Mafia Mask 45

Chapter 45 The Real Traitors

Caleb's POV

Yesterday crawled by like a death march. My skull throbbed from the whiskey I'd consumed trying to drown out the image of Ivy's face when I'd banished her from Thorne territory. Every breath felt like inhaling broken glass. Heidi, Scott, Xavier, and Jude had surrounded me like a protective wall of loyalty, insisting our financial officer couldn't have leaked family secrets to rival syndicates. Their voices hammered at me relentlessly, demanding I wait for the money laundering investigation to reveal what they already believed with absolute certainty.

Heidi had ventured into the dangerous waters of our accounting division to retrieve the documents that bastard Roman claimed were being verified by our forensic accountants. While she was gone, Roman called with his voice dripping manufactured outrage, spewing excuses about delayed cartel payments and missing shipment manifests. I was too mentally drained to engage with his theatrical performance. I cut him off mid-sentence, telling him to hand everything over to Heidi or start packing for a one-way trip to the harbor.

When Heidi returned with the financial records for our money laundering specialists, I felt hollow inside. Scott had warned me it was crucial to compare his secured copies with Roman's originals, promising answers that would either condemn Ivy or expose the real traitor. But the silence stretched between us like a taut wire ready to snap.

Ivy had spent the entire previous day orbiting around me like a guilty planet seeking absolution. Espresso appeared at my desk without request. Imported pastries materialized when I skipped lunch, my stomach too knotted with rage and regret to consider food. She manufactured reasons to enter my office, her emerald eyes searching my face with something that looked disturbingly like genuine concern rather than fear.

Felix Hayes, the digital security specialist Scott had unleashed on our surveillance systems, remained locked in technological warfare with the damaged camera from my private office. No word from him either about who had accessed our most sensitive family documents.

The uncertainty was eating me alive like acid in my veins. Every minute without Ivy in Thorne territory felt like watching my empire bleed out slowly through an untreated wound.

Mid-afternoon, Heidi slipped into my office like a shadow moving through smoke, closing the door with the deliberate care of someone carrying explosive intelligence. She approached my mahogany desk with the measured steps of a capo delivering news that would reshape our entire understanding of loyalty and betrayal.

"You're coming with me to the safe house right now," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the city's distant rumble. "The inner circle is waiting."

My pulse spiked like a shot of pure adrenaline. If they needed to meet outside family headquarters, they'd discovered something that could bring down our entire operation. And from Heidi's expression, it wasn't going to destroy Ivy's reputation.

I stood so quickly my leather chair rolled backward into the wall. "Tell my aide I'm stepping out with you for family business. Won't be long."

The underground meeting room buzzed with tension, but our corner felt isolated from the rest of the criminal underworld. I dropped into my chair and ordered bourbon with hands that weren't quite steady enough for a mafia don.

"What did our investigation uncover?" The words came out rougher than intended, carrying the weight of absolute authority.

Scott exchanged glances with the others before leaning forward like a general delivering battle intelligence. "Caleb, you've made a catastrophic error in judgment. Ivy never leaked anything to our enemies." He slid a thick folder across the table. "This contains my complete forensic analysis. The financial documents Heidi retrieved from Roman are sophisticated forgeries designed to frame our most valuable asset. They don't match our secured Saturday copies at all. But examining these fakes revealed exactly how the embezzlement operation functions within our money laundering network. We'll need additional time to quantify the full scope of Roman's theft, but we're talking about substantial betrayal of family resources. And I can guarantee these documents were altered after Heidi and Xavier set their surveillance trap. I had our cleaning crew make copies before anyone realized we were monitoring the situation."

The folder felt heavy as lead in my hands as I opened it. Page after page of comparative analysis, highlighted discrepancies, and damning evidence stared back at me. My underboss of fifteen years had

betrayed the Thorne family with surgical precision, stealing from our operations while pointing the finger at an innocent woman.

Before I could process the full implications of Roman's treachery, Felix cleared his throat with the nervous energy of someone about to deliver crucial intelligence. "Don Thorne, I managed to salvage one critical frame from your private office surveillance footage. It's just a single image, passes so quickly you'd never notice during normal review." He rotated his laptop toward me with reverent care. "Security already replaced the damaged equipment, but I need you to identify this shoe that appears in the recovered footage. It's the only physical evidence from last Monday's breach. Remember, the cameras weren't operational the previous week due to maintenance."

I stared at the screen with growing fury. The shoe was clearly visible - low, thick heel, practical design suited for stealth rather than elegance. Nothing like Ivy's sophisticated footwear choices that commanded respect in our criminal circles.

"Can you access surveillance from my aide's office during the same timeframe?" I asked, my voice carrying the deadly calm that preceded violence.

Felix's fingers flew across the keyboard like a virtuoso pianist. The security feed revealed everything in stark black and white digital clarity. My aide Monica, moving through Ivy's workspace with furtive glances and predatory calculation, checking corners like a thief infiltrating enemy territory. The shoe match was unmistakable evidence of betrayal.

The memory hit me like a physical blow to the solar plexus. At that exact moment when Monica was planting evidence to destroy Ivy's reputation, I had been kissing the woman I loved in my office, lost in the dangerous fantasy that we could build something genuine together in this world of blood and bullets.

I was a complete fool. I'd humiliated the woman who owned my heart and been manipulated by my own aide like some amateur street punk rather than a seasoned don. My vision blurred with rage, throat constricting as the magnitude of my mistake crashed over me like a tidal wave of consequences.

Everyone at the table watched me with varying degrees of sympathy and expectation, waiting for their don to process this intelligence. I forced words through my burning throat.

"I was a complete idiot."

"Yeah, boss, you definitely screwed this one up," Xavier said without sugar-coating the brutal truth.

Scott leaned back in his chair with the confidence of a trusted consigliere. "We haven't identified which rival family is receiving our leaked intelligence yet, but now we know the source of the betrayal. My recommendation? Keep your enemies within striking distance. Don't expose your aide's treachery yet. The new cleaning crew member has instructions to befriend her, gain her trust through careful manipulation. That's our pathway to uncovering the larger conspiracy."

"Scott's strategy is sound," Heidi added with cold calculation. "Eliminating Monica now would alert her handler in the rival organization. We'd lose our tactical advantage before we can identify the real threat."

"So you're suggesting I walk back into family headquarters and pretend nothing happened? How do I bring Ivy back into Thorne protection without clearing the air first?" The frustration in my voice was raw enough to cut glass.

Xavier's expression grew grim with the weight of bad news. "Brother, Ivy started working for Frost's organization today. And honestly? I doubt she'll return to our territory easily." He slid another folder across the table like he was handling dynamite. "Especially considering how deeply your betrayal wounded her pride."

I opened the folder and felt my world tilt sideways on its axis. Ivy's resignation from the Thorne family, signed with her precise handwriting that had once balanced our most sensitive financial records. But the severance payment remained completely untouched.

"She refused compensation for her service?" I could barely form the words through my constricted throat.

"According to our contact who handled the delivery, she said she didn't want a single dollar from this family," Xavier reported, his concern evident in every syllable.

"What the hell is she thinking? She has Max to provide for. She might need those resources for protection." This wasn't the Ivy I knew - practical, financially strategic, always thinking three moves ahead. "If she refused payment for her loyalty, earning her forgiveness just became impossible."

Scott's voice carried the weight of hard-earned wisdom. "Caleb, Ivy is a woman of exceptional character who commands respect in any criminal organization. You'll have to work harder than you've ever worked if you want her forgiveness. She won't make anything easy for someone who questioned her loyalty to the family."

"Then what's my next strategic move?" I felt completely lost, terrified that Ivy would never forgive what I'd done to her reputation.

"Maintain operational security, pursue Ivy relentlessly, and beg for her forgiveness like your life depends on it," Heidi said with quiet certainty. "When the timing is right, we'll eliminate Monica and bring Ivy back to Thorne territory where she belongs."

They were absolutely right, but I wouldn't waste another precious minute. I'd find Ivy today and have a very direct conversation with Frost about respecting territorial boundaries.

"Meanwhile, we'll test the loyalty of your remaining inner circle," Scott continued with methodical precision.

"It's just cleaning crews and administrative staff, Scott," I said, not grasping the full scope of potential infiltration.

"Remember, they observe everything, overhear every conversation, have access to every secure area. Paranoia keeps dons alive longer," Scott replied, his thoroughness showing years of survival instinct.

"Understood." I ran my hands over my face, exhaustion weighing on me like lead armor. Sleep had become elusive since banishing Ivy, and now I felt like the worst kind of amateur. "What about the personnel we discussed placing strategically?"

Jude's expression turned mysteriously satisfied with predatory anticipation. "We've already embedded a janitor and coffee service operator on each floor of our operation. It's been incredibly productive - the

janitor channels all discarded intelligence to our analysis team, and we're discovering treasure troves of evidence about Roman's network. We'll have embedded assets in every department by Friday. Don't worry, Miles is cooperating beautifully, placing everyone without raising suspicions among the traitors."

"Excellent work. Anything else requiring immediate attention?" I asked, scanning their faces for additional intelligence.

Everyone shook their heads with military precision.

"Then let's return to headquarters, Heidi. I don't want my efficient aide sensing anything unusual about our operational security," I concluded, my smile sharp as a switchblade and twice as dangerous.