

Exposed to the CEO Behind the Mafia Mask

Chapter 7: Chapter 7 A Second Dance with Danger

Ivy's POV

After that first explosive phone confrontation with Caleb Thorne, I sat at my desk feeling like I'd just survived a firefight. Heidi had assured me it was a test, but the way he'd cut the call still left my nerves raw and exposed.

"Don't look so shaken," Heidi said, noticing my white-knuckled grip on the desk edge. "Trust me, if Caleb had truly been displeased, this building would be in lockdown by now."

"He sounded absolutely murderous," I protested, still staring at the phone as if it might burst into flames.

"That's just his nature. He's probing every new person who enters his inner circle for weaknesses." She gathered some encrypted files from her desk. "I need to step out briefly to handle some... family business. You'll manage here alone?"

I nodded, though my stomach was still twisted in knots. "Of course."

After Heidi left, I tried to focus on reviewing the security protocols she'd prepared for me. The office felt tomb-quiet, and I found myself startling at every small sound—footsteps in the hallway, elevator chimes, the distant hum of what might have been secure communications equipment.

About twenty minutes later, a tall man with messy brown hair and quiet confidence appeared in the doorway, carrying a small black case.

"Excuse me? You must be the new assistant," he said, setting the case down smoothly. "I'm Jude, from our... technical department."

"Hi, I'm Ivy," I replied, grateful for human contact that didn't involve death threats.

"These are for you." He set the case on my desk, revealing a military-grade smartphone and tablet. "Secure company devices. The phone's already programmed with Mr. Thorne's private line, and both devices are encrypted with our highest-level protocols."

"Thank you, that's impressively efficient," I said, examining the phone's reinforced casing.

Jude lingered casually by my desk, clearly wanting to say something more. "So, tell me, how's your first day going? Working directly for the Don can be... overwhelming."

"So I'm discovering," I replied carefully, noting his use of the formal title.

"He's actually brilliant once you get past the whole terrifying factor," Jude continued, his tone friendly but assessing. "Listen, I know this might be forward, but if you ever want to grab coffee and talk about surviving in this organization, I'd be happy to show you the ropes..."

I smiled gently, recognizing the helpful look in his eyes. "That's very kind of you, Jude, but I'm not really in a place for socializing right now. I hope you understand."

"Of course!" he said smoothly, giving a respectful nod. "No problem at all. But if you need any technical support—encryption issues, secure communications, anything—I'm on the fifth floor."

After he left, I spent the next hour familiarizing myself with the devices and reviewing more of Heidi's meticulously organized intelligence files. I was starting to feel like I might actually survive this position when the phone rang again.

The caller ID showed the same encrypted number as before. My blood turned to ice.

Taking a steadying breath, I answered with forced professionalism: "Thorne Group, Mr. Thorne's office. This is Ivy speaking."

"Why is it you again?" The deep voice was immediately recognizable, and his irritation was a palpable force even through the phone. "Where the fuck is Heidi now?"

"Mr. Thorne," I replied, fighting to keep my voice level, "Ms. Quinn stepped out briefly on urgent business. How may I assist you?"

"I specifically requested to speak with Heidi. Is she dodging my calls?"

The accusation in his tone made my spine go rigid. "I assure you, sir, Ms. Quinn isn't avoiding anything. She's handling some critical matters and will return shortly."

"Critical matters more important than her employer?" His voice was razor-edged with sarcasm and something darker.

"I wouldn't presume to prioritize Ms. Quinn's responsibilities," I said carefully, "but I'm here to handle whatever you need."

"What I need is competence, not pathetic excuses," he snarled. "Since you appear to be my only option, tell me—has the Cassie manifest been analyzed?"

I frantically scanned the papers on my desk, searching for anything with that name while my heart hammered against my ribs. "I'm afraid I don't have immediate access to that information, Mr. Thorne. This is only my first day, and—"

"Your first day?" He cut me off with a harsh, dangerous laugh. "And they left you alone to handle my operations? Fucking brilliant."

His contemptuous tone ignited something fierce inside me. "Mr. Thorne, I understand you're frustrated, but I'm doing my best to assist you despite having literally learned your name only hours ago."

"Watch your fucking tone," he warned, his voice dropping to a lethal whisper. "I don't know what kind of operation you think this is, but—"

"The kind where employees are treated with basic human dignity," I interrupted, my temper finally exploding past all caution. "I may be new, but I'm not incompetent, and I refuse to be spoken to like I'm garbage beneath your shoe."

There was a stunned, deadly silence on the line. Then: "Did you just interrupt me?"

"Yes, I did," I said, my heart threatening to burst from my chest but my voice steady as steel. "And I'll do it again if you continue being unnecessarily brutal."

"You have some fucking nerve," he said, but there was something different in his tone now—surprise, maybe even a hint of dark amusement.

"I have self-respect," I corrected firmly. "And if you want a competent assistant, you'll need to show some basic respect in return."

Another pause that stretched like a blade against my throat. "You realize I could destroy you right now?"

"Yes," I admitted, my mouth dry as sand, "and if that's what you choose to do, then I suppose I misjudged what kind of man you are."

"What kind of man is that?"

"The kind who values strength over submission. The kind who respects courage. But apparently, I was wrong."

The silence stretched so long I wondered if he'd hung up again. Then, quietly and with dangerous interest: "You're either very brave or very suicidal, Miss..."

"Brooks," I supplied, my voice barely above a whisper. "Ivy Brooks. And I prefer to think of myself as realistic."

"Realistic," he repeated, and I could hear the predatory smile in his voice now. "Well, Miss Brooks, we'll see just how realistic you are when I return to the office tomorrow."

"I look forward to meeting you properly, Mr. Thorne," I said, though my hands were trembling like leaves.

"One more thing," he added, his voice dropping to an intimate rumble that made my skin prickle. "Have some chamomile tea ready. Something tells me I'll need it after dealing with you."

Before I could respond, he disconnected.

I stared at the phone in my hand, my entire body vibrating with adrenaline. Had I just secured my position or signed my own death warrant?

When Heidi returned fifteen minutes later, she found me sitting at my desk like a statue.

"What's happened?" she asked immediately, her sharp eyes taking in my pale complexion. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Mr. Thorne called again," I said weakly. "I think I might have made a catastrophic mistake."

"Mistake how?"

I recounted the conversation word for word, watching Heidi's expression shift from concern to amazement to outright fascination.

"Dear God," she breathed, sinking into the chair across from my desk. "In twenty-five years with this family, I've never heard of anyone speaking to Caleb Thorne like that and living to tell about it."

"So I'm definitely dead," I concluded miserably.

"On the contrary," Heidi said with a dangerous smile. "I think you might be exactly what he's been searching for—someone who won't crumble under his darkness."

"He's coming in tomorrow," I said, showing her the message on my secure phone. "And he wants chamomile tea."

Heidi burst into delighted laughter. "Chamomile tea! Oh, Ivy, that's perfect. He's acknowledging that you've gotten under his skin."

"How is that possibly good?"

"Because Caleb Thorne doesn't get rattled by people he can dismiss. He only gets rattled by people who have power over him."

I wasn't entirely convinced, but Heidi's confidence was the only thing keeping me from complete panic. As the day wound down, I tried to focus on memorizing the remaining security procedures, but my mind kept drifting to tomorrow's inevitable reckoning.

When closing time arrived, I gathered my things with a mixture of anticipation and terror. I'd challenged one of the most dangerous men on the East Coast—twice—and somehow survived. Now I just had to survive meeting him face to face.

As I waited for the elevator, I couldn't shake the feeling that tomorrow would change everything. I just wasn't sure if it would end with me earning his respect or disappearing into the harbor.

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