Mafia Mask 43

Chapter 43 No Way Back

Ivy's POV

I felt completely untethered, like a boat cut loose from its moorings in a violent storm. Zoe had rushed out at dawn, insisting she would handle Max's drop-off at the safe house daycare, while Carmen had stationed herself firmly in my apartment, determined to spend the entire day ensuring I wasn't alone. I was grateful for her fierce loyalty, but the crushing weight of being such a burden on the Miller family was suffocating me.

Before departing, Zoe had given me explicit orders to do nothing except rest and recover from the trauma of my violent expulsion from Thorne territory. She promised to speak with her contact in the organization and assured me we would have a solution by nightfall. But sitting idle while others risked their necks to solve my problems felt wrong. I was already taking far too much from this generous family who had opened their doors to a disgraced exile.

Carmen and I shared a quiet lunch together, and she filled the heavy silence with stories about her children and grandchildren scattered across the country, too far away for regular visits due to the dangerous nature of their work. Her eyes brightened when she spoke about the joy Max brought to her life, how his innocent laughter reminded her of her own children before they were inducted into this violent world. The loneliness in her weathered voice made my heart ache, even as I felt overwhelmed by her maternal protection.

When afternoon shadows began to lengthen, she announced she was heading to the black market and would collect Max from the secure facility afterward. Despite her insistence that I remain hidden and rest, I seized the opportunity to call my parents. I had steeled myself to tell them everything about the catastrophe my life had become and ask if Max and I could return to our old home.

The secure phone buzzed just as I was reaching for the encrypted device. The voice crackled through the speaker, informing me that a courier from Thorne Syndicate was downstairs with documents requiring my immediate signature. My blood turned to ice, but I knew I had to face whatever final humiliation they had brought me.

The elevator ride down felt like descending into hell. The Thorne courier handed me a sealed envelope without making eye contact, clearly uncomfortable with whatever role he was playing in my destruction.

Inside were my termination papers and a check for severance pay. I signed the documents with steady hands, but when it came to the blood money, I shoved it back untouched. I scrawled a note on the paperwork stating I was waiving all compensation. I would not take a single dollar from that organization, not after the way they had cast me out into the darkness.

Back in the safety of the apartment, I finally dialed my parents' secure line, my hands trembling slightly despite my efforts to remain composed.

"Ivy, sweetheart! I've been missing you something fierce! How are my favorite people doing in that big city?" My mother's voice burst through the connection, warm and loving as always, though tinged with the constant worry that came from knowing how dangerous my new life had become.

"Oh, Mom, we talk practically every day," I managed to laugh, though tears were already forming in my eyes. I longed for her protective embrace more than ever, for the safety of our old neighborhood where life had been so much simpler.

"That doesn't mean I miss you any less, honey! Hold on, let me put you on speaker. Your father's right here with me." Her excitement was infectious, though I found it strange that Dad was home during business hours when he usually worked.

"There's my beautiful daughter! How's my little soldier treating you?" Dad's gruff voice filled the room, carrying the warmth of a man who had worked hard his whole life to provide for his family.

"We're managing, Dad. Max's still at daycare right now." I fought to keep my voice steady, not wanting to alarm them with news of my disgrace.

"Honey, I'm so glad you called when you did. Do you have some time to chat, or are you busy?" Dad asked, and I had to bite my lip to keep from breaking down completely.

"I have plenty of time, Dad. I'm just having some coffee and staying inside. What's going on?" I managed to ask without my voice cracking.

"Well, sweetheart, we have some news that I think is going to make you very happy," Mom chimed in, practically vibrating with excitement that seemed oddly out of place given the circumstances.

"Ivy, honey, I've officially retired! Yesterday was my last day at the factory. The boss even threw me a farewell party and tried everything he could think of to convince me to stay on part-time. But now that you're all settled in your new life, I decided it was time for your old man to enjoy some well-earned rest," Dad announced, his joy unmistakable but devastating to my hopes.

"Dad, that's absolutely wonderful! I'm so proud of you! Mom, now you two can finally take all those trips you've been planning," I meant every word, even as my escape route crumbled to dust.

"Oh, but you haven't even heard the best part yet! I went ahead and cashed out my retirement fund, and we bought ourselves a charming little farmhouse out in the countryside. We're moving everything this weekend. Your mother and I are finally going to live that peaceful life we've been dreaming about, far from the stress and noise of the city," Dad continued, his excitement radiating through the line.

My last hope turned to ash in my mouth. There was absolutely no way I could return home now, not when my parents had just begun their new Chapter in retirement. They continued talking for several more minutes about their plans and how eager they were for Max and me to visit their farm soon. I made all the appropriate responses, but inside I was screaming with despair.

After we disconnected, I buried my face in my hands and let the hopelessness wash over me like a dark tide. I could not bring myself to destroy their hard-earned peace by telling them about my expulsion and the bounty that might still be on my head. I would have to wait for Zoe and trust in whatever dangerous plan she had devised.

The sound of the reinforced door opening followed by Max's excited shouts of "Mommy, mommy!" instantly lifted my spirits from the depths of despair. From the moment I had first felt him moving in my womb, Max had been my anchor and my reason for surviving. No matter how treacherous the waters became, his presence always reminded me that I could endure anything for his sake.

I scooped him up and covered his face with kisses, breathing in his innocent scent that carried no trace of the violence that surrounded our world. When I tried to help Carmen with the supplies, she shooed me away and insisted I focus on Max, who apparently had countless stories to tell me about his day at the facility.

We were playing on the living room floor after his bath when he suddenly looked up at me with those piercing innocent eyes and asked, "Mommy, is Caleb coming over today? I really want to play with him again."

The question hit me like a sniper's bullet. I had not expected Max to remember Caleb, let alone ask for him with such longing. Fortunately, Zoe chose that moment to return home, and Max immediately launched himself into her arms, temporarily forgetting his dangerous question.

After dinner and Max's carefully structured bedtime routine designed to give him normalcy in our chaotic world, I joined Zoe in the living room where she announced we needed to have a serious discussion about survival.

"Ivy, how are you really holding up after today's humiliation?"

"I feel terrible, Zoe. Right before you got home, Max was asking when Caleb would come visit again."

"Really? That's surprising. Max usually doesn't remember people after meeting them just once, especially dangerous ones," she said, looking genuinely puzzled by this development.

I told her about the conversation with my parents and how their retirement had eliminated my only backup plan for refuge. I finished by admitting that I would need her protection and connections more than ever now.

"You're incredibly stubborn, you know that? Didn't I promise I would find you shelter? And it turns out I barely had to pull any strings. My contact overheard me explaining your situation, and he immediately told me to bring you in tomorrow morning," Zoe announced with a triumphant grin.

"What exactly do you mean, Zoe? Does he know what really happened to me in Thorne territory?" I asked, confusion replacing some of my despair.

"He knows the important parts. I explained that Caleb accused you of something you didn't do. My contact called Caleb a hotheaded monster who's going to regret his actions, so he thinks it would be better if you're already under his protection when Caleb inevitably comes crawling back," she explained, her smile widening with dangerous satisfaction.

"He’s not going to apologize, Zoe. He’ll either block your contact from sheltering me or find a way to have me eliminated once I’m there," I said, unable to shake my pessimism about surviving in this merciless world.

"Not going to happen. My contact has already made his decision. Tomorrow morning, you’re coming to work with me."

"Alright, Zoe. I’ll meet with your contact and be completely honest about my disgrace. If he still wants to risk protecting me after hearing everything, then I’ll accept his offer."