Mafia Mask 50

Chapter 50 Professional Boundaries

Ivy's POV

I surveyed the private dining room at The Darkstone, feeling completely disoriented. This gathering was highly unusual. Besides Mr. Jenkins from the casino's financial department and myself, there sat Zoe, Dominic Frost, Caleb, Xavier, Jude, Heidi, and Scott around the mahogany table.

What kind of meeting was this? I caught Zoe's eye across the polished surface, and she offered a helpless shrug. She appeared just as bewildered as I felt. Dominic gestured toward an empty chair positioned directly beside Caleb. Seriously?

My suspicions flared immediately. This had to be another one of Caleb's elaborate schemes to corner me into conversation. Obviously, he had zero intention of genuinely requiring our money laundering consultation services. Still, I would maintain my professionalism and deliver my best performance. At least Mr. Jenkins could witness my capabilities in the neutral territory.

"Ivy, I requested your attendance because of your extensive experience with Thorne operations and your intimate knowledge of their current financial vulnerabilities," Dominic explained, seemingly reading my thoughts. "I know you're an exceptional professional who can handle this delicate situation."

"Absolutely, sir. I'm here to assist however needed." I settled into the chair and switched into professional mode, though my skin prickled being this close to Caleb's dangerous presence.

Mr. Jenkins launched into the consultation presentation while I contributed strategic insights about offshore account management and untraceable transaction protocols. Our collaboration flowed seamlessly. We operated like a well-oiled machine, anticipating each other's points throughout the detailed financial restructuring proposal. When the formal presentation concluded, the questions began flooding in. I addressed every concern about territorial money movement and family asset protection with confidence while Mr. Jenkins beamed with pride at my comprehensive responses.

Caleb surveyed his lieutenants, silently gauging their reactions to our money laundering expertise.

"Outstanding work, Caleb. The financial security measures are impressive. Your family definitely needs this level of protection," Scott declared with conviction, referring to the sophisticated offshore banking network we'd outlined.

"I'm equally impressed. I had no idea the neutral zone had developed something this sophisticated for family asset management, Dominic," Xavier added his endorsement.

"Perfect. Dominic, send over the consultation contract, and we'll finalize this arrangement," Caleb announced in that authoritative Don voice that made him dangerously attractive.

Zoe circulated folders containing the detailed service agreement, and their decision came without hesitation. Everything was settled on the spot, with only the retainer payment and operational protocols to be established the following week.

The formal meeting dissolved into casual conversation. My former Thorne associates surrounded me with cautious embraces and guarded greetings about how the family operations had changed since my departure. Caleb remained in his seat, watching everything unfold with those unreadable ice-blue eyes.

"Ivy, you remember Heidi's transition ceremony is tomorrow, right?" Jude drew me toward the back corner of the room, lowering his voice conspiratorially.

"Yes, I'm aware. I'm going to miss her guidance terribly," I admitted, feeling genuine sadness about Heidi stepping back from her role as the family's senior advisor.

"We all will. But this consulting position is perfect for her, and the Don decided she'll return monthly for strategic guidance. I guess nobody in the territory can function without Heidi's expertise." This was news to me, but I felt relieved knowing we could maintain contact. Jude continued, "Your name and Zoe's are both on the guest list. You absolutely cannot miss this ceremony."

"Jude, I'm not attending. There's no way I'm stepping foot in that compound again. I refuse to risk being humiliated and dragged out a second time," I said defensively.

"Who's going to remove you? Everything's been resolved. They never should have questioned your loyalty in the first place," Jude spoke as if my welcome was obvious.

"It might appear resolved, Jude. But Caleb's treatment and Xavier's accusatory stare that day caused real damage. I have no desire to return to that compound," I said, fighting back tears.

"Beautiful lady, I've already confronted Xavier about his behavior. He was completely wrong not to defend you. And Caleb, don't get me started on that stubborn Don. But you have to come, for Heidi's sake," Jude insisted.

"Fine, I'll consider it. Thank you for the invitation. You're a genuine friend, and I miss our strategy discussions," I said sincerely.

"Then let's schedule regular meetings again. How about Saturday? I want you to meet my wife properly. She's also furious with those two morons," Jude said with a hearty laugh.

"Pardon the interruption, Jude, but one of those morons wants to make amends," Xavier announced, appearing behind me with his characteristic stealth. Jude excused himself and departed.

"Listen, Xavier, you don't owe me any apology," I said immediately, though I remained quite upset with the family's former military strategist.

"I absolutely do, Ivy. I offered you protection within our circle, and when you needed support, I failed you completely. I feel terrible about being such a coward."

"Xavier, I understand you received intelligence that implicated me. It's unfortunate you accepted it as absolute truth without proper investigation. But I comprehend your position. After all, you and Caleb share a brotherhood forged in blood, and you felt obligated to support him," I said, avoiding eye contact.

"Ivy, supporting Caleb doesn't justify acting unfairly toward family. I was wrong. Just like him. I should have responded like Heidi, Jude, and Scott, who never questioned your loyalty for even a moment."

"Let's move past it, Xavier. You've already cleared everything up through proper channels. It's irrelevant now."

"It absolutely matters. And I genuinely want your forgiveness. I'm truly sorry for doubting your honor."

"Alright, Xavier, stop torturing yourself," I said, attempting to conclude this conversation.

"Excellent, so you'll attend Heidi's ceremony tomorrow and return to the family?" Xavier said quickly.

"Neither option is happening. I'm never entering that compound again," I stated firmly.

"But Ivy, I thought you forgave me," Xavier looked genuinely confused.

"I'm moving forward, Xavier. I harbor no resentment toward you personally. Don't worry about it."

"I suppose I'll need to earn your forgiveness through actions too, won't I?"

"Nobody needs to grovel, Xavier. We're fine, and you don't require forgiveness from someone no longer bound to your family," I assured him with a smile.

"Understood. We'll earn you back," Xavier said with a confident wink. "One more thing, Ivy. I brought your final compensation. You completed the work, so you deserve payment for services rendered."

"I won't accept that money, Xavier. Don't persist, I want nothing from any of you. I hope you won't push this issue and create additional problems with the neutral zone," I fixed him with a stern look that left no room for negotiation.

"You're being stubborn, Ivy," Xavier said with a sigh. "And you have every right to be. I'm sorry everything is so damaged, and it's our responsibility. But we'll work tirelessly to earn your trust back. And you will return to us."

Xavier slipped the payment envelope into his jacket's inner pocket, smiled warmly at me, and exited the room. I found his determination oddly endearing despite everything, and smiled back at him before he disappeared into the casino's shadows.