

Exposed to the CEO Behind the Mafia Mask

Chapter 5: Chapter 5 First Impressions and Dangerous Calls

Ivy's POV

The Thorne Group headquarters towered over Port Serenity like a dark fortress, its black glass surface reflecting the gray morning sky. I stood before the imposing entrance, my heart hammering so violently I was certain the armed security guards could hear it through their earpieces.

"You can do this," I whispered to myself, smoothing down my navy pencil skirt with trembling hands.

I'd woken up before dawn to make sure Max was settled for his first day at the high-end daycare center Zoe had found. My poor baby had clung to me, his ice-blue eyes filled with uncertainty—so much like his unknown father's. It had taken all my strength not to call in sick on my very first day. But Zoe had swooped in, distracting him with pancakes shaped like dinosaurs while I slipped away.

The lobby was all black marble and bulletproof glass, with security cameras tracking every movement. The receptionist looked up as I approached, her smile professional but wary—the kind that assessed whether you belonged in this world of money and secrets.

"Ivy Brooks," I said, trying to project more confidence than I felt. "I'm starting today as Ms. Quinn's replacement."

Her entire demeanor shifted, like I'd just uttered a magic password. "Of course! We've been expecting you. Ms. Quinn is waiting upstairs."

She handed me a sleek black access card with my name already embossed in silver. "Twenty-eighth floor. The elevator will recognize your clearance level."

The elevator whisked me upward with silent efficiency, my stomach dropping not just from the speed but from the magnitude of what I was walking into. The doors opened to reveal a spacious reception area with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the harbor—and what looked suspiciously like private docks below.

Heidi Quinn stood waiting, elegant in a cream silk blouse and black designer pants. Her smile was warm yet calculating as she extended a perfectly manicured hand.

"Punctuality. I appreciate that quality," she said, her sharp blue eyes assessing me. "Welcome to Thorne Group, Ivy."

"Thank you for this opportunity," I replied, trying not to sound breathless.

"Come, let me show you your workstation before we begin orientation."

She led me to a large, executive-style desk positioned like a fortress outside a set of imposing mahogany double doors. The workspace was pristine, equipped with multiple monitors, a phone system that looked like mission control, and a small arrangement of white orchids—expensive, beautiful, and slightly dangerous.

"This will be your command center," Heidi explained. "From here, you'll manage Mr. Thorne's schedule, correspondence, and... communications."

I ran my fingers lightly over the polished surface. "It's incredible."

"Mr. Thorne is handling business in Chicago until next week, which gives us time for proper training." She handed me a leather-bound planner that felt heavier than it looked. "I've prepared this for you—it contains everything from security protocols to Mr. Thorne's very specific preferences."

I flipped through the pages, noting the meticulous detail and what appeared to be coded references I didn't understand. "This is remarkably thorough."

"When you've been managing the affairs of the Thorne family for twenty-five years, you learn that attention to detail can mean the difference between success and... complications," she said carefully.

The morning flew by in a whirlwind of classified information. Heidi was patient but exacting, explaining the complex scheduling system, security protocols, and filing procedures with military precision. By noon, my head was spinning with passwords, code names, and the names of "business associates" who seemed to operate in shadows.

"You're adapting quickly," Heidi assured me as we broke for lunch in the executive dining room—a space that felt more like a war room than a cafeteria. "It's substantial to absorb in one day."

"I'm determined to master it all," I promised, taking a bite of my salad while noting the other executives spoke in hushed tones about "territories" and "collections."

My phone buzzed with a text from Zoe: "How's the new gig? Max's daycare just sent me this pic. Thought you might need it."

Below was a photo of Max, beaming as he painted at an easel. Relief flooded through me.

"Everything alright?" Heidi asked, noticing my expression.

I hesitated, then decided honesty was best. "It's my son. It's his first day at a new daycare, and I was worried. But he looks happy."

"How old is he?" Heidi's expression grew genuinely curious.

"Max. He's three." I pulled up a photo on my phone. "He's my entire world."

Heidi studied the picture intently. "He has quite remarkable eyes."

"Yes," I agreed softly. "He got them from his father."

"And is his father involved?" Her question was gentle but probing.

I shook my head. "No. He doesn't even know Max exists." Before she could respond, I added, "It's... complicated."

To my surprise, Heidi reached across the table and covered my hand with hers. "Life in this business often is. For what it's worth, I have tremendous respect for single mothers. It requires exceptional strength."

The tension in my chest eased slightly. "Thank you for understanding. I promise it won't interfere with my work."

"I never doubted that." She checked her expensive watch. "Now, shall we continue? There's still the matter of Mr. Thorne's travel security arrangements to review."

Back at my desk, Heidi walked me through the complex process of coordinating Mr. Thorne's frequent trips. Apparently, he was extraordinarily particular—specific private jets, secure hotels, and armed drivers were all meticulously documented in Heidi's encrypted files.

"Mr. Thorne has certain... non-negotiable requirements," she explained diplomatically. "He can be demanding and sometimes dangerous when crossed, but he's fair to those who prove their loyalty. Always follow protocol exactly, and you'll survive just fine."

At two o'clock, Zoe texted again: "Max's daycare director called. They need additional medical forms signed—legal guardian signature required. I'd handle it, but they're being strict about protocol."

My heart sank. "Heidi, I'm so sorry, but there's an urgent matter with my son's enrollment. I need to sign some forms they overlooked."

To my relief, she nodded immediately. "Of course. Family emergencies take precedence, especially on first days. Handle it and return when you can."

"Are you certain?" I asked, already gathering my purse.

"Ivy, I meant what I said about respecting single mothers. Go. I'll cover your desk."

The daycare was only minutes from the office in a neighborhood that clearly catered to wealthy families. The director apologized profusely for the oversight as I signed the additional forms.

"We're absolutely loving having Max here," she assured me. "He's already bonded with two other children."

I peeked into the playroom where Max was constructing an elaborate tower with wooden blocks, his little face serious with concentration. My heart swelled with fierce pride.

"Can I say hello quickly?" I asked.

"Certainly!"

Max spotted me immediately, his eyes lighting up. "Mama!" he shouted, running over and wrapping his arms around my legs.

I knelt to his level. "Are you having fun, sweetheart?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "I built a castle! And I have new friends!"

"That's wonderful," I said, brushing his dark hair from his forehead. "Mama has to return to work now, but I'll see you tonight, okay?"

To my surprise, he didn't cling or cry. Instead, he gave me a quick kiss and ran back to his blocks. Such independence already. I wasn't sure whether to feel proud or heartbroken.

I made it back to the office in record time, relieved to find Heidi still monitoring my desk.

"Everything resolved?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you for being so accommodating."

She waved away my gratitude. "Now, let's continue with—"

The phone on my desk rang with an urgent, sharp tone that made both of us freeze. Heidi raised an eyebrow. "Your first call. Remember the protocol."

Taking a steadying breath, I lifted the receiver. "Thorne Group, Mr. Thorne's office. This is Ivy speaking. How may I assist you?"

"Who the fuck are you?" a deep male voice demanded with lethal authority. "Where's Heidi?"

The raw aggression in his tone hit me like a physical blow. "I'm Mr. Thorne's new executive assistant. Ms. Quinn is right here if you'd prefer to speak with her."

"New assistant?" he snarled. "I wasn't informed of any personnel changes."

I glanced at Heidi, who was watching me with intense focus. "May I ask who's calling, sir?"

"You can't be fucking serious." His voice was razor-sharp with dangerous impatience. "Put Heidi on the phone. Now."

I covered the mouthpiece. "He refuses to identify himself and demands to speak with you."

To my shock, Heidi shook her head firmly. "Handle it. Tell him I'm unavailable."

Swallowing my terror, I returned to the call. "I apologize, sir, but Ms. Quinn is currently unavailable. If you could please state your name and the purpose of your call, I'd be happy to assist you or relay a message."

"Listen, whoever the hell you are," the voice growled with barely controlled menace, "I need the Chicago shipment numbers immediately. The timeline just accelerated."

"I'd be delighted to help with that request, sir, but company security protocol requires that I verify who I'm speaking with first."

There was a deadly silence on the line. Then a harsh, dangerous laugh. "Well, well. Heidi found someone with actual backbone."

I waited, my heart threatening to explode from my chest.

"Tell Heidi I called," he finally said, his voice dropping to a threatening whisper. "And congratulations—you just passed your first test working for me."

The line went dead.

I stared at the receiver in my trembling hand, then at Heidi. "Was that...?"

"Mr. Caleb Thorne himself," she confirmed, her eyes sparkling with something that looked like approval. "Brilliantly done, Ivy. He tested you, and you held your ground."

"He hung up on me!" I was mortified. "On my first day!"

Heidi laughed—a sound that held secrets. "Don't worry. That's actually an excellent sign. If he'd been truly displeased, you would have heard language that would make a sailor blush."

"Worse than what he already said?" I sank into my chair. "He sounded absolutely terrifying."

"Caleb Thorne is a man who demands absolute excellence and has zero tolerance for weakness or disloyalty." She patted my shoulder reassuringly. "But he respects those who stand their ground against him. Trust me, you made exactly the right impression."

"I seriously doubt that," I groaned. "He probably thinks I'm completely incompetent."

"On the contrary." Heidi smiled with knowing satisfaction. "You might just be exactly what he needs—someone who won't be intimidated by his... intensity."

"His intensity?"

She chuckled darkly. "Caleb can be quite the predator when he's focused on business. But I have a suspicion you might be the one person who can handle his bite."

I stared at her in disbelief. "Me? Handle him? After that call, I'm pretty sure he's going to destroy me!"

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