

EXPOSED TO THE CEO BEHIND THE MAFIA MASK

Chapter 4: Chapter 4 A Dangerous New Beginning

Ivy's POV

The sound of a champagne bottle cork popping cut through the chatter in the small break room above the auto shop. I turned to see Kyle Miller, the shop owner who'd employed me for three years, standing with a rare genuine smile on his weathered face.

"Everyone, please raise a glass to congratulate Ivy on finishing her financial certification!"

Applause erupted from the handful of mechanics and office workers. My cheeks warmed as they lifted their beer bottles and paper cups in my direction. The small surprise celebration they'd organized meant more to me than they could know, especially considering how tight money was for all of us.

"Thank you all so much," I said, fighting back tears. "Working here while studying hasn't been easy, but your support made it possible."

Kyle approached me with an envelope. "We're proud of you, Ivy. But now that you've got those credentials, I have to insist you start looking for opportunities that match your skills."

I frowned. "Are you firing me?"

He chuckled grimly. "Course not! But you're overqualified for balancing our books now. You deserve better than this neighborhood."

"But I love it here. The hours work perfectly with Max's schedule, and everyone's been understanding when emergencies come up."

Kyle placed his calloused hand on my shoulder. "And we've loved having you keep us legitimate. But you've worked too hard to settle for managing petty cash for a bunch of grease monkeys."

I nodded, knowing he was right. My financial certification demanded more than doctoring books for small-time operations. Max and I deserved a chance at something better—somewhere safer.

As the party wound down, I started clearing empty bottles when my phone buzzed. Zoe's name flashed on the screen.

"What's up?" I asked, cradling the phone against my shoulder.

"Guess who just got off the phone with my father?"

"Robert? What did he want?" I asked, curious. Zoe's father had always been kind to me, especially after Max was born, despite the whispers about who the father might be.

"He wants to know if you're interested in interviewing for an executive assistant position."

I nearly dropped the bottles I was holding. "At his company?"

"No, better! At Thorne Group in Port Serenity. Dad has business connections with one of their board members. Their CEO's executive assistant is retiring, and they need someone exceptional to replace her."

My mouth went dry. Thorne Group was one of the most powerful corporations on the East Coast—and according to rumors, a perfect front for less legitimate business activities.

"That's... that's way above my level, Zoe."

"No, it's not! You've basically been running financial operations for half the businesses on this street. This is perfect timing with your certification."

"But Port Serenity is hours away," I pointed out. "I can't uproot Max like that."

"Actually..." Zoe's voice took on that tone she used when she had news. "Finn just got offered a position at Port Serenity Hospital. Senior communications coordinator."

I gasped. "Zoe! That's incredible! Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was waiting for the right moment. And now it's here!" She paused dramatically. "I already found us an amazing apartment with three bedrooms. One for you, one for me, and one for little Max."

"Us? You want us to live together?"

"Of course! And before you ask, Finn already arranged to transfer his IT consulting work to the Port Serenity market. We'll all be together!"

I sank into a chair, overwhelmed. "This is happening so fast."

"Sometimes fast is good," Zoe said softly. "Port Serenity could be a fresh start for all of us. No more running into Brodie and Tiffany at the corner store. No more whispers from people who've known your business since kindergarten."

She was right. Ever since Brodie had betrayed me with my cousin, and especially since I'd returned from that underground auction pregnant, my neighborhood had felt suffocating with judgment and barely concealed threats from people who didn't approve of my choices.

"When's the interview?" I asked, my decision already made.

"Tomorrow at ten. Video call with someone named Heidi Quinn."

My heart raced. "Tomorrow? That's so soon!"

"Fortune favors the bold, Ivy. This is your moment to step into something bigger."

The next morning, I sat at my kitchen table in my nicest blouse, hands trembling slightly as I waited for the video call to connect. Max was with my parents, giving me the quiet I needed.

When the screen lit up, I was faced with an elegant older woman with silver hair twisted into a neat bun. Her smile was warm but calculating, putting me at ease while simultaneously assessing me.

"Miss Brooks? I'm Heidi Quinn, current executive assistant to Mr. Thorne. Thank you for making time for this interview."

"Thank you for considering me, Ms. Quinn."

She chuckled softly. "Call me Heidi, please. Now, Robert Miller speaks very highly of you, but I'd like to hear about your experience in your own words."

For the next forty minutes, I detailed my work experience, education, and financial skills. Heidi asked pointed questions about my organizational methods, ability to handle pressure, and experience with confidential information—questions that seemed to probe deeper than typical office work.

"The position is extremely demanding," she explained carefully. "Mr. Thorne runs a... complex operation and expects absolute excellence. His schedule is packed with various business dealings, and you'll be responsible for managing it flawlessly. There will be late nights and occasional weekend obligations."

"I understand," I replied, straightening my shoulders. "I should mention that I have a three-year-old son. His care is my priority, but I'm committed to excellence in my work as well."

I held my breath, waiting for the polite rejection that often followed this disclosure.

Instead, Heidi's smile deepened. "I raised two children while working for Mr. Thorne's family. The organization values loyalty above all else, and loyalty extends to taking care of our people's families. As long as the work gets done exceptionally well, there's flexibility for family needs."

Relief washed over me, though something in her tone suggested there was more to this "organization" than met the eye.

"Now for the practical details," she continued. "The salary is \$120,000 annually with comprehensive benefits, including childcare assistance and family security provisions. You'd start next Monday, spending two weeks training with me before I transition to other responsibilities."

I nearly choked. That was more than triple what I currently made.

"That sounds... that would be life-changing," I managed.

Heidi studied me through the screen with sharp blue eyes. "I've interviewed fifteen candidates this week, Ivy. You're the only one I'm offering the position to. Something tells me you're exactly what Mr. Thorne's operation needs."

My eyes widened. "You're offering me the job? Now?"

"I trust my instincts. And Robert Miller doesn't recommend people lightly—especially for positions requiring such discretion." Her eyes twinkled with hidden meaning. "Will you accept?"

"Yes," I said without hesitation. "Absolutely yes."

"Excellent. I'll email you the paperwork today, including some additional confidentiality agreements. We'll see you Monday at 8 AM sharp."

After we disconnected, I sat in stunned silence for several minutes before calling Zoe with the news. Her excited screams almost shattered my eardrum.

Telling my parents was harder than I expected. We sat in their cramped living room after dinner, Max playing with blocks nearby while the distant sound of sirens wailed through the neighborhood.

"Port Serenity?" My mother's voice quavered. "But that's so far from everything we know."

"It's only a few hours, Mom," I reminded her gently. "And the opportunity is incredible. More money than I've ever dreamed of."

My father took my mother's hand with his scarred fingers. "We knew this day would come, Diane. Ivy needs to build her own life somewhere safer."

"But what about Max?" she asked, glancing at my son. "He's so used to being here with us while you work."

"Zoe found an apartment near a highly-rated daycare center," I explained. "And the company offers childcare assistance. He'll be well taken care of."

"Who will watch him when he's sick?" My mother's eyes filled with tears. "Who will know that he likes his sandwiches cut into dinosaur shapes?"

I moved to sit beside her, wrapping my arm around her shoulders. "I'll know, Mom. And I'll teach his caregivers. But this job means I can give him everything he deserves—safety, security, a real future."

My father cleared his throat. "Your mother and I are just going to miss you both something fierce."

"I know," I whispered, my own eyes welling up. "We'll miss you too. But we'll visit often, I promise."

Max looked up from his blocks, sensing the emotional atmosphere. He toddled over and climbed onto my lap.

"Mama sad?" he asked, his extraordinary ice-blue eyes—so like his unknown father's—searching my face with concern.

"No, baby. Mama's excited," I assured him, kissing his forehead. "We're going on a big adventure soon."

"Venture!" he repeated excitedly, making us all laugh through our tears.

My father stood and pulled me into a hug, Max squished comfortably between us. "We're so proud of you, sweetheart. You've survived more in three years than most people face in a lifetime."

"We just want what's best for you both," my mother added, joining our embrace. "Even if it scares us."

In that moment, surrounded by their love, I knew I was making the right choice. Port Serenity would be a new beginning for Max and me—a place where we could build our future together, without the weight of the past or the dangers of this neighborhood holding us down.

The week flew by in a flurry of packing, paperwork, and tearful goodbyes. Before I knew it, Sunday afternoon arrived, and Zoe, Finn, Max, and I stood outside our new apartment building in Port Serenity—a sleek high-rise that spoke of money and security.

"Home sweet home!" Zoe announced, unlocking the door with a flourish.

The apartment was spacious and luxurious, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the harbor. True to Zoe's word, it was fully furnished with expensive, comfortable pieces.

"This is way nicer than you described," I gasped, taking in the marble countertops and gleaming hardwood floors.

"Only the best for my godson and best friend," she replied with a wink. "Max, want to see your room?"

My son nodded eagerly, his little hand clasped in Finn's as they followed Zoe down the hallway.

"I painted it blue like the ocean!" Zoe called over her shoulder. "And there might be a surprise waiting!"

Max's delighted squeal moments later confirmed her hint. I found them in a charming room with ocean-blue walls and a brand new train table in the corner. Max was already pushing a wooden engine along the tracks, completely enraptured.

"Zoe, this is too much," I protested weakly.

She waved away my concern. "The apartment's subsidized—Dad's connections came through. And the train table is from all of us. Max's birthday is next month anyway."

I hugged her fiercely. "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"You survived," she replied simply. "Now go unpack. Your first day at Thorne Group is tomorrow, and you need to be sharp."

Later that night, after Max was tucked into his new bed and Zoe and Finn had retreated to their room, I unpacked my final box. At the bottom, nestled in tissue paper, was a small wooden jewelry box I'd brought from my parents' house.

I opened it carefully, revealing the contents I hadn't looked at in over three years: a delicate gold mask, a dried rose, and a nearly empty bottle of expensive perfume—mementos from the underground auction that had changed my life forever.

I lifted the perfume bottle, removing the stopper to catch its scent—a complex blend of amber, jasmine, and vanilla that immediately transported me back to that dangerous night. The night I'd felt beautiful and powerful after months of heartbreak. The night I'd

fallen into the arms of a stranger with mesmerizing ice-blue eyes and a distinctive scar—eyes my son now shared.

On an impulse, I dabbed a drop behind each ear. Tomorrow marked the beginning of my new life. A fresh start. A chance to prove myself in what was undoubtedly a more dangerous world than I'd ever inhabited.

I placed the perfume bottle on my dresser instead of returning it to the box. Perhaps it was time to stop hiding these memories away. The underground auction had given me Max—the best thing in my life. I wouldn't be ashamed of that night anymore.

As I crawled into bed, the scent of the perfume enveloped me like an embrace from the past. Tomorrow I would walk into Thorne Group wearing it, a silent reminder of my strength and the beautiful, dangerous life I was building, one calculated risk at a time.

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