you're moving in tonight. This isn't negotiable," I declared, grasping her trembling hands.

The arrival of both families transformed the waiting room into a gathering of anxious faces and whispered prayers. Finn's parents, followed by Zoe's family, Ivy's parents, and Xavier's mother, created a support network that somehow made the vigil more bearable. The surgical time stretched endlessly until finally, exhausted surgeons emerged with cautious optimism. Finn had stabilized, though he remained in critical condition. The intensive care unit would monitor him closely, allowing only immediate family and Zoe brief visits.

When Zoe returned from seeing Finn, her devastation was complete. She looked fragile enough to shatter at the slightest touch.

"Everyone's coming to our compound tonight. I have secure rooms prepared for extended stays. Zoe, you're included in this arrangement. My drivers will be at your complete disposal. Our fortress offers both safety and comfort during this crisis. Intelligence officers will brief us there with updates."

The drive home felt surreal, knowing I was about to shatter Ivy's peaceful evening with devastating news. Our physician and I approached our bedroom with heavy hearts, finding Ivy propped against pillows, her intuition already sensing trouble.

As predicted, Ivy's reaction was immediate and intense. Her blood pressure spiked dangerously as she processed the attack on Finn. Our physician quickly administered medication to stabilize her condition while monitoring both her vital signs and the babies' responses. Despite her physical distress, Ivy insisted on joining Zoe downstairs. I carried her carefully to the living room sofa, where the women embraced and wept together. Ivy's attempts to console Zoe despite her own condition showcased her remarkable heart.

Our physician's continued monitoring showed Ivy's condition stabilizing, though he remained concerned about stress-induced complications. I asked Carmen to keep Max occupied in another wing of the compound, protecting him from the heavy emotional atmosphere that permeated our home.

The intelligence officers' arrival brought additional grim news that settled over our gathering like a suffocating shroud.

"The situation has deteriorated further," Daniel began grimly. "Surveillance footage from the attack site revealed enforcers who've been apprehended. Both have extensive criminal records and were wanted fugitives. Under interrogation, one confessed they were following Roman Rossi's direct orders. Rossi specifically mentioned that Finn's mother needed to learn about minding her own business, clearly referencing her assistance in Max's custody proceedings."

"That monster must have learned about her involvement through his informant in our organization," I said, fury coursing through my veins.

"Almost certainly. This intelligence was never released through normal channels," the officer confirmed.

Ivy's anguished cry from the sofa cut through me like a blade. Both she and I carried crushing guilt over Finn's suffering.

"I would make the same choice again without hesitation. I have no regrets, and this tragedy isn't your burden. My Finn will recover completely, I have unwavering faith," Finn's mother declared, once again proving her extraordinary strength while comforting my wife.

"The identity of your organization’s informant remains unknown," the officer continued. "Enhanced protection for everyone is now essential."

"Perfect. I want everyone under our roof immediately," I announced, making clear this wasn’t open for discussion.

"Alternative arrangement: parents and Zoe stay here, while our associates relocate to Xavier’s compound. The building’s security systems are excellent, and proximity makes protecting everyone more manageable."

"I’m bringing Heidi and Scott here as well." We finalized arrangements without objection, fear motivating everyone’s compliance. I contacted our security chief to strengthen protection at our compound, Xavier’s facility, and both legitimate businesses. Dominic implemented similar measures. Remote operations would become our norm, and no one would venture out without notification, armed escort, and professional drivers.

The next morning brought cautiously optimistic news from Finn’s medical team. He would survive, though recovery would be lengthy and require extensive support. His hospital stay would continue for the foreseeable future.

Chapter 199 Blood Means Nothing

Ivy’s POV

Several days had passed since Finn took a bullet during the warehouse raid that finally cornered Roman’s remaining associates. Our daily encrypted video calls had become my only source of peace, watching his face gradually heal despite the severity of his gunshot wounds. The family doctor assured us he was past the critical stage, though Roman Rossi himself remained a ghost in the wind, evading every tracker and informant in our network.

Tomorrow would mark the end of our extended family lockdown. My parents were scheduled to return to their safehouse, leaving only Finn’s parents behind at the compound. The thought of losing this heavily armed sanctuary filled with loved ones made my chest tighten. I had grown accustomed to being surrounded by bodyguards who treated me like royalty, but they promised their next visit wouldn’t be long.

The afternoon sun cast shadows across the fortified pool area as I reclined on the lounge chair beside my mother. Her encrypted phone's sharp ring shattered our peaceful silence. She answered with visible irritation, spat a curt "No," and immediately disconnected.

"What's eating at you, mom? Someone managed to ruffle your legendary composure?" I teased, studying her tense expression while my security detail maintained their vigilant positions around the perimeter.

"Nobody worth mentioning."

"Mom." My tone carried the authority I had learned from months as a mafia wife. "Spill it. What's happening?"

"Nothing important."

We entered a stubborn standoff, neither willing to budge until Caleb and my father emerged from the armored house. Their curiosity was immediately piqued by the tension crackling between us. Caleb approached with his characteristic calm authority that commanded respect from every soldier in the organization, gently suggesting my mother share whatever was troubling her.

"Fine!" My mother's composure finally cracked. "My sister refuses to stop harassing me about speaking with Ivy."

My father's face darkened immediately, his hand instinctively moving toward his concealed weapon. "What does that bloodsucker want with you?"

"To discuss Brodie," my mother replied, her voice dripping with disgust at the name of the low-level thug who had betrayed our family.

My father's jaw clenched. "Ever since that piece of garbage was thrown in federal prison, she's been relentlessly tormenting your mother."

"Give me the phone, mom. Call her right now."

"Ivy, absolutely not!" My mother's protective instincts flared, knowing how dangerous it was to show any weakness in our world.

"Call her, mother-in-law. She won't quit until we handle this directly," Caleb's voice carried gentle but firm persuasion, the same tone he used when ordering executions.

My mother reluctantly retrieved her encrypted phone, dialed the number, and placed it in my palm. I immediately activated the speaker function. Her sister's voice emerged, already complaining.

"Diane, you must understand we're family..."

"Now you suddenly remember we're family, Gladys?" I cut through her whining before it could gain momentum, my voice carrying the steel I had learned from watching Caleb negotiate with rival families.

"Ivy, mind your tone with me. I'm your aunt."

"You're nothing to me. You're merely my mother's sister. State what you want. Why this constant harassment of a made man's family?"

"Disrespectful brat! Now that you've married into the Thorne crime family, you've forgotten about blood completely. You didn't even invite us to witness your oath ceremony..."

"Listen carefully, Gladys. If your goal is complaining about wedding invitations to a private mafia ceremony, stop wasting both our time. Don't expect invitations to anything else in my life. You're not part of this world. If that's everything, have a pleasant day."

I moved to disconnect, but her desperate shout stopped me.

"Wait, Ivy! Please don't hang up!"

"Say what you want. Now."

"Ivy, Brodie is your cousin's husband. My grandson was born and still doesn't know his father. You have to help get him out of federal prison!"

"I don't have to do anything, Gladys. He should have considered that before helping that traitor Roman kidnap and chain my son to a warehouse pipe."

"Ivy, show mercy!"

"Mercy for a low-life soldier who only brought me harm? For a pathetic man who put a gun to a child's head - MY SON?" My voice rose to a shout that made several bodyguards look our way. "No. I have zero mercy for dead men walking."

"Ivy, then for my daughter's sake, help me get her husband released from federal custody."

The phone was suddenly passed to someone else. My cousin Tiffany's voice replaced her mother's.

"We used to be like sisters, Ivy."

"I considered you a sister, Tiffany, but you betrayed me, humiliated me, and mistreated me whenever possible. I pity your son who bears no responsibility for this mess, but I won't lift a finger to help the man who sold information to Roman about my child's location."

"Ivy, he's filled with remorse. He wants to see you, to apologize properly," Tiffany's voice took on that whining quality I recognized as pure manipulation. "He wants to make amends, and so do I. Give me your address and I'll visit, cousin. I'll bring my son to meet his little cousin."

"Don't you dare, you snake! If you show your face at this compound, I'll have my husband's soldiers drag you off the property in body bags. I'll call our contacts in federal law enforcement. I'm capable of making your life hell. Don't you dare appear in front of me..."

The phone was suddenly snatched from my grasp.

"Ladies, this is Ivy's husband speaking." Caleb's voice carried deadly calm authority that had silenced courtrooms and burial grounds alike. "I'm issuing you both a warning. Stay away - far away - from my family, or I'll ensure you both join Brodie and his accomplice in federal prison. You're well aware I possess both power and substantial resources in the underworld, which means I always get what I want. If my mother-in-law chooses to maintain contact with you, I respect her decision. However, near my wife and children, none of you will come close. Are we crystal clear?"

Caleb ended the call, returned the phone to my mother, and knelt beside my chair.

"My angel, are you alright?"

"Yes, Caleb. These people caused me tremendous pain, and now they have the audacity to demand family loyalty they never respected," I replied with obvious contempt. "I'm sorry, mom."

"Diane, I apologize, but I won't permit them anywhere near Ivy or my children."

"You have nothing to apologize for. I completely agree with your position. That's exactly why I didn't want you speaking with them. Gladys and I are sisters, but we never maintained a good relationship. I severed ties with her permanently when Max was kidnapped. She's the one who keeps calling me," my mother explained, looking somewhat embarrassed by the family drama.

"Father-in-law, are you certain about leaving tomorrow? I'm genuinely concerned about Roman's remaining associates," Caleb addressed my father with obvious worry.

"We must resume our normal lives, son. We'll manage fine with proper precautions," my father assured him with confidence.

"I've already deployed a full tactical security team to your location. You'll remain with them constantly, correct?" Caleb pressed for confirmation.

"Yes, we've agreed to stay with your armed personnel until this maniac is captured or eliminated," my father confirmed.

Both Caleb and I released simultaneous sighs of relief, though the underlying tension remained palpable in our dangerous world.

Chapter 200 Betrayal from Within

Ivy's POV

After my parents departed for their safe house in the mountains, I asked Caleb if I could visit Finn at the private medical facility where the family's wounded soldiers recovered. His steel-blue eyes hardened with that familiar protective edge.

"You need complete rest, tesoro. The family doctor specifically ordered minimal movement."

"I have the wheelchair," I countered, placing my hand on his tattooed forearm. "I promise not to push myself."

Caleb's protective instincts battled against his desperate need to keep me content. After several tense moments, he relented and had his driver take us to the secure medical compound. Finn appeared healthier than anticipated, discussing strategy with his mother when we entered. The visit lasted only briefly but significantly lifted my spirits.

As we prepared to leave, I seized my opportunity.

"Since we're already away from the estate, could we make a stop at the shopping district? I still need supplies for the babies."

Caleb's expression grew thunderous. "Ivy, I have territory meetings scheduled this afternoon. I cannot escort you personally."

"The soldiers will accompany me," I pressed. "Plus I'm meeting the other wives there. Please, amore, I'm losing my mind confined to the compound all day with nothing to occupy my time." I deployed my most pitiful expression.

He exhaled heavily, running his scarred hand through his dark hair. "Very well. But you stay within arm's reach of security, no wandering alone, and you contact me regularly without fail."

"You're impossibly controlling when the mood strikes you," I teased, earning a reluctant smile.

At the upscale shopping center, the wives were already assembled. We headed directly to the exclusive children's boutique, where miniature designer garments and luxury accessories filled every showcase. I was examining delicate infant gowns near the floor-to-ceiling windows when an unsettling sensation crept along my spine. I turned toward the main display area but observed nothing suspicious. Moments later, Lexi and Zoe surrounded me with armloads of exquisite outfits, successfully diverting my attention from the uneasiness.

Following our shopping expedition, my pregnancy appetite struck with brutal intensity. The wives settled me at a prime table in the food court and departed to retrieve our meals. I observed a young mother at a nearby table, her twin sons laughing over their lunch, when something lightly brushed against my hair. The contact sent ice water through my bloodstream.

I whirled around but glimpsed only a figure in a black overcoat and baseball cap moving away through the crowd. My pulse hammered against my throat. Everything recently felt menacing, and the relentless stress was gradually breaking me down.

When the wives returned bearing food, I forced myself to eat and maintain normalcy. After lunch, Zoe expressed interest in visiting the bookstore to find reading material for Finn. The establishment was packed with weekend customers.

"I'll remain out here," I informed them, gesturing toward the gelato cart positioned strategically outside. "That crowd is overwhelming."

They vanished inside while one of my assigned soldiers purchased a vanilla cone for me. I was savoring the cold sweetness when my phone vibrated with an incoming message.

"Savor your treat while you still have the chance."

Unknown sender. My blood transformed to liquid nitrogen.

I frantically scanned the surrounding area but detected nothing alarming among the casual shoppers and families strolling past. The wives emerged from the bookstore, chatting animatedly about Lexi's discovery, when my phone rang.

"Caleb..." My voice emerged breathless and trembling.

"My queen, what is your exact location right now?"

"At the shopping center." I struggled to sound composed, not wanting to create unnecessary alarm.

"Ivy, listen very carefully. I need you to return to the compound immediately. Can you do that for me?"

"What's happening?"

Caleb's heavy sigh carried through the connection. "I just received a photograph of you enjoying gelato outside the bookstore. From an untraceable number. I believe it's Rossi."

My hand trembled so violently I nearly dropped the device. "I received a message as well."

"Return home immediately. I'm departing now to meet you there."

The line disconnected. Instantly, one of the security soldiers crouched beside my wheelchair.

"Ma'am, we need to evacuate. Immediately."

The wives noticed the sudden tension and gathered protectively around me. I quickly explained the situation as we moved toward the exit. As we passed a metallic balloon vendor, my blood turned to ice.

There, partially concealed behind silver and gold balloons, stood a disturbingly familiar silhouette.

"Rossi!" I screamed to the security team. "He’s right there, behind the balloons!"

Four soldiers rushed in that direction while the remaining two hustled us toward the exits. Vehicles were already positioned and waiting. I was shaking uncontrollably, nausea rising in my throat. Zoe pressed a water bottle into my hands.

"Drink slowly, sweetheart. Small sips."

The other soldiers returned a short while later, empty-handed and breathing heavily. Rossi had vanished like smoke into thin air.

Back at the compound, Caleb waited with Xavier, Dominic, Jude, and Daniel. Inspector Adler stood alongside four additional officers in our main reception room.

"My angel, are you injured?" Caleb lifted me from the wheelchair into his powerful embrace.

"He was observing us the entire time," I whispered against his chest. "He was so dangerously close."

"You’re protected now. I have you."

Adler and Daniel confirmed they were conducting a comprehensive sweep of the shopping center and analyzing all surveillance footage. I recounted every detail from our hospital visit onward.

"How did he obtain my personal number? We changed everything after the kidnapping incident."

"Most likely through our company insider," Adler replied grimly. "What confuses me is the traffic surveillance around the medical facility showed no trace of Rossi. No suspicious vehicles, nothing unusual whatsoever."

"So he simply stumbled upon them at the shopping center?" Caleb demanded.

"Absolutely not. Men like Rossi don't take casual strolls through commercial districts. Every action is meticulously calculated. He knew she would be there." Adler's expression grew deeply thoughtful. "Ivy, where did you acquire your current phone?"

"It's a company-issued device, pre-loaded with my email accounts and contacts."

"Who physically delivered it to you?"

"The IT department provides them ready for immediate use."

Adler nodded with grim understanding. "Can your technical specialist examine the device?"

Soon after, Felix Hayes arrived and began his comprehensive analysis. His discoveries chilled everyone present in the room.

"Inspector, your suspicions were correct. There's sophisticated surveillance software embedded in Mrs. Thorne's phone. I strongly recommend examining all company devices immediately."

Caleb's face darkened with murderous fury. "How was this software installed?"

"This type of program requires direct physical access, Mr. Thorne. It cannot be installed remotely."

"That significantly narrows our investigation," Adler concluded. "Your informant operates within the IT department."

Caleb’s hands clenched into deadly fists as he contacted Scott. Someone with intimate access to our operations was feeding Rossi our every movement, and now they had a much smaller pool of suspects to interrogate.