Mafia Mask 31

Chapter 31 Fire and Resolve

Ivy's POV

I left Thorne Group headquarters in a complete daze, my mind still reeling from what had transpired in Caleb's private office. The memory of his hands on my skin, the intensity in those ice-blue eyes, the way he had commanded my body with such devastating precision - it all burned through my veins like liquid fire. I needed to get home to Max, to anchor myself in the one pure thing that kept me grounded in this dangerous world I had stumbled into.

The taxi ride through the city's darker neighborhoods felt interminable. When I finally walked through the reinforced door of our fortified apartment, Max came running toward me despite his stuffy nose, his little arms stretched wide as he called out "Mommy" in that congested voice that made my heart clench. His radiant smile immediately swept away every complicated thought swirling in my head. This was what truly mattered. This was the center of my universe.

Zoe hadn't returned yet from her reconnaissance work, so I found Carmen bustling around the kitchen with the practiced efficiency of someone who had spent years managing households in this unforgiving underworld. She had already prepared Max's medication, fed him a nutritious dinner, and somehow managed to transform our modest safe house into something that felt genuinely warm and welcoming.

"Carmen, I honestly don't know how to express my gratitude for everything you've done today," I told her, meaning every single word.

She dismissed my thanks with a characteristic wave of her weathered hand, though her smile radiated genuine warmth. "Don't be ridiculous, Ivy. Max is the most precious little boy I've ever had the privilege of watching. Even with this cold making him miserable, he's been nothing but an angel. And when Mrs. Martinez contacted me asking if I'd look after her grandson, well, I couldn't refuse. It gets terribly lonely in that enormous estate all by myself."

The way she referred to Max as her grandson filled my chest with overwhelming gratitude. Zoe's crime family had welcomed us both without hesitation or questions, treating us like blood relatives rather than strays who desperately needed protection and shelter.

"Mrs. Martinez has been nothing short of incredible. Having Zoe's family embrace us the way they have feels like a miracle," I said quietly.

"You deserve every ounce of kindness they show you, sweetheart. Raising such a wonderful boy completely on your own while navigating this treacherous world takes extraordinary courage and strength." Carmen reached over to squeeze my hand gently. "Now go get yourself cleaned up and change into something comfortable. I'll keep a watchful eye on this little prince until you're ready."

I followed her suggestion exactly, letting the scalding water wash away all the tension that had accumulated in my shoulders from the day's dangerous encounters. When I emerged from the bathroom feeling somewhat more human, Zoe had arrived and was showering Max with affection while he giggled and waved around a small bag of candy she had smuggled in for him.

"Zoe, you're going to completely rot all his teeth with that constant stream of sugar," I said, though I couldn't suppress my smile watching how happy she made him.

"I'm his godmother, which means spoiling him absolutely rotten is literally written into my job description," she shot back with that mischievous grin that stretched across her entire face.

Carmen collected her belongings and moved toward the reinforced exit. "Well, ladies, I should head back to the compound. Take excellent care of my little prince, will you?"

"Wait, Carmen, won't you stay for dinner with us? Please?" I asked, probably sounding more desperate than I had intended.

"Yeah, stay longer, Nana!" Max chimed in with his most adorable puppy dog expression that could melt even the hardest criminal's heart.

"Oh, my sweet boy, I wish I could stay tonight." She bent down to caress his cheek tenderly and plant a gentle kiss there, making my heart overflow with affection for this woman who had become like family to us.

"Before you leave, would you be available to watch Max tomorrow? I have to return to Thorne Group," I remembered to ask.

"Actually, don’t worry about arrangements, Ivy. I’m completely free all day tomorrow and plan to spend every single minute spoiling my godson absolutely rotten. Right, little man?" Zoe said, making Max dissolve into delighted giggles.

"But isn’t Finn supposed to arrive this weekend? I don’t want to interfere with your plans," I said, already feeling guilty about potentially disrupting their time together.

"What plans? Finn’s arrival has been postponed until next week because he’s finally relocating here permanently to help run operations," she said, practically glowing with excitement. "Tomorrow it’s just me and this little guy. And we should probably reschedule our girls’ day until next week anyway, since Max’s still fighting this cold. That way Carmen can have a proper rest too."

After Carmen departed for the family compound, Zoe and I settled into our evening routine. She took a shower while I got Max ready for bed, and then we sat down to enjoy the delicious meal Carmen had prepared with ingredients from the family’s private suppliers. Once Max was safely tucked in and sleeping peacefully, Zoe and I tackled the dishes together. That’s when I finally found the courage to tell her everything that had happened in Caleb’s office.

When I finished recounting every detail, Zoe was staring at me with an expression I couldn’t quite decipher.

"Zoe, I completely screwed this situation up, didn’t I? I need you to tell me how to fix it, because when that man touches me, my brain completely shuts down and stops functioning entirely."

"Ivy, you didn’t screw anything up. What was screwed up was your absolutely ridiculous plan to never be with anyone again after having Max. And let’s be completely honest here, your boss is devastatingly gorgeous. Actually, you’re surrounded by incredible men these days, because Xavier is also ridiculously attractive," she said, fanning herself theatrically until I couldn’t help but laugh.

"Zoe, this fire I feel when Caleb touches me, I’ve only experienced it once before. With Max’s father. My ex-boyfriend never even came close to making me feel this intensity."

"Well, honey, if it's that powerful, then maybe you should stop fighting it so hard. Besides, you said he promised it won't affect your position, and if it does somehow, you can always find work elsewhere in the organization."

"You really think so? I'm terrified of getting hurt again. I think I'm already developing serious feelings for him, but he operates in such a dangerous world that seems completely out of my league."

"Ivy, stop that right now. I refuse to listen to this 'out of my league because he's powerful' nonsense. That's the same toxic garbage those idiots from our old neighborhood filled your head with, and you need to forget every single word of it. They were all losers anyway." Zoe's voice sharpened the way it always did when she was defending me fiercely. "Power doesn't determine compatibility, Ivy. And sometimes we have to take dangerous risks. It's better to get hurt than spend your entire life wondering what might have been. Plus, this time you don't even have to worry about protection. Though a baby with Caleb's genetics would probably be just as beautiful as Max."

I grabbed the dish towel and playfully swatted her with it, but I was laughing too hard to put any real force behind it. After Max was born, Zoe had insisted I start taking birth control despite my protests. I had fought her on it initially, swearing I would never be with anyone again, but she had worn me down with her relentless persistence. She had pointed out that I hadn't planned on sleeping with a stranger at that underground auction either, but it had happened regardless. Now I was grateful she had been so stubbornly insistent.

"Ivy, listen to me carefully. Get yourself ready, go to work tomorrow, and drive that man absolutely crazy all day long. Then after everyone else leaves the building, completely rock his world so thoroughly that no other woman will ever be able to make him forget you," she said, gripping my shoulders and looking me straight in the eye with fierce determination.

"You really think I have that kind of power over him?" I asked, feeling a thrill of excitement mixed with pure terror.

"Ivy, you have absolutely no idea how much influence you already wield. And you've already let the guy pleasure you, so stop being ridiculous and get some real action."

God, Zoe was absolutely impossible. But she wasn't wrong about any of it. I looked at her with what I hoped was a seductive smile and said, "Help me choose the perfect outfit?"

"Yes! I’m going to make you look so devastatingly hot that man won’t be able to concentrate on anything else all day long."

She grabbed my arm and practically dragged me toward the bedroom, already plotting the look that would, according to her expert assessment, give Caleb Thorne a heart attack.