Mafia Mask 24

Chapter 24 Morning Coffee and Predatory Warning

Ivy's POV

I walked into my apartment with my boss's parting words still ringing in my ears like a dangerous promise. He would continue his relentless psychological warfare. What deadly game was Caleb Thorne really playing with me? Today had been an emotional battlefield that left me questioning everything. Would our office dynamic ever find some semblance of normalcy, or were we destined to dance this dangerous dance until one of us broke?

I tiptoed to Max's room, finding him lost in peaceful slumber, his tiny arms wrapped around his favorite stuffed dinosaur. The sight of my son's innocent face made my heart swell with fierce love. Maybe I could convince Zoe to join us for a Sunday afternoon at the park—Max would love that, and I needed the normalcy. I peeked into my best friend's room, confirming she was also deep in sleep, then grabbed the baby monitor from the hallway table.

The hot shower felt like salvation, washing away the tension and confusion that had accumulated throughout the day. As I slipped between my sheets, thoughts of Caleb invaded my mind once again. His intense gaze, his commanding presence, the way he seemed to see right through every defense I'd built. I was definitely losing my sanity.

Morning came too quickly. Max bounced out of bed like a spring, his radiant smile instantly brightening my mood. He chattered excitedly about his upcoming day at school while I helped him get dressed, sharing every little discovery and adventure that filled his young world. Watching my son thrive with such joy made every sacrifice worthwhile.

After getting myself ready, I wandered into the kitchen where Zoe had already brewed our morning coffee.

"Morning, gorgeous! I need every single detail about yesterday. Your life is like a prime-time crime drama!" she said, barely containing her excitement.

"Zoe, I promise I'll spill everything tonight. Just know that my boss transformed into the devil incarnate yesterday."

"Uh-huh. And sweetheart, did you perhaps poke the beast first? I know you, Ivy. You left that war declaration note on my nightstand this morning."

"Guilty as charged. I wore that killer black dress you bought me last year with those red stilettos."

Zoe's jaw dropped to the floor.

"If that man didn't completely lose his mind seeing you in that outfit, I'll eat my designer heels."

"No need for such drastic measures. But seriously, I need to drop Max off now. Want to come with us?"

"Absolutely," she said, downing the rest of her coffee. "Though I'll be dying of curiosity until tonight."

"I want to hear about your day too. Your job sounds way more dangerous than mine."

"Honey, you have no clue how lethal my boss can be. But tell me, do you honestly think that conservative pantsuit will make you invisible? Because if hiding is your goal, mission failed. Your curves look incredible in that fitted shirt."

I groaned internally. After yesterday's overexposure, I had deliberately chosen a charcoal gray pantsuit with a blazer, hoping to tone things down and avoid provoking the predator. The white shirt underneath was indeed more form-fitting than I remembered. Too late to change now.

Thursday morning started with blessed quiet. Caleb had scheduled a disciplinary meeting with the underboss, giving me a temporary reprieve from his overwhelming presence. I was methodically working through my task list when Heidi texted that she would be running late.

I was deep in contract review when my boss stormed through the office doors, his expression thunderous enough to kill, heading straight for his private fortress while motioning for me to follow.

"Good morning, Miss Brooks. Have you completed the Universal contract review?"

Back to formal titles. Stress mode activated.

"Good morning, Mr. Thorne. Yes, I finished the review and emailed it to you. I also verified the Beijing shipment details—everything is proceeding smoothly. The cargo is being loaded as we speak, departing tonight on schedule. All documentation has been double-checked and approved. I sent you a comprehensive report via secure email."

"Excellent work. We have the Zenith Systems meeting with Dominic after lunch. I need you there documenting everything. Has the territory report meeting been confirmed?"

"Yes, Mr. Thorne. Scheduled and confirmed for five o'clock in your office, exactly as requested."

"Perfect. Has Heidi arrived?"

"Not yet. She called about a delay related to her Boston relocation arrangements. Anything else, Mr. Thorne?"

"No. You may return to your desk."

I was already halfway to the door when his voice stopped me cold, dripping with dark amusement and dangerous promise.

"Ivy, that conservative blazer and long pants won't hide what I've already seen. And what I haven't seen yet, I'm definitely going to explore."

I froze completely, then turned slowly to find him closing the distance between us with predatory grace that made my blood sing with fear and anticipation. My heart hammered against my ribs as his eyes devoured me with unmistakable hunger.

Once again, I fled to my desk in complete shock. That man was absolutely infuriating and lethal to my sanity! At noon, Jude bounced into my office with his usual cheerful energy.

"Beautiful lady, you won't believe the crazy thing my wife did today. Want to grab lunch and hear about it?"

Lunch with Jude was exactly what I needed. His hilarious stories about his wife's antics had me laughing until my sides ached, providing a blessed respite from dangerous thoughts. Before we parted ways, he mentioned sending details about Heidi's farewell party that he and Xavier were organizing for next week.

At two o'clock sharp, we gathered in the secure conference room. I was shocked to see Zoe there, and we embraced warmly before she introduced me to her boss.

"Zoe, I'm going to have serious words with your father. When Robert recommended Ms. Ivy for this position, he failed to mention she was an absolute goddess!"

I smiled awkwardly, then heard Mr. Dangerous's voice behind me, sharp with lethal warning.

"Frost, keep your wandering hands and eyes away from my assistant. Ms. Ivy isn't one of those disposable women from your usual crowd."

I caught Dominic Frost's amused glance bouncing between me and my boss with obvious interest and barely concealed entertainment.

"Well, well, the untouchable Caleb Thorne showing possessiveness over you, Ms. Ivy! How absolutely fascinating! But my dear friend Caleb, I'm not sure I can resist the temptation of such beauty."

"You better resist, Dominic." Xavier entered with perfect timing. "You wouldn't want to face our brother's legendary violence." His mocking smile was pure entertainment. "But who's this stunning woman with you, Dominic?"

"Don't even think about it, Xavier. This is Zoe Miller, Robert's daughter, and she has a boyfriend who looks like he stepped out of a romance novel and could probably kill you. In other words, completely off-limits like Ms. Ivy. No wonder they're best friends," Dominic replied, rolling his eyes dramatically.

"What a tragedy! But surely you two could introduce me to an equally gorgeous friend? I've been so terribly lonely lately." Xavier's exaggerated pitiful expression had everyone bursting into laughter.

"Good God, Xavier, do you have any boundaries?" Caleb exclaimed in exasperation.

"Sorry, Mr. Black, but we don't have another drop-dead gorgeous and dangerous friend like us to share. My apologies," Zoe replied through her laughter.

"Now that you gentlemen have finished your territorial display, can we actually conduct business?" Caleb said, cutting through the banter with lethal authority, though we still heard Xavier's disappointed complaint.

"Aw, but we were just getting to the good part."

We all laughed again. The meeting proceeded smoothly in a surprisingly friendly atmosphere. After saying goodbye to Zoe, I returned to my desk with just enough time to handle encrypted emails before the territory report meeting.

The calm before the storm, I suspected.