Mafia Mask 201

Chapter 201 Betrayed by Blood

Roman's POV

This rat-infested safe house reeked of decay and desperation, but it was the only sanctuary left after the Thorne family's soldiers had raided my penthouse. The irony wasn't lost on me that I, once a respected underboss in the organization, now depended entirely on some street-level punk I'd recruited from the docks. This crumbling hideout was miles from Thorne territory, but it served its purpose keeping me off their radar.

At least yesterday brought some satisfaction watching Ivy jump at every shadow. Tailing her through Little Italy like a ghost had been pure entertainment, watching her paranoia spike with each passing hour. My inside man's brilliant move installing surveillance malware on all Thorne Group devices meant I could orchestrate my vendetta from behind this computer screen, moving my enemies around like pawns on a chessboard.

The frustrating part was Ivy rarely left the family compound anymore. Well into her pregnancy, she looked like she was smuggling a basketball under her designer maternity clothes.

"Boss man, grub's here," Derek announced as he kicked through the door. That irritating street rat refused to use proper titles, preferring his ridiculous street nickname for me. Though I had to admit, it carried a certain weight in the underworld. He was a pain in the ass, but his network of desperate contacts proved invaluable for wet work.

"Please tell me you brought something edible this time," I grimaced, remembering yesterday's greasy disaster from some dive near the waterfront. The oversalted garbage he'd brought was barely fit for strays.

"Nothing but five-star dining for the mastermind," he replied with obvious sarcasm, tossing me the takeout bag.

"Sit down. We need to discuss business." A plan had been forming in my mind, but execution required careful orchestration.

"What's the play now?" Derek dropped onto the threadbare couch, propping his boots on the coffee table like he owned the joint.

"I need someone to snatch a newborn from the hospital," I said, savoring the mental image of that arrogant don and his wife's anguish. "Ivy's due date is approaching fast. When she delivers, we're taking one of those babies."

"Damn, boss man, you're getting more ruthless by the day," Derek grinned approvingly. "I can arrange that. What kind of operator you thinking?"

"A woman who can pose as medical staff. She lifts the infant from the nursery and delivers it to me. You'll be backup, blending with the hospital crowd, watching everything, making sure nothing goes sideways," I outlined my rough strategy.

"Perfect! I know exactly who can handle this. There's this chick I've been seeing, always hurting for cash. She'll jump at the chance," Derek always had someone willing to do anything for a payday.

"Excellent, bring her here for a meet. But don't get generous with promises. Five grand maximum. Understood?" My war chest was running dangerously low.

The only funds remaining came from Patricia's offshore accounts that I'd liquidated and funneled through shell companies before the feds could freeze everything. Less than three hundred thousand had escaped their asset seizure. Between paying Derek and my company rat, who were both getting too comfortable with their positions, money was becoming a serious problem.

My burner phone buzzed with a message from my inside source. What crisis now? I grabbed the device and read.

"They somehow detected the surveillance network. All monitoring programs on phones and computers have been neutralized."

Damn it! This would complicate everything significantly. I typed quickly: "What happened?"

His response arrived immediately.

"Unknown, but they conducted a comprehensive security sweep of all electronic equipment throughout the organization and deactivated everything. Worse news, there's a new security chief reviewing all departmental operations. This guy knows his business."

When did Caleb Thorne develop actual brains? He'd always been predictably violent before. This development would make my life infinitely more difficult. I decided to apply pressure and sent another message.

"Find a solution, but maintain intelligence flow if you want to keep receiving your regular envelope."

His reply increased my irritation.

"I'll attempt what I can, but security has tightened considerably. They're exercising extreme caution, and Thorne is conducting most family business from the compound now, keeping office activities minimal. Intelligence from the top level has dried up completely."

What an incompetent fool! I explicitly told him to find solutions. Staying informed about their operations was crucial to my survival.

"Hey boss man, got a question for you," Derek interrupted my thoughts.

"What now, kid?" I sighed, feeling tension building behind my temples.

"You planning to help my buddy who got pinched in that kidnapping job?" Derek fixed me with an intense stare.

"I wouldn't even lift a finger for my own blood," I snapped, losing patience. "He earned good money for the work, prison was part of the risk he accepted, so he can handle the consequences alone."

"Come on, that’s not how the code works. You can’t abandon the guy! He’s completed countless jobs for you, quality work too," Derek protested.

"And received excellent compensation for each one. Now he’s on his own. Every man for himself," I replied, starting to eat. At least today he’d brought steak and fries. Nothing spectacular, but vastly superior to yesterday’s slop.

"Boss man, can I ask something else?" Derek looked somewhat nervous.

"What now?" Such an aggravating little pest.

"Why won’t you help your daughter? The girl’s practically mafia royalty and she’s rotting in lockup. Seems pretty harsh," Derek appeared genuinely sympathetic toward Yara.

"She’s old enough to handle her own problems. Yara never executes anything correctly, she only creates obstacles for my operations. Once I finish with Caleb Thorne, I’m disappearing to live comfortably without even remembering that annoying girl. She’s exactly like her mother." I started talking and before realizing it, had revealed too much. "If you feel sorry for her, she’s yours."

"Man, being your son-in-law would be incredible. That girl is absolutely stunning," Derek said with a grin. "But she wouldn’t give me a second glance, I know it."

And he was absolutely right. I shook my head and laughed. Yara only had eyes for Caleb, she’d developed a complete obsession with him. Admittedly, I bore significant responsibility for this fixation. From childhood, I constantly reinforced that she should marry him, that he was her perfect match, programming her quite effectively.

During her teenage years, she became rebellious and developed feelings for that Austin Kieran character. She started spending time with him, completely infatuated, and he followed her around constantly. She even lost her virginity to him, and worse, multiple soldiers witnessed it happening at the social club. I was furious with her, this was devastating for my plans to arrange her marriage to Caleb. I gave her a severe beating that day and threatened that any future defiance would result in her being thrown onto the streets penniless.

She was a pampered mafia princess whose entire existence revolved around shopping, country clubs, and expensive establishments with her friends. Prison must be torturous for her. But that's how I maintained control over her, and she followed my every command.

"Derek, did you discover how the feds located my penthouse?" I suddenly remembered to ask. "I'd completely forgotten about it until now."

"Oh right, almost slipped my mind. I sent that junkie lawyer to the lockup to pressure that Monica woman. He went yesterday," Derek replied. "That woman's absolutely disgusting, right boss man? She got furious and said to get her out fast, or she'll sing everything, though she hasn't talked yet. But she wanted you to know that the princess requested a cell transfer recently and it was approved."

"What do you mean?" I asked, finding this strange since they had gotten along well.

"She only knows that the princess received a lawyer visit, and afterward, she stopped speaking to Monica entirely and requested the transfer."

"When did this occur?" I was curious.

"Around the time they raided your place. The lawyer, he's a junkie but occasionally thinks clearly, after speaking with Monica, he managed to identify who visited the princess."

"And who was it?"

"Damn! I forgot the name, what was it again?" Derek concentrated but couldn't remember. He grabbed his phone and made a call, laughing when he hung up. "I don't know how that guy passed the bar exam, he's already wasted."

"The name, you idiot! Before you forget again," I said, throwing the takeout container onto the table.

"Oh yeah, he said it's Austin, but he doesn't remember the surname."

"Kieran!" I said with pure hatred. He must have visited and revealed everything to Yara.

"Yeah, that's it. You're brilliant, boss man! That's insane!" Derek laughed while staring at me.

"What else did Monica say?"

"She said she kept investigating and discovered that the princess was pressuring the prison warden to meet with some detective. Then, Monica learned from another inmate that the princess got a detective visit, and it was significant because the meeting happened in the warden's office. And that was the day your place got raided." Derek stretched across the sofa back.

"But Yara didn't know about the penthouse. Or did she? And even if she did, she wouldn't betray family," I speculated aloud, though the moron was listening intently.

"Look boss man, I don't know, but like, you whacked the girl's mother, right? And you're letting her rot in lockup alone. If it were me, I'd want to destroy you, rip your heart out, and feed it to Brutus, my pitbull," Derek laughed, and his logic was sound.

Yara must have been enraged. But it was too late now. She knew too much, and it was definitely her who provided them intelligence, which explained why all my accounts were frozen. Traitorous daughter! I should have been more cautious. Her mother had already pulled that stunt hiding evidence of the car bomb that killed Caleb Thorne's parents. I should have realized my spoiled little princess wasn't as foolish as she appeared. Her mother must have taught her to gather information for leverage. But it was finished now! Done! So to hell with her!

Chapter 202 One Child Missing

Ivy's POV

After the shopping center ambush, I refused to set foot outside our fortified compound. The pregnancy had become increasingly demanding as the quadruplets grew, leaving me drained and carrying what felt like lead weights through quicksand with every movement.

We immediately pulled Max from his private academy. Leaving him exposed when Roman's remaining loyalists were still hunting our family seemed like tactical suicide. The former underboss was circling our

territory like a wounded predator, waiting for the perfect moment to strike at what we held most precious.

Finn had been released from the family's private medical facility and was completing his physical therapy in our guest wing. The assassination attempt left no permanent damage, but he moved with the calculated caution of a man who had stared death in the face. We all did now.

Roman had vanished completely after our violent confrontation at the shopping center. Our cyber warfare specialists discovered surveillance malware embedded throughout the Thorne Group's digital infrastructure, but the insider feeding him information remained a ghost. Felix now controlled the entire technology division with ruthless efficiency, monitoring every electronic whisper that moved through our networks.

Caleb and I were preparing for the hospital. Dr. Taylor insisted on scheduling a cesarean delivery. Late in the pregnancy, our children were healthy enough for birth, and my body was demanding relief. The date fell on a Saturday in summer, which brought back memories of our masquerade encounter in the underground auction house.

"What has you smiling like that, tesoro?" Caleb appeared behind me, pressing his scarred lips to the crown of my head.

"I was remembering our first night together."

"Ah, the evening we created Max." His ice-blue eyes held that familiar dangerous spark.

"A Saturday in summer. Exactly like today."

"A sacred date for our bloodline." Caleb's voice carried the same reverence I felt. "Ready to go? I am desperate to hold our heirs."

"Caleb, the hospital security arrangements. You implemented everything I requested?"

"Yes, tesoro. The hospital is locked down tight. We have teams stationed at every entrance, and our children will have armed protection around the clock. They will not move anywhere without our soldiers watching."

Relief flooded through me. Our compound felt impenetrable, but hospitals had too many vulnerabilities where Roman could strike at our most precious assets.

Our inner circle had transformed the hospital lobby into a celebration. Balloons bobbed against the ceiling, party decorations adorned every surface, and confetti sparkled across the marble floors.

"Did someone mistake this for a carnival?" I laughed at their extravagant enthusiasm.

"This is how we welcome the next generation of Sterlings with proper respect, boss lady." Ruby blew a party horn that made me laugh until my ribs ached.

The medical team prepared me efficiently. By sunset, I had delivered four perfect, healthy children who were transferred to the NICU purely as a precaution for their early arrival.

We would remain hospitalized for several days, which made my skin crawl with paranoia. Every shadow seemed threatening. Every unfamiliar face looked suspicious. Dr. Taylor eventually prescribed mild sedatives to stop my hands from trembling with constant vigilance.

"Ivy, I have excellent news." Dr. Taylor entered wearing a broad smile. "Your children are thriving beautifully. The pediatric team just cleared them to leave intensive care today. They will spend a couple more days in the standard nursery for observation, then your entire family can return home."

"Finally. After many days, that is music to my ears." I felt tension drain from my shoulders. "But why cannot we leave today if they are out of critical care?"

"I prefer a couple more days of additional monitoring." The doctor remained firm. "Plus, in a few days it will be weeks after surgery, and we can remove your surgical sutures. Better to return home completely healed."

"Whatever you recommend professionally, doctor."

The medication made me drowsy. Tomorrow we would finally return to our secure compound. A security operative entered and gestured for Caleb to step outside. That snapped me fully alert.

"Do not even consider leaving this room without explaining what is happening." I fixed the operative with a lethal stare.

"It is nothing serious, ma'am." He glanced nervously at Caleb, which only intensified my glare.

"Tell her." Caleb sighed, knowing he could never hide anything from me.

"One of the children, sir, cannot be located." The operative barely finished speaking before I was out of bed with my hands twisted in his tactical vest.

"What did you just say? You lost my child?"

"Ma'am, please, a medical staff member removed one infant from the nursery for routine testing. Our operative accompanied them, but somewhere within the hospital he was struck unconscious. When he regained consciousness, both the staff member and your child had disappeared."

Dr. Taylor rushed in with nurses who gently guided me back into bed. My entire body was shaking with barely contained rage.

"Ivy, breathe deeply. We will recover your child. All evidence suggests they remain within the hospital complex. We have triggered complete lockdown protocols. No one enters or exits this building. Security footage confirms the person who took your child has not left the premises."

"Daniel, thank God you are here." Caleb's voice cracked when our friend appeared in the doorway.

"I was conducting business when the alert came through. I have several men with me. Adler is already coordinating the systematic search." Daniel's voice was steady and professional. "Stay with Ivy. Trust me to tear this hospital apart until I find your son."

"Thank you, Daniel."

The door opened again, and nurses wheeled in bassinets containing my other precious children.

"Ivy, your remaining children will stay here with you. I believe this will ease your anxiety. I will also remain in this room personally. They will not leave for any reason, and only medical staff I personally trust have access."

I stared at my other children sleeping peacefully in their secure cribs, and my heart shattered for the missing piece. I called our compound to confirm Max was safe. My parents had arrived from our Greenleaf estate days ago to meet their grandchildren and were now watching Max under heavy guard at home.

But one of my children was gone, and madness was clawing at the edges of my sanity.

Chapter 203 One Baby Gone

Daniel's POV

The decision to visit the private medical facility today seemed routine enough. I had wrapped up a security sweep in the territory and mentioned to my crew that I wanted to check on Caleb and Ivy's newborn quadruplets. My lieutenant Bella, who was behind the wheel of our armored sedan, immediately perked up at the mention of meeting the babies. Before I knew it, the entire security detail was eager to see them.

We had been hunting Roman for months now, and my team had become deeply invested in this vendetta. Each of them had crossed paths with our Don and his wife at some point during our operations, forming a loyalty that went beyond professional duty to the Thorne family.

Bella insisted we make a detour to the facility's exclusive gift boutique. Soon we were all pooling our money together, buying metallic balloons, premium chocolates for Ivy, and an assortment of stuffed

animals. The sight of three seasoned enforcers debating over teddy bear colors would have been amusing under different circumstances.

Standing before the private nursery window, watching those four tiny beings sleep peacefully, should have filled me with warmth. Instead, an icy dread settled in my stomach. Something was wrong. I counted again, slower this time. Three babies. Only three.

I approached the private security guard stationed nearby, keeping my voice steady despite the alarm bells screaming in my head. "Where's the fourth baby?"

He shrugged with casual indifference. "One of them got taken for some medical procedures, I think."

"Just one?" The question came out sharper than I intended. "Why would only one need testing?"

His blank stare told me everything I needed to know. He had no answers, and worse, he hadn't thought to ask questions. This wasn't one of our people.

A nurse emerged from the nursery, her scrubs pristine white under the soft lighting. I intercepted her path, my tactical vest and visible family crest immediately commanding her attention. She took in my bulletproof protection, still worn from our earlier patrol, and the Thorne insignia on my jacket.

"Ma'am, I need to know why only one of the quadruplets was taken for procedures."

Her expression shifted from professional courtesy to concern. "Let me check our system."

She disappeared back into the nursery, her fingers flying across the computer keyboard in the corner. When she returned, her face had gone pale.

"Sir, we have a serious problem. There are no medical orders for any of those babies in our system. I'm alerting facility security immediately."

The world seemed to slow around me. "Do it now!" I barked, already pulling out my encrypted phone. "Which direction did they go?" I demanded of the security guard, whose casual demeanor had evaporated into nervous fidgeting.

He pointed toward a corridor with shaking hands.

My fingers found Director Taylor's number with muscle memory. The facility director picked up right away.

"Taylor, lock down the facility immediately. One of the Don's babies is missing. Code Black, now!"

I didn't wait for his response. The announcement system crackled to life before I even hung up, announcing the lockdown protocol that would seal every exit within seconds.

I sprinted down the corridor the guard had indicated, my boots echoing against the polished floor. Every staff member I passed got the same urgent question about a nurse and security escort. The trail led me to a fire escape door, and my blood ran cold when I found it unlocked.

Inside, I discovered the security guard crumpled on the landing, blood seeping from a gash on his head. I dragged his unconscious form back through the doorway just as the security protocols engaged, sealing us inside.

A doctor materialized at my side, professional instincts kicking in as he assessed the injured guard. When the man regained consciousness, his story confirmed my worst fears. He remembered following the supposed nurse into the stairwell, finding her behavior suspicious. Then nothing but pain and darkness.

"He needs stitches and a full medical workup," the doctor informed me as I prepared to leave them.

I needed to get back to my team, but the security doors between facility wings had already locked down. Another call to Taylor resolved that obstacle, but precious minutes were slipping away.

The fire escape yielded nothing despite my frantic search. The facility's massive structure mocked my efforts. I needed backup, and I needed it now.

Back on the maternity floor, I found Taylor coordinating with his head of security, who was barking orders at his overwhelmed staff.

"Do we have surveillance footage?" I cut straight to the heart of the matter.

"Already pulled it. Follow me."

The security office was cramped, designed for routine monitoring rather than crisis management. Four chairs surrounded a small table where a laptop displayed frozen footage. The head of security hit play, and we watched our nightmare unfold in grainy black and white.

The woman looked convincing in her nurse's uniform, cradling the baby with practiced ease. The security guard approached her, following protocol by assigning an escort. We tracked their movement through multiple camera angles until they reached the stairwell, where the footage went dark.

"Check the entrance logs," I ordered.

The woman had entered legitimately, her badge granting access through the turnstiles. But there was no record of her leaving, which meant she was still inside. The timeframe was narrow, working in our favor. From the moment she took the baby until lockdown, no one had exited through any monitored entrance.

"She's got help," I concluded grimly. "No way she knocked out that security guard while holding an infant. We're looking for at least two people."

Taylor nodded grimly. "What's our next move?"

"We tell Caleb and Ivy what's happening. And move the other three babies to their room. Consolidate security and keep the family close to their children."

The walk to Ivy's private suite felt like a death march. Caleb's personal security detail had already briefed them, and Ivy's anguished sobs echoed down the hallway before we even reached the door.

Caleb’s eyes met mine with desperate hope, as if I could work miracles through sheer force of will. His usual composure was cracking, but he was fighting to hold himself together for his wife’s sake.

"I’ll find your baby," I promised them both. "Trust me."

At the doorway, Caleb caught my arm. "I can’t believe this is happening again, Daniel."

The weight of his past trauma, everything Roman had already put them through, made this violation even more heinous.

"Stay strong," I told him. "Keep Ivy calm. I’m going to tear this place apart if I have to."

I assembled my teams with military precision. Twenty floors stretched above and below us. My three men, plus seven of Caleb’s personal guards, minus the injured one and the four I stationed at the suite. It wasn’t enough manpower for a building this size, but it would have to do.

The elevators were locked down, forcing us to use the stairs for everything. Taylor had provided master keys and override cards, giving us access to every room and corridor in the building.

We started on the maternity floor and worked systematically. Each empty room, each supply closet, each maintenance area got the same thorough treatment. Nothing.

Hours crawled by like days. I sent updates to both Taylor and Caleb after clearing each floor, knowing they were hanging on every word. By the time we reached the administrative level, my team was running on pure determination and adrenaline.

The first floor should have been our last hope, but room after room yielded nothing. My fury was building to dangerous levels. How could two people and a baby simply vanish inside a locked building?

Somewhere in this maze of corridors and rooms, one of the Don’s children was being held by people capable of violence. Every minute that passed increased the danger, and I was no closer to finding them than when we started.

The search would continue. I would turn over every stone, open every door, and check every shadow until that baby was back in its parents' arms where it belonged.

Chapter 204 Beneath the Boiler

Daniel's POV

I positioned myself on the hospital's first floor, scanning every corner with the precision that had kept me alive through countless mafia operations. My pulse hammered against my ribs as I caught sight of a woman slipping into the restroom like a shadow. I couldn't tell where she'd emerged from, but every instinct I'd honed over years as Caleb's enforcer screamed danger.

Without hesitation, I signaled Bella, my partner whose reputation for extracting information from enemies preceded her into every interrogation room in our territory.

"Check the bathroom," I commanded, my voice low and urgent. "I'll cover the exit."

The sound of impact echoed from inside, followed by a grunt of pain. I burst through the door to find Bella straddling a woman on the tile floor, zip ties already binding her wrists with practiced efficiency.

"Capo, we got her," Bella announced, hauling the suspect to her feet with brutal force. "Same face from the security footage. She ditched the nurse disguise, but it's definitely our kidnapper."

"You people are insane!" The woman's voice cracked with desperation. "I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Fury surged through my veins like liquid fire. I slammed her against the cold bathroom wall, pressing my Glock against her temple. The metal kissed her skin with deadly promise.

"Listen carefully, because I'm only saying this once," I growled, my voice dropping to a predatory whisper. "You're going to tell me exactly where that baby is. Right now. Or I'll paint these walls with what's left of your worthless brain and tell the boss you attacked a made member of this family. Your choice."

Her body trembled against the wall, but after a moment, she lifted her chin with defiant arrogance.

"I honestly don’t know what fantasy you’re living in, handsome," she purred with sickening confidence. "But you’re welcome to search me if it makes you feel better."

My patience snapped like a dry twig. I grabbed her shoulders and hurled her toward the sink with enough force to rattle the mirror.

"Bella, search this piece of garbage," I snarled. "And don’t worry about being gentle. Family business comes first."

Bella’s eyes lit up with savage satisfaction. "Finally, someone who makes my day interesting."

She seized the woman and slammed her face-first against the wall with bone-jarring impact. "Spread your arms and legs, scum."

When the suspect hesitated, Bella drove her skull against the tiles with a sickening thud.

"Capo, did you witness that clear act of self-defense?" Bella asked with mock innocence.

"Absolutely, Bella," I replied, pressing my gun barrel harder against the woman’s head. "Follow orders, you baby-stealing parasite. I’ve got zero hesitation about pulling this trigger, and even less mercy for monsters who steal children from our family."

Fear finally cracked her composure. She assumed the position while Bella began a brutal pat-down that would leave bruises for weeks. I felt no sympathy whatsoever.

Bella’s hands stopped abruptly at the woman’s midsection.

"Something’s hidden here." She grabbed the suspect’s shirt collar. "Strip. Now."

When the woman froze, Bella’s palm connected with her cheek in a vicious slap that left angry red fingerprints.

"I said strip, you worthless piece of trash!"

Shaking hands fumbled with buttons, revealing a tactical harness strapped beneath her clothes. The gear included a stun gun, cell phone, and a syringe filled with unknown liquid.

"Well, well," Bella whistled appreciatively as she confiscated the equipment. "Should we check for more surprises, Capo? These street rats love hiding things in creative places."

The suspect’s face went pale as Bella snapped on latex gloves with theatrical precision.

"Remove your shoes. Slowly."

As the woman complied, Bella thrust her hand down the suspect’s pants with such force that she rose onto her toes, gasping in pain. Meanwhile, I examined the discarded footwear and discovered an identity card concealed in the sole.

"Disgusting," Bella muttered, stripping off the gloves and tossing them in the trash. "This filth is contaminated. I think that’s everything, Capo. Unless you want me to check other hiding spots. I’m happy to be thorough."

I studied the ID card with grim satisfaction.

"Well, Ms. Roxanne Moore, that depends on whether you’re going to cooperate or if we need to get creative with our family’s traditional interrogation techniques."

"What do you want from me?" she sobbed, her earlier confidence completely shattered.

"You know exactly what we want," I said with deadly calm.

"The baby's dead," she spat with bitter malice.

Bella's hand cracked across her face again.

"No time for gentle procedures, Capo," Bella announced, spinning the woman around and bending her over the sink. "Time for the invasive search."

She drew her weapon and angled it menacingly.

"I'll tell you everything!" Roxanne screamed, struggling against the porcelain. "Please, I'll tell you!"

"How sweet," Bella mocked. "Start singing, little bird."

"Machine room," she gasped between sobs. "Under the third boiler tank."

Understanding hit me like lightning. I sprinted from the bathroom, shouting for Bella to secure the prisoner. My feet pounded against hospital floors as I raced toward the mechanical room, terror clawing at my chest. Those boilers generated enough heat to kill a member of our family.

In the sweltering machine room, I located the third boiler and heard it - the faint, precious sound of an infant crying. My heart hammered against my ribs as I searched frantically beneath the piping system.

There, in a canvas bag positioned away from the direct heat source, I found him. Baby Aria, alive but frightened. I lifted him with infinite care, cradling his tiny body against my chest. His cries softened as he felt my warmth.

Behind the boiler, I spotted discarded evidence - a purse and the stolen nurse uniform. I called for our cleanup crew to secure everything.

When I returned to the hallway, Bella had Roxanne pressed against the wall, completely subdued.

"You got lucky, you worthless parasite," I whispered in her ear. "If this baby had been hurt, I would have fed you to that boiler myself. What did she tell you, Bella?"

"She sang like a frightened canary," Bella grinned. "Roman ordered the kidnapping. She had an accomplice - only knows him as 'Joker.'"

"Perfect. Let's find this Joker character."

"You go ahead, Batman," Bella laughed, gesturing toward our soldier Ernest. "I'll hand Harley Quinn here over to Wonder Boy."

Despite everything, I couldn't help laughing at her comic book references. I called Caleb immediately.

"Your son is safe," I announced. "Tell the security team to maintain the lockdown until we catch the accomplice."

I made my way back to Ivy's room, each step careful and protective. When I placed baby Aria in his mother's arms, her tears of joy made every terrifying moment worthwhile. Caleb embraced me with gratitude that needed no words.

"This is the second child of mine you've saved," he said with wonder. "You're their guardian angel."

"I don't know about angel status," I chuckled as our family doctor approached. "But apparently hospital rumors have promoted me to Batman."

Everyone laughed, breaking the lingering tension.

"Can we agree these kids will avoid any more adventures?" I joked, rubbing my neck. "I aged considerably today."

After our doctor examined Aria and declared him healthy, Ivy approached me with profound gratitude.

"Daniel, meet Aria, your godchild," she said, placing the baby back in my arms. "I know you'll protect him with your life."

Unexpected emotions overwhelmed me as I gazed down at this perfect little human. The connection I felt was immediate and profound.

"Never thought I'd see a tough guy like you crying," Caleb teased.

"I'm too busy bonding with my godson to care," I replied, reluctant to return him to Ivy's arms.

We conducted one final search but found only abandoned clothing in a nursing break room's camera blind spot. The accomplice had vanished without a trace.

"Ernest, transport the prisoner to our compound," I instructed. "We'll complete formal questioning there. Everyone else, we're escorting the Thorne family home safely."

Chapter 205 Plans Fall Apart

Roman's POV

I was sprawled across my worn leather chair in the abandoned warehouse, savoring every detail of my upcoming vendetta against Thorne. The anticipation burned through my veins like molten steel. Then the rusted door slammed open with such violence it echoed through the cavernous space. Derek stumbled inside, his face ashen as a corpse.

"Boss, we are completely screwed!" Terror leaked from every syllable Derek spoke.

My body shot upright, chair spinning behind me. "What disaster have you idiots created this time? Where is your partner with the Thorne heir?"

Derek's Adam's apple bobbed frantically. "Boss, the entire operation went straight to hell!"

"Explain yourself immediately!" My voice could have shattered concrete.

"It exploded, crashed, became a bloodbath, turned into a nightmare!" This fool's pathetic vocabulary grated against my nerves like broken glass.

I advanced toward him with predatory steps. "What specifically went wrong, you worthless piece of garbage?"

"Okay, so Roxanne grabbed the screaming baby like we planned. Then this massive security guard spotted her, so I cracked his skull with a metal pipe. We separated afterward because Roxanne figured splitting up would throw off the heat. But suddenly every hospital exit locked down tight, and they started broadcasting some emergency code over the speakers. I had no idea what that meant. All I knew was they began searching every corner of that place, so I slipped into a supply room and grabbed some scrubs. When the lockdown finally lifted, I escaped, but I watched them drag Roxanne away in handcuffs."

Rage boiled in my chest like liquid fire. "How is this possible? You both scouted that location repeatedly. We planned every detail meticulously. You even successfully lifted identification badges from hospital staff. How did everything collapse?"

Derek planted his hands on his hips with infuriating casualness. "Well, we never expected that muscle-bound detective being there!"

"What detective?" My patience was evaporating rapidly.

"I overheard some nurse talking about how lucky it was that the built detective happened to visit the maternity ward right when Roxanne disappeared with the baby. He immediately triggered the lockdown before she could escape with the Thorne brat."

"Damn it all to hell! Cannot a single thing proceed smoothly?" I slammed my fist against the brick wall. "Now explain to me, you brain-dead moron, why you came here? Are the authorities tracking you?"

Derek puffed out his chest with misplaced pride. "No way, Boss! I am slicker than oil on ice. Vanished without leaving a single trace."

"Will your arrested partner expose our operation?" Anxiety crept into my voice despite my efforts to suppress it.

"Absolutely not! Roxanne is solid as a rock. Besides, she never learned my real identity. To her, I am simply the Phantom! Like from those old movies, you understand? Pretty intimidating alias, right Boss?"

I massaged my throbbing temples. Dear God, this individual was a walking catastrophe! How could someone so utterly clueless survive in the underworld?

"Listen carefully, you imbecile. Roxanne knows this warehouse location. She has been here before," I reminded this amateur.

"Chill completely, Boss. I have everything under control. I contacted my lawyer connection, Professor High, and sent him to the station. He will tell little Roxanne to keep her mouth shut and she will get paid later." Derek settled into my chair with smug satisfaction. "You see how it works, Boss. I operate like a real made man!" I seriously doubted that assessment, but silence seemed wiser.

"This Professor High character, did he understand his instructions, or was he high during your conversation?" I struggled to maintain composure.

"Ha! That guy stays permanently stoned. Even when he is not high, he is somehow still high. You catch my drift?" Even Derek appeared confused by his own explanation.

"Just leave immediately and let me think. I must completely restructure my plans now." I collapsed into another chair and buried my face in my hands.

"Hey Boss, I can recruit some muscle to grab the baby. I heard the whole Thorne family is leaving the hospital today. Should be much easier at their compound," Derek suggested.

"They received discharge?" This information had potential value. The idiot might actually be correct about residential vulnerability, despite their fortress-like security measures.

"Look Boss, I do not know if it was discharge or whatever medical process they went through. I just overheard the nurse mentioning the doctor approved taking the little ones home," Derek explained with his characteristic eloquence.

"I will consider it carefully. Now get out immediately," I exhaled heavily. He had been present less than thirty minutes and my energy was already depleted.

"Alright then, Boss. Just call me if you need backup. I will return tomorrow so we can plan properly," Derek headed toward the exit.

"Derek, can you acquire some equipment for me tomorrow?" I called before he departed.

"Absolutely, Boss. Text me details. Need me to arrange some girls to relieve stress? I can organize that service too." Derek disappeared through the doorway, leaving me questioning whether he was soldier, con artist, or pimp.

I settled down to strategize my next approach when I already had preliminary ideas forming. But barely moments after leaving, the fool poked his head back inside.

"Hey Boss?" Derek called out.

"What now?" I asked without patience, lacking energy to dismiss him again.

"You know what, you are an excellent capo. We click like Gladys and Clyde, you understand? We operate like authentic wiseguys, can create chaos together," Derek spoke with excitement while I felt like weeping.

"Kid, Gladys and Clyde were bank robbers, not mafia! They got gunned down by cops!" At this point, we resembled comic relief more than criminal masterminds.

"Oh right, Boss! Forgot that detail. But I am genuinely enjoying our partnership!" Derek performed some ridiculous gesture before pointing at me. I felt like a joke! "Want me to send Shirley over for personal

services? She is young but experienced, provides excellent satisfaction, will keep you completely relaxed."

"No! I require solitude for planning. Leave now!" I was trapped in purgatory with a brainless demon assistant!

The following day, Derek delivered my requested items while persistently demanding details about my developing plan. I evaded his questions, claiming I was still organizing preliminary strategies. I promised updates once everything crystallized. I dismissed him quickly and prepared for surveillance of the Thorne compound.

I spent subsequent days observing that fortress and refining my strategy. Thorne employed three nannies: one lived onsite, another stayed weekdays, and the third commuted daily in her personal vehicle. I would follow her home and coerce her into providing access to Thorne's property. To infiltrate undetected, I needed to work alone since I recognized the head of security as competent.

After extended surveillance and planning, I noticed something unusual. Caleb departed the compound with his wife. This seemed strange because she had avoided public appearances since my shopping center intimidation, except for medical appointments and childbirth. I decided to follow them. When they entered the police station, every alarm in my head screamed warnings. I would need to accelerate my timeline significantly.

I returned to the warehouse and mentally rehearsed my plan repeatedly. I would breach the compound, restrain and secure everyone present, force Thorne to transfer funds to offshore accounts, four untraceable ones I had established. Then I would compel him to arrange private jet transportation out of the country. I would depart the compound with him and one baby as insurance, and at the airfield, I would eliminate both Thorne and the child. Only after that worthless Caleb was dead would I live like a king in another country.

Perhaps I would even enjoy some personal time with that interfering Ivy. I had observed her from distance, and she had maintained reasonable appearance despite bearing four children simultaneously.

Perfect! Now I simply needed to remain calm until execution time arrived.

Chapter 206 Against His Will

Ivy’s POV

I had been sheltered within the fortress walls of the Thorne estate with my babies for some time. After the terrifying assassination attempt at the private clinic, I was too shaken to risk taking them anywhere beyond our secured compound, so Dr. Taylor continued making daily visits to monitor their progress. The twins were flourishing and meeting every developmental milestone perfectly.

Caleb had brought in two seasoned caretakers that Carmen had vetted through her network to help us manage the beautiful chaos. My parents had already returned to the safety of Greenleaf territory, and we were slowly establishing our rhythm as a family of six. Max was completely enchanted by his little siblings, treating them like the most precious treasures in his world, and every evening our inner circle would gather at the main house for dinner to dote on their godchildren.

"I still think it’s completely unjust that you’ve already declared Daniel gets to be Aria’s godfather. Meanwhile, the rest of us are left in limbo," Xavier complained as he cradled one of the babies with surprising gentleness.

"Stop your whining, Xavier. At least you’re guaranteed one of them. What about me?" Zoe threw herself dramatically across the leather sofa.

"Hey, my favorite lunatic, you already claimed Max!" Caleb pointed out with a rare grin.

"I know, you magnificent brute! And I adore my little prince more than my own life!" Zoe had Max nestled in her arms, showering his chubby cheeks with kisses until he dissolved into giggles. "But our crew needs reinforcements. So when exactly are you planning to expand the family again, bestie?" Zoe’s eyes sparkled with mischief, and everyone erupted in laughter.

"Absolutely not, Zo! No more children. Look around you - we have five little ones!" I said, genuinely horrified at the thought of adding to our brood. "Caleb is getting the procedure done."

"Why does it have to be me? What about you getting your tubes tied? Or we could settle it with a coin toss," Caleb suggested with mock outrage.

"Because this way we prevent another deranged woman from claiming she's carrying your heir!" I shot back, reminding him of the entire Yara nightmare, and his expression immediately darkened.

"Valid point. I suppose that's the wiser strategy," he conceded with reluctance. "But what if we decide we want another child down the line?"

I stared at him with such intensity that I genuinely contemplated violence. Our friends were practically rolling on the floor with laughter.

"Let me make this crystal clear, Mr. Thorne - until you get that vasectomy, you're not touching me." I crossed my arms defiantly.

"I'll contact the doctor first thing in the morning!" Caleb promised hastily. "Now, let's focus on what really matters here. Time to draw lots for the babies."

"Absolutely not happening, because you always promised I'd be godfather to your firstborn. Due to unfortunate circumstances, Zoe hijacked my godchild - I might actually contest that legally - but for now, I'm claiming August as my godson. He was born first this time, so it's settled." Xavier had already scooped up August along with his bottle, looking triumphant.

"Fine, since Xavier threw his tantrum, we'll humor him," Dominic said with exaggerated patience. "Come on, Jude, looks like we're going to be surrounded by mini-Catherines."

Everyone immediately claimed one of the girls, and that's how the godparent situation resolved itself. In the end, they all agreed they'd be honorary godparents to every single baby anyway.

We were still laughing and discussing family plans when Adler entered with his wife. They'd come to visit the babies, but Adler seized the opportunity to update us on the investigation's progress.

"The woman who attempted to abduct your daughter was definitely contracted by Roman for the job. Unfortunately, she's not providing us with much useful intelligence. The only valuable information she gave up is that Roman hired her through someone called Joker. We've searched through every criminal contact we have access to, and none of the known operatives with that alias match the person captured on the clinic's surveillance footage," Adler's frustration was etched across his weathered face. "It's like

we’re trapped in a maze. We get tantalizingly close, but we can never quite catch him. And there’s something else, Caleb - our suspicions have been confirmed. It was Brodie who sabotaged your parents’ helicopter, acting on Roman’s direct orders," Adler revealed.

"How did you manage to confirm that, Adler?" Caleb’s voice was tight with controlled rage.

"I interrogated Ivy’s parents extensively. They verified that Brodie disappeared from his own wedding reception for a significant period. A maintenance worker at the private airfield distinctly remembers seeing him there and even joked about whether he’d abandoned his bride," Adler explained carefully. "But I have to be honest with you - the evidence is circumstantial at best. I desperately need his confession. Too much time has passed for me to recover security footage from that day. I’m actively searching for additional witnesses, but I need to build a much stronger case."

"Is he willing to cooperate with our investigation?" Caleb asked.

"Well..." Adler rubbed his chin uncomfortably. "That’s where we hit a major obstacle."

"He’s refusing to talk," I concluded.

"Actually, he’s claiming he’ll reveal everything - including exactly how he and Roman first connected and began working together - but he’s making one non-negotiable demand. He insists on speaking directly with you, Ivy. He won’t say another word unless you agree to meet with him," Adler delivered the bombshell.

"Absolutely not!" Caleb immediately tensed up, his protective instincts flaring dangerously. "My wife is not going anywhere near that psychopath."

"Caleb, if he maintains his silence, even if we manage to eliminate him for your parents’ murder, we’ll never get the full picture. He’ll take his secrets to the grave. And he might be our only lead to finding Roman," Adler explained patiently. "Trust me, I hate asking this of you, but I need Ivy’s cooperation."

"I’ll do it," I said without hesitation.

"Like hell you will!" Caleb snapped back.

"And exactly who's going to stop me?" I challenged him.

"Ivy, I'm your husband," Caleb was seething with anger.

"But you're not my master," I replied firmly. "I refuse to sit on the sidelines if I can help put the people who murdered your parents in the ground. This isn't open for debate. Adler, go ahead and arrange it. Just tell me what I need to do."

Adler glanced at Caleb uncertainly, as if seeking his approval. Caleb was practically vibrating with fury.

"What's the point now? It's already decided. Just set it up. But I want every possible security measure in place for Ivy," Caleb finally surrendered.

"Understood. I'll coordinate everything and contact you tomorrow with the details. Thank you for this, and I'm genuinely sorry for having to ask," Adler said, clearly uncomfortable with the situation.

"It's fine, Adler. I know you wouldn't ask unless it was our only option," Caleb sighed heavily. "I just want this nightmare to finally end."

Chapter 207 Leveraging Secrets

Brodie's POV

Time crawled by in this concrete fortress they called a federal penitentiary. Every day stretched like an eternity, broken only by the occasional hour in the yard and visits from Tiffany. That woman showed up monthly, more out of duty than love, but I needed her connection to the outside world. Doing time without any lifeline would drive a man insane, especially when you're marked as a rat in a place full of Thorne family loyalists.

Her first visit had been explosive. She'd discovered my affair with Monica and came ready to claw my eyes out. But I knew exactly which buttons to push with Tiffany. I fed her the same sob story I'd perfected over the years - that I was weak, that Monica had manipulated me, that it meant nothing.

Tiffany swallowed it like always. Years of our relationship had taught me her weaknesses. She'd rage, I'd grovel, and eventually she'd forgive me. The cycle never changed.

Our son had been born the week the feds dragged me into this hellhole for my role in the Thorne parents' car bombing. Tiffany brought him once, expecting some touching father-son moment, but I shut that down fast. This wasn't some family reunion. If she wanted to visit, she could come alone for conjugal visits. A man has needs, and prison walls don't change basic biology.

My court-appointed lawyer was worthless. Showed up once, mumbled about plea deals, then disappeared. I needed real representation, the kind that costs serious money and knows how to work the system. That's when I started pressuring Tiffany to reach out to her cousin Ivy. Ivy had married into the Thorne empire, and blood was supposed to help blood. But Tiffany came back empty-handed, claiming Ivy wanted nothing to do with our family.

So I switched tactics. I reached out to Inspector Adler through the warden, dangling information about Roman Rossi's whereabouts. The detective took his time responding, but he finally agreed to arrange a face-to-face with Ivy Thorne. My ticket to potential freedom lay in what I knew about that night.

Ivy Thorne. Just thinking about her made my blood run hot with frustration and desire. She'd always been the prize, even when I was stuck with Tiffany. Perfect curves, sharp mind, and completely untouchable once she entered the Thorne world. When she got pregnant years ago and didn't know the father's identity, I nearly lost my mind with jealousy. I'd been so close to having her before everything went to hell.

But I possessed information she didn't know I had. After that helicopter job Roman paid me for, a detective had come sniffing around our neighborhood asking about a woman in red at some high-end mafia gathering. Roman panicked and paid me handsomely to misdirect the investigation. During my conversation with that detective, he'd revealed what he was really hunting - the mystery woman who'd been with Caleb Thorne that fateful night.

It didn't take genius-level intelligence to connect the dots. He was searching for Ivy. Caleb Thorne was her kid's father. I'd planned to take that secret to my grave, watching her squirm in ignorance while I enjoyed the power it gave me. But somehow they'd figured it out without my help, and more investigators kept circling our old territory.

When Ivy disappeared from town years ago, I saw dollar signs. She was heading somewhere she might discover the truth about her kid's paternity, and I could have cashed in on that knowledge. But when

she returned, she was always accompanied by that interfering bitch Zoe. The day I spotted them at the neighborhood market, I made my move the second Zoe walked away. I was ready to name my price for the information, but that nosy woman returned and caused a scene before I could close the deal.

The next day, I watched Ivy meet with Caleb Thorne himself. He told her everything, and my payday evaporated like smoke. But I still wanted to understand how they'd connected the dots without my intervention.

"Brodie, get over here." Grime' gravelly voice cut through my brooding as he strolled across the yard with his usual swagger.

"What's the word, Grime?"

"Got some premium shine brewing in my cell. You buying?" Grime operated the most sophisticated moonshine operation in the entire cellblock, and I was his most reliable customer. Tiffany kept my commissary account stocked with cigarettes, which I traded for liquid comfort and temporary escape from reality.

"You know my money's good. Same rate as last time?"

Grime nodded his approval and I handed over the payment in tobacco currency.

"Inmate Brodie, front and center." A guard's authoritative voice boomed across the recreational area. I walked to the reinforced gates where he waited with standard-issue restraints. "Get in the transport cage. Warden wants to see you immediately."

"During yard time? What kind of operation are you people running here?" This interruption genuinely pissed me off. That single hour of freedom was sacred in this concrete tomb.

"I'm not your personal secretary, convict. Move your ass." The guard cuffed me and subjected me to the humiliating search routine - strip down completely, squat and cough while they examined every crevice. Complete degradation disguised as security protocol.

In the warden’s sterile office, Inspector Adler sat waiting behind a manila folder thick with case documents. My pulse quickened with anticipation. This had to be about my arranged meeting with Ivy Thorne.

"The detective’s here to discuss your request," the warden announced curtly. I moved toward an empty chair across from Adler.

"Did I authorize you to sit, inmate Brodie?" The warden’s voice dripped with institutional authority. "You remain standing until I explicitly grant permission otherwise."

This power-hungry bureaucrat was really testing my already-thin patience, but I couldn’t afford to antagonize him.

"Mr. Brodie, Mrs. Thorne has agreed to meet with you under strict conditions," Inspector Adler said, cutting directly to business without preamble. "But we’re conducting this entirely on my terms. You stay restrained throughout the complete conversation. If you step out of line even once, I terminate the meeting immediately. Are we absolutely clear on these parameters?"

The detective was flexing his authority, but I desperately needed this face-to-face encounter. "Absolutely, Inspector Adler. I genuinely appreciate you facilitating this arrangement."

"Inspector, can I ask you something personal?"

"You can ask whatever crosses your mind." His response carried a smug undertone. "Whether I choose to answer depends entirely on my discretion."

"Those women who got arrested alongside me - Roman’s crew - they still locked up in here?"

"Yes, they’re both still incarcerated. Why do you suddenly care about their welfare?" His eyes narrowed with obvious suspicion.

"Just professional curiosity. One’s Roman’s daughter Yara, the other’s his longtime mistress Monica. Seems strange that Roman isn’t moving heaven and earth to help either of them." I was genuinely puzzled by Roman’s complete abandonment of his own people.

"That’s correct. And here you sit, protecting information about someone who won’t even lift a finger for his own blood relatives."

"That’s cold as hell," I muttered, more to myself than anyone else in the room.

"We’re finished here, Mr. Brodie. You’ll receive notification when everything’s properly arranged." The detective dismissed me with a casual wave of his hand.

"Fred, escort the inmate directly to his cell. Yard time’s essentially over anyway," the warden instructed his subordinate.

"Come on, warden, there’s still valuable time remaining-"

"Would you prefer extended solitary confinement instead, inmate Brodie?"

"No, sir. My sincere apologies." I swallowed my rage and allowed the guard to lead me away from potential freedom.

Back in my cramped cell, I shared news of the moonshine acquisition with my cellmates. Everyone wanted shares, and I charged premium rates per shot. By the time Grime delivered the potent goods, I’d already recouped my initial investment and turned a decent profit. Then I proceeded to get completely obliterated on the homemade alcohol.

The next morning arrived far too early. My skull pounded from the brutal hangover as a guard yanked me from my thin mattress. Dawn was barely breaking over the prison walls, and the aftereffects made everything infinitely worse.

"What’s happening now?" I asked groggily as they secured the restraints, but received no response until they shoved me into the patrol vehicle.

"Inspector Adler ordered your immediate transport to the station for questioning," the officer finally explained once we were moving.

My heart raced with nervous anticipation mixed with desperate hope. Today I would finally see Ivy Thorne again, and maybe, just maybe, find my path back to freedom through the information I possessed about her past.

Chapter 208 Federal Detention Deal

Ivy's POV

Inspector Adler's voice carried a note of satisfaction when he called to inform me about the meeting. Brodie had finally agreed to see me, and Adler had arranged it for the following afternoon at the federal detention center. The controlled environment would serve dual purposes - they could take Brodie's official statement about the Thorne family operations while ensuring my safety.

When the appointed hour arrived, I stood outside the imposing concrete fortress, flanked by Caleb and our security detail. The autumn air bit at my cheeks as we climbed the steps, each footfall echoing my racing heartbeat. Adler greeted us at the entrance, his weathered face grave as he led us through sterile corridors lined with reinforced steel doors to his cramped interrogation room.

"Wait here," he instructed, gesturing toward uncomfortable metal chairs bolted to the floor. "I'll bring him in shortly."

The minutes stretched like hours until heavy footsteps and the jangle of chains announced their return. Two federal marshals flanked the man who had once shared my bed, and I barely recognized him. Brodie's once-pristine appearance had deteriorated into something almost feral. Stubble covered his hollow cheeks, his head had been shaved down to the scalp, and the orange federal jumpsuit hung loose on his diminished frame. Yet despite his circumstances, that infuriating smirk still played at the corners of his mouth.

"Secure him there," Adler commanded, pointing to a chair bolted to the wall with reinforced steel restraints. The marshals maneuvered Brodie into position, threading his handcuffs through a metal rail that gleamed under the harsh fluorescent lights.

"Mrs. Thorne is here as requested, Brodie," Adler announced with professional detachment.

Brodie’s eyes found mine, and I suppressed a shudder at the calculated hunger in his gaze. "Look how far you’ve climbed, Ivy. Mrs. Thorne now, is it?" His voice carried that same mocking tone that had once charmed me and now made my skin crawl. "Married to the most feared Don on the East Coast. I need to speak with her alone."

"Absolutely not," Adler replied without hesitation.

Brodie shrugged with practiced nonchalance. "Then I suppose you’ll continue chasing shadows while Roman remains free to complete his coup."

The words hit their mark. Before I could stop myself, I was on my feet. "I’ll speak with him."

"Ivy, no!" Caleb’s voice cracked like a whip, but I had already made my decision.

I turned to my husband, our eyes meeting across the tension-filled room. Trust me, I mouthed silently. Caleb’s jaw worked as he fought some internal battle before finally nodding his consent.

"Inspector, he’s properly restrained?" I asked, needing the reassurance.

"Completely secured, Ivy. We’ll be right outside monitoring everything. One word from you and we’re in."

Brodie’s laugh was low and predatory. "How am I supposed to touch you properly with these things on, sweetheart? Can’t run my hands over that gorgeous body of yours like I used to when you were slumming it in that garage—"

The chair scraped against concrete as Caleb lunged forward, his fist connecting with Brodie’s jaw in swift strikes that would have shattered bone if not for Adler’s intervention. "Keep your filthy mouth off my wife!"

"Federal assault," Brodie gasped through his split lip, though his eyes danced with twisted amusement. "The judge will hear about this police brutality."

Adler hauled Caleb back while addressing Brodie with cold authority. "The judge will also hear that you returned to your cell without a single mark on you, according to the medical report I'll be filing." Brodie's grin faltered slightly. "Ivy, maintain your distance from him."

Alone with my past mistake, revulsion washed over me in waves. The man I had once believed I loved sat before me in federal chains, and all I could feel was disgust at my younger self's poor judgment in the dangerous underworld we inhabited. I settled into the chair across from him, maintaining careful composure.

"You wanted this conversation. I'm here. What do you want?"

His eyes roamed over me with nauseating familiarity. "Still stunning, Ivy. Even after four babies. Motherhood in the family business suits you."

Ice crystallized in my veins. "How could you possibly know about my son?"

"Your dear cousin Tiffany keeps me well-informed during her conjugal visits." His smile turned venomous. "She despises your rise to power, you know. Always has. The jealousy eats at her constantly now that you're the Thorne Syndicate's first lady."

"I figured that out when I found you both in my bed."

"Still wounded by that betrayal, darling?" The pet name felt like acid on my ears.

"Don't call me that!" I snapped, then forced a bright smile. "Wounded? Tiffany did me the greatest favor of my life. Leaving you led me to find a real man, someone worthy of ruling an empire."

Dark clouds gathered in Brodie's expression.

"You certainly landed well, didn't you? Married to the most powerful Don, his heir, living in that fortress they call a mansion." His tone turned calculating. "But blood helps blood, Ivy. I'm stuck in this federal hell, tolerating that worthless cousin of yours. You owe me."

"I owe you nothing. You created this situation when you chose to work for Roman's faction."

"Listen, I only slept with Tiffany because she threw herself at me. What can I say? I'm a man - when women offer themselves, I take what's available. Just like with Monica and the others."

"You're revolting!" The words exploded from me. "You're not a businessman - you're a pathetic bottom-feeder who plants bombs for money."

"Such sweet words from my former lover!"

I forced myself back under control. "What exactly do you want from me?"

"Simple. You and your powerful husband provide me with the best federal defense attorney money can buy. Regular money transfers to my commissary account. Regular visits while I'm serving my sentence."

Laughter burst from my chest at the sheer audacity. "You actually believe there's a chance I'd agree to that?"

"Then you'll be searching for Roman until the feds shut down your entire operation."

"I truly regret every moment I wasted on you. You're beneath contempt."

"We were good together, Ivy. If your cousin hadn't seduced me that day, we'd be running our own crew by now."

"No, Brodie. I would have eventually seen through your facade." I leaned forward slightly. "Let me offer you some advice - confess to your crimes and cooperate fully. Federal cooperation means reduced sentences."

"Why would I do something so stupid?"

"Because my husband possesses both wealth and federal connections. He can ensure your life becomes infinitely worse than a standard federal sentence. He already detested you, but knowing you helped murder his parents? He'll move mountains to see you rot in maximum security forever."

"What proof does he have? The day that car bomb went off, I was exchanging vows with your cousin." His smile turned predatory. "I specifically chose that date for the perfect alibi."

The casual cruelty took my breath away. I needed leverage, something that would crack his armor of selfishness. Then it hit me - there was one person who still mattered to him.

"Your mother must be devastated by all this federal investigation. Has she visited?"

The change was immediate. His cocky demeanor cracked. "No, she hasn't come. Her lupus flares can't handle federal prison visits - doctor's orders. Why bring her into this?"

"I always respected your mother. She's a good woman who raised multiple children in that neighborhood alone. Now her youngest has broken her heart by getting mixed up in organized crime."

"Leave my mother out of this conversation."

"Wouldn't you like to speak with her? Maybe through secure video call? I know she and Tiffany don't communicate, so she's probably desperate for news, terrified and alone."

Brodie's mask slipped completely. He leaned forward as far as his federal restraints allowed. "You think one video call with my mother will make me spill everything about Roman's operation? You're smarter than that."

"I have a proposition. If you agree, I'll make it happen."

His eyes sharpened. "I'm listening."

"You're facing serious federal time for kidnapping my son. We both know that." He nodded grimly. "I know your mother's lupus is progressing badly. I can convince Caleb to pay for her treatment at the country's premier lupus research facility - private rooms, the best specialists, no waiting lists, guaranteed experimental treatments. Plus I'll arrange regular secure video calls through federal channels. In exchange, you confess everything and tell us what you know about Roman's coup attempt."

Brodie's head dropped as he wrestled with the decision. When he looked up again, something vulnerable flickered in his eyes.

"Regular video calls with my mother."

"That's pushing federal protocol. Maybe monthly."

"Fine." He sighed heavily. "Arrange that, and I'll tell you everything about Roman's plans."

I moved to the door and called the others in. "I've negotiated terms for Brodie's full cooperation, but I need both of you to hear this."

Adler entered with measured steps. "Let's hear your terms."

"Caleb, Brodie's mother is genuinely good-hearted. She's suffering from severe lupus and has no connection to any family operations. I'd like you to fund her treatment at the best medical facility available. She means everything to Brodie."

Caleb studied Brodie with barely contained rage. "The irony of caring for the mother of my parents' killer isn't lost on me." His voice was granite. "But if you vouch for her character, I'll handle it. Besides, she's not responsible for her son's choices in the underworld. I'll make arrangements today, including a full-time medical companion."

Gratitude flooded through me. "You’re incredibly generous." I placed my hand over his heart, feeling it race beneath my palm. "Inspector, I need you to authorize an immediate secure video call with his mother, then arrange monthly calls through federal protocols."

"The immediate call is simple. Monthly calls require judicial approval and federal oversight," Adler explained. "I can petition the judge, but organized crime cases have strict communication protocols."

"No deal," Brodie said flatly.

"You’d sacrifice your mother’s healthcare over video calls? That’s pure selfishness even by criminal standards," Caleb spat, disgust evident in every word.

Brodie looked away, jaw working. Finally: "Alright. But the Inspector has to try for the monthly calls through proper federal channels."

"And I want to speak with my mother before I say anything else about Roman’s operation."

Caleb was already reaching for his phone. "I’ll call my people and set up her medical care immediately."

Chapter 209 Closing the Trap

Ivy’s POV

The Thorne family’s private interrogation room felt suffocating after hours under the harsh fluorescent lights. Brodie sat across from us, his weathered hands shaking as he unraveled years of deception under the watchful eyes of our family’s enforcers. His mother wept openly beside him, her frail fingers clutching mine as she begged her son to confess everything to the Don.

"Please forgive him," she whispered through her tears. "I tried to raise him right in this neighborhood. I failed him, but maybe he can still make things right with your family."

Caleb surprised me by placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. Despite his reputation for ruthless violence, he showed unexpected compassion to this broken woman. "We’ll make sure you get the

medical care you need," he promised quietly. In that moment, watching my husband show mercy to the mother of a traitor, I fell in love with him all over again.

Once Brodie started talking, the words poured out like a confession at his own funeral. His voice was steady, almost relieved, as he detailed the web of betrayal that had entangled our crime family. Roman had recruited him through a mutual connection, Derek Cooper, who had fled from our territory to the rival family's protection the moment he turned eighteen.

"Roman approached me during the helicopter maintenance some time before the crash," Brodie said, staring at his cuffed hands. "He paid me handsomely to sabotage the aircraft that killed your parents. He even funded my helicopter mechanic certification so I'd know exactly how to make it look like mechanical failure."

My blood turned to ice. Caleb's parents had died because of this man I had once trusted, once shared a bed with, once allowed near my son. The thought made bile rise in my throat.

But Brodie wasn't finished destroying what remained of my faith in him. He continued detailing years of dirty work for Roman's shadow network, laundering money through shell corporations, recruiting desperate people from the slums to do the underboss's bidding, creating false paper trails that led investigators in circles. Each revelation was another nail in Roman's coffin.

Then came the confession that shattered my remaining composure.

"Ivy, you deserve to know the truth," Brodie said, finally meeting my eyes. "I always knew Caleb Thorne was Max's father."

The room spun around me. "What did you say?"

"Right after that underground auction years ago, a private investigator came asking questions. Caleb had sent him to find the woman in the red dress from that night. When the detective described the case, I knew immediately it was you. Your cousin had seen you leave for that gathering and wouldn't stop talking about that red dress." Brodie's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "Roman paid me to send the investigator on wild chases. Then more came over the years, and I did the same thing. I kept quiet for money."

Rage burned through my veins like molten steel. "You knew who my son’s father was and said nothing?"

"Yeah, but look how it worked out," Brodie shrugged with infuriating casualness. "Fate brought you together anyway."

I shot up from my chair so violently it scraped against the concrete floor. "I hope I never have to see your pathetic face again!"

I stormed out of the interrogation room, my heart pounding with fury and disgust. How had I been so blind? How had I let this man touch me, kiss me, enter my home where my son slept peacefully?

Caleb followed me into the corridor, his powerful arms wrapping around me before I could completely lose control. "Let’s go home, tesoro," he murmured against my hair.

"How could I have been so wrong about him?" I asked, my voice breaking. "How did I let him into my life?"

"You were young and alone in a dangerous world. We all make mistakes when we’re vulnerable." Caleb’s confident smile cut through my panic. "What matters is that you chose the right man to marry and have children with."

Despite everything, I laughed. He always knew how to pull me back from the edge of despair.

"That’s what I want to see," he said, kissing me softly. "Do you mind if we stop by the office before going home? I need to discuss something with Scott."

"Of course. It’ll be good to see the girls."

At Thorne Group’s headquarters, I decided to check on Gemma, who had been miserable for weeks since her breakup with Dominic, one of Caleb’s lieutenants. I found her at her desk, staring blankly at financial reports.

"Gemma, don’t you think it’s time to forgive him? You’ve been heartbroken lately."

She sighed heavily. "Ivy, I don’t trust him anymore after what happened. I’m not sure his apologies are genuine."

My phone buzzed with a message from Caleb asking me to join his meeting. I hugged Gemma goodbye and headed for the executive elevator.

The doors opened to reveal someone already inside, and my stomach dropped.

"Ivy! What a pleasant surprise," Baxter from IT said, his smile not reaching his eyes.

"Baxter, right?" I forced politeness into my voice.

"You remember me. I’m flattered." His tone shifted, becoming more aggressive. "Too bad you didn’t mention you were looking for a relationship when we first met. But I guess you went straight to the top, didn’t you?"

"I’m sorry, I don’t understand what you mean."

"You told me you weren’t interested in dating anyone," he said, stepping closer in the confined space. "But apparently you just weren’t interested in dating anyone below executive level."

"Life doesn’t always go as planned," I said carefully, wishing the elevator would move faster.

"Of course not. The boss is quite the catch. He’d make a saint break her vows." His words dripped with venom. "Well, if you ever get tired of playing queen of the castle, you know where to find me. I’d be happy to show you how the other half lives."

The sexual innuendo in his voice made my skin crawl. When the doors finally opened and he stepped out, I felt like I could breathe again.

In Caleb’s office, I found Xavier, Jude, Scott, and Heidi already assembled. Caleb quickly briefed them on Brodie’s confession.

"Cooper?" Scott raised his eyebrows. "That’s not a common surname. And it sounds familiar."

"Familiar how?" Heidi asked.

"I’ve seen it somewhere recently in background checks, but I can’t place where."

"Earth to Ivy," Jude said, waving his hand in front of my face. "What’s got you so distracted?"

"I had a strange encounter in the elevator," I said. "That IT guy, Baxter, who set up my systems on my first day. He was inappropriate then, and he was worse today."

Caleb’s expression darkened dangerously. "What kind of inappropriate?"

"Nothing serious, just pushy and crude. But given our suspicions about IT security being compromised..."

"That’s it!" Scott slammed his hand on the desk. "Baxter Cooper! I reviewed his personnel file recently. His father relocated from our territory, but he’s lived here his whole life. He has to be our security leak."

"Finally," Xavier breathed with satisfaction.

"Time to close this trap," Caleb decided, reaching for his phone. "I’m calling Inspector Adler. Xavier, bring Baxter up here. Tell IT his workstation needs emergency maintenance."

Within minutes, Baxter sat across from Caleb, who wasted no time establishing dominance.

"So you hit on my wife," Caleb said, his voice deadly calm.

"No, Mr. Thorne, she misunderstood," Baxter stammered.

"Let me be crystal clear," Caleb's voice rose with controlled menace. "She belongs to me. You had nerve even looking at her."

"Mr. Thorne, I swear I never meant—"

"Don't swear, you traitorous piece of garbage. We've been hunting you for months, but you made one fatal mistake. You got smart with my wife."

Baxter's face drained of all color. "I don't know what you're talking about."

The phone rang, and Caleb simply said, "Send them in."

Inspector Adler entered with Detective Daniel and uniformed officers, grinning like a predator who had cornered her prey.

"Another rat in the trap, Caleb."

"All yours, Adler," Caleb said, moving to sit beside me. "He's small and pathetic, but he's yours now."

"Mr. Bastien Cooper," Adler said, settling into Caleb's chair. "I arrested your cousin Derek a short while ago. He's very eager to cooperate to avoid federal racketeering charges."

"Shit," Baxter whispered, sinking deeper into his chair.

"Start talking. I'm patient, but Detective Daniel here gets impatient quickly," Adler said, gesturing to his stone-faced partner.

The confession that followed was comprehensive and damning. Roman had approached Baxter during a routine computer repair years ago, grooming him slowly with money and promises until he agreed to

spy on our family operations. Small information leaks at first, then larger security breaches, until finally he was helping hide Roman's movements and installing surveillance malware throughout our entire network.

Later, Baxter was led away in handcuffs, charged with conspiracy, racketeering, and participation in organized crime. We finally had Roman's exact location.

The endgame was approaching.

Chapter 210 Deadly Ultimatum

Ivy's POV

Returning home from the warehouse confrontation, exhaustion settled into my bones while an aching emptiness consumed my chest from being separated from my children. Max bounded toward me with animated tales of how he had watched over his baby siblings throughout the day, his small chest puffed with pride as he described their peaceful meals and restful sleep.

Despite my bone-deep weariness, sleep remained elusive that night. A relentless pounding hammered behind my temples, and while the babies stayed surprisingly calm with Caleb handling the midnight feedings and diaper changes like a devoted father, my mind churned with unease. Violent nightmares plagued what little rest I managed to steal, leaving me with a suffocating dread that wrapped around my throat like cold fingers.

Dawn arrived with my headache intensified, the previous day's confrontations having extracted their brutal toll. After checking on the children and finding them sleeping peacefully beside Max, I dragged myself to the kitchen, desperate for coffee to dull the throbbing in my skull before resorting to painkillers.

Carmen and I were reviewing security protocols when a thunderous crash erupted from the living room. Our eyes met in alarm before we rushed to investigate. The sight that greeted me turned my blood to ice in my veins.

Roman stood in the center of our sanctuary, a chrome-plated pistol trained on one of our trusted nannies. His eyes blazed with the wild desperation of a cornered animal.

"Well, well, look what we have here - the little whore who destroyed everything," he snarled, swinging the weapon toward my chest.

I forced steel into my spine despite terror flooding my system. "What do you want from us, Roman?"

His laughter was razor-sharp and bitter. "Isn't it crystal clear, sweetheart? I want every goddamn thing your bastard husband stole from me. Money, territory, respect. Since that piece of shit Caleb demolished my operations, he's going to bankroll my disappearance with enough cash to live like a king wherever I choose." His voice dripped with entitlement, as if the world owed him compensation for his failures.

"You've completely lost your mind, Roman."

"Have I really?" Venom laced his words. "Let me educate you, princess. I'm not crazy - I'm being strategic."

"Put the gun down, Roman." Caleb's voice sliced through the tension as he descended the staircase, causing Roman to pivot and aim directly at his heart.

"Look who finally graces us with his royal presence - the almighty Don Caleb Thorne himself." Hatred blazed in Roman's eyes like hellfire. "You know, I could never understand how you survived that helicopter sabotage. My work was flawless, absolutely perfect. I even had forged documents naming me as your father's successor. Everything would have passed inspection if you hadn't somehow crawled out of that wreckage alive. Then I discovered the truth - you only lived because you were fucking this slut in some dark corner during the memorial service." His voice escalated to a roar.

"Lower your weapon and we can negotiate like civilized men," Caleb said, his tone unnaturally calm for someone staring down a gun barrel.

"Oh, we're absolutely going to negotiate. I'm going to dictate terms, and you're going to comply immediately, you spoiled prince!" Roman's composure shattered completely. "Everyone sit on that couch right fucking now."

"This is between you and me, Roman. Release my wife and staff," Caleb attempted to bargain, but I stared at him incredulously. There was no way in hell I was abandoning him to face this madman alone.

"I'm the one calling the shots here, and nobody moves until I say so! Get your asses on that couch immediately!" Roman's roar shook the room as we complied. Caleb captured my trembling hand, squeezing it with reassurance that did nothing to slow my racing pulse.

"You know what, Caleb? Let me share a fascinating story. Do you know how I first encountered your father?"

"I have no fucking clue, Roman."

"I was working as muscle at this dive bar he frequented," Roman began, his tone taking on a twisted nostalgia. "One night he brought your mother there, and when she stepped out of the limo, some street punk tried to grab her purse. I chased the bastard down and returned it, though he escaped. Your mother was absolutely radiant - classy, graceful, genuinely kind. When I handed back her purse, she thanked me endlessly, and your father gave me his card, told me to call his office. Your grandfather was still running the empire then, ruling with an iron fist. But he offered me a position. I called myself a financial consultant, but really I was just a glorified messenger boy."

"And you murdered the man who gave you that opportunity. What kind of monster does that make you?" Caleb's voice shook with revulsion.

"Your father was weak, believed people were fundamentally good, completely unfit to control an empire of that magnitude. But I worked my ass off, Caleb, went to business school and earned my credentials. In college, I met that insufferable Patricia. She was always a pain in the ass, but she came from the right bloodline. It was a calculated move that could open doors to valuable connections, and she was refined enough to accompany me to family functions. I started dating her, and since your parents were also together, we occasionally double-dated. Eventually, I fell completely in love with your mother. She was truly extraordinary. I tried everything to capture her attention, but she was utterly devoted to your pathetic father. They married, then I married Patricia."

"Of course my mother would never look twice at scum like you! My father was an honorable man, and you're nothing but a parasite!" Caleb's fury was building.

"Your father was pathetic, Caleb. But I continued cultivating his friendship, positioning myself closer to the family business for better advancement opportunities. And it worked beautifully. I gained his complete trust and became financial director. Your grandfather was aging and would eventually step down, leaving the organization to your spineless father. I saw my opening and began planning how to become his right hand and secure the underboss position. But your grandfather never retired, and when he died, your father decided to make his young son his heir apparent. And you were just a pampered rich boy who knew absolutely nothing."

"The family business was always bloodline, Roman! When my father offered me leadership training, I initially refused, but he insisted it was necessary preparation for my inheritance," Caleb shot back.

"He fed me the same bullshit!" Roman's laughter was venomous. "But you and your father were always obstacles blocking my path. That's when I realized I'd never achieve what I deserved in that organization. So I began skimming profits and developed the brilliant plan to establish my own operation. Everything was proceeding flawlessly - I would have left you completely bankrupt."

"All those years of stealing from us, Roman, and look what your greed accomplished - it transformed you into a killer, a thief, a kidnapper. You destroyed your own existence and, after murdering your wife, you landed your daughter in federal prison!" Caleb was losing control, which terrified me.

"Little Yara is a moron! Takes after her mother completely. She would have been nothing but dead weight. And I have zero patience for her stupidity. She can survive on her own now. Look at her - she couldn't even give you an heir, while this little whore you married has already produced five! You two breed like fucking animals!"

"Show my wife respect, Roman. She has nothing to do with your failures!" Caleb's rage was reaching dangerous levels.

"She has everything to do with this!" Roman's voice rose dangerously. "If this little whore hadn't entered your life, you'd be dead by now. And if she hadn't joined the organization, you would have married my Yara, and I would have destroyed you financially, left you completely dependent on me, you spoiled brat!"

"I would never have married your psychotic daughter, Roman!"

"Yes, you absolutely would have." Roman pressed closer. "But you know what? I gave you a second chance, and you threw it away. When your father was eliminated, you should have promoted me to underboss, but instead you brought in that little friend of yours for the position. Another insufferable prick! From that moment, my dear Caleb Thorne, you sealed your own fate. And everything was progressing according to plan until you orchestrated that secret audit trap, which I discovered was this bitch's brilliant idea. See how she's involved in this, how she sabotaged my plans! She's going to pay severely for her interference."

"Just tell me what you want, Roman." Caleb's patience was evaporating.

"First, I want money, mountains of it, because your federal friends tightened security too effectively, managed to freeze all my accounts, destroy my network, and arrest all my trusted soldiers. So, you spoiled prince, I want cash and I want transportation out of this country. That's just the beginning." Roman's laughter was chilling.

"How exactly do we accomplish this, Roman?"

"We'll start by restraining these bitches." Roman dropped his duffel bag and ordered the nanny to retrieve ropes and secure Carmen and me, sealing our mouths with duct tape. Then he forced Caleb to do the same to the nanny. "Now, Caleb, you're going to take your phone and put it on speaker. You're going to dismiss your security detail."

"Roman..." Caleb tried to object.

"NOW!" Roman's bellow filled the room.

Caleb complied with Roman's demand. Justin, our head of security, didn't even question the unusual dismissal. He simply acknowledged that he would grant everyone leave time. My heart plummeted in despair. What an incompetent security chief - this couldn't be happening!

"Excellent! Now you're going to call your pilot and tell him to prepare that magnificent private jet of yours, the one you use for international family trips. Tell him you're leaving the country with your household and you'll provide the destination upon arrival, but everything must be ready very soon." Roman instructed, and Caleb followed his commands precisely.

The pilot clearly found the request suspicious and questioned Caleb about the destination to file the flight plan. Caleb impatiently told him to follow orders and that it would likely be somewhere in South America.

"Perfect! See how beautifully we're cooperating!" Roman mocked. "Now you're going to retrieve your laptop and transfer two billion dollars to various accounts whose numbers I'll provide."

"Roman, that's an astronomical amount of money. I won't be able to transfer it all within such a short timeframe," Caleb objected.

"You want to be free of me and protect your family, don't you? Then start making those transfers. And for each delay you cause, I'll execute one of your children. Look, you have five, so I think you have enough time to end up childless!" Roman's threat sent ice through my veins.

"Let's go to my office, the computer is there." Caleb struggled to contain his murderous rage.

"Not so fast! First, I have a little gift for you." Roman produced handcuffs from his pocket. "Extend your arms." Caleb complied and was shackled.