Mafia Mask 57

Chapter 57 Gentle Counsel

Ivy’s POV

Max and I sat cross-legged on the reinforced hardwood floor of our safe house living room, surrounded by the custom-carved wooden building blocks that Caleb had commissioned from an artisan in Little Italy. Each piece bore intricate engravings that resembled the architectural details of the Thorne family estate. My son’s small fingers worked with careful precision to balance each block, his tongue poking out in concentration as he constructed elaborate towers. These blocks had become his most treasured possession, and I couldn’t ignore how often he reached for them whenever his mind wandered to thoughts of his father.

"Mommy, will Caleb come see my castle today?" Max asked, his innocent eyes looking up at me as he placed another ornately carved piece atop his growing fortress.

My chest constricted painfully at the question. The child had formed such a deep attachment to the dangerous man who ruled half the city’s underworld. "Not today, sweetheart. We’re having lunch with Aunt Heidi before she leaves for her business meetings in Europe, remember?"

The distinctive sound of our reinforced front door’s multiple locks disengaging interrupted us, followed by Zoe and Finn’s familiar voices echoing through the armored hallway. Max abandoned his architectural masterpiece instantly, his little legs carrying him straight into Finn’s waiting arms.

"Uncle Finn!" Max squealed with delight as Finn lifted him high into the air, spinning him around until they were both dizzy with laughter.

We spent several minutes catching up in the living room, the conversation carefully skirting around the more dangerous aspects of our recent lives. During the drive through the city’s carefully monitored streets, Finn and Max were already making elaborate plans for their afternoon expedition to the high-end shopping district, complete with stops at the exclusive toy boutique and the private children’s entertainment center.

The restaurant was one of Heidi’s favorites, a discrete establishment in the business district that catered to the city’s elite and asked no uncomfortable questions about its clientele. We were seated quickly at a

corner table with bulletproof windows overlooking the bustling financial district. Heidi arrived precisely on time, her elegant presence commanding attention as she glided toward our table with the poise of someone who had spent many years navigating the treacherous waters of organized crime families.

"Finally, I get to properly meet this remarkable man I've been hearing so much about," Heidi announced with a knowing smile, her sharp eyes assessing Finn with the practiced gaze of someone who had evaluated countless potential threats and allies over the years.

"Heidi, he truly is everything I hoped for. Just look at how gentle he is," Zoe said warmly, reaching over to squeeze Finn's hand while he turned an endearing shade of red under Heidi's scrutiny.

We all shared a moment of genuine laughter as Finn stood, his cheeks still flushed, and introduced himself to Heidi with the kind of old-world courtesy that the older generation of crime families still valued. After our drinks arrived, the conversation flowed naturally to stories about my childhood in the working-class neighborhoods and Heidi's upcoming travels to oversee various family business interests across the Atlantic.

Max, who had been quietly sketching on his children's menu with the special crayons the restaurant provided, suddenly tugged on Heidi's silk sleeve. "Aunt Heidi, do you know Caleb?"

Heidi's carefully maintained composure flickered with genuine surprise. "Yes, little one, I know him very well. He's been like a son to me for many years. Why do you ask?"

"Are you gonna see him when you go away?" Max pressed, his eyes bright with the kind of hope that made my heart clench with protective fear.

"I will see him before I leave the city. Would you like me to give him a message from you?" Heidi asked gently, her weathered fingers running through my son's soft dark hair.

"Yes! Tell him I finished the big castle with all the blocks he gave me, and I want to show him how tall I made it," Max said, his voice filled with such earnest longing that I felt the familiar ache of maternal guilt settling over me like a heavy blanket.

The bond my son had formed with the most dangerous man in the territory was something that both terrified and mystified me. How could I explain to a young child that sometimes the people we care about make choices that put us in danger, and that sometimes staying away from them is the only way to stay alive?

"I'll make sure to tell him exactly that, I promise," Heidi said softly, pressing a gentle kiss to the top of Max's head before turning to me with eyes that held years of hard-won wisdom. "It seems they've developed quite a special connection, Ivy."

"They have, Heidi. And now I'm left trying to figure out how to handle it. Max clearly misses him, but the situation is so complicated," I admitted, feeling the weight of impossible decisions pressing down on my shoulders.

"Perhaps you should pay attention to what your son is trying to tell you about the man's character," Heidi suggested with a meaningful look that made my stomach flutter with uncertainty and something that might have been hope.

The remainder of our lunch passed in comfortable conversation and shared laughter, the kind of peaceful atmosphere that felt precious in our world of constant vigilance and calculated risks. When it came time to say goodbye, Heidi and I confirmed our plans to meet again when she returned from handling family business overseas. Her regular visits had become one of the few constants I could rely on in this unpredictable life.

As we prepared to part ways in the restaurant's private parking garage, Heidi caught my arm with a grip that was surprisingly strong for someone her age.

"Sweetheart, you need to find it in your heart to forgive him. Caleb made serious mistakes, yes, but he won't repeat them. And Xavier was just trying to protect his closest friend and business partner," she said firmly.

"Heidi, what he did cut me deeper than I thought possible. I don't know if I have the strength to risk that kind of pain again," I replied, my voice heavy with the emotional exhaustion I'd been carrying for weeks.

"Ivy, pride has never brought anyone lasting happiness. Think carefully about that," Heidi said with finality, giving me one last kiss on the cheek before disappearing into her armored sedan.

We proceeded to the shopping district as planned, and I tried to push Heidi's pointed words from my mind. The private children's entertainment center was a welcome distraction, filled with the sounds of innocent laughter and play. Max threw himself into every activity with boundless energy, his face glowing with excitement as he conquered elaborate obstacle courses and raced down towering slides designed by European architects.

After watching the boys play for a while, Zoe and I were exhausted and needed some adult conversation. Finn waved us away with an understanding grin, promising to keep Max entertained and safe for as long as we needed.

We wandered through the upscale shopping district, window shopping and enjoying the rare opportunity to walk at a leisurely pace without constantly checking for potential threats. When we passed the exclusive boutique where we'd purchased our evening wear, Zoe grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the entrance with renewed energy.

"So, boss lady, decided it's time to expand that carefully curated wardrobe of yours?" Zoe asked with playful sarcasm as we walked through the heavy glass doors.

Dominic was casually leaning against the polished marble counter, engaged in animated conversation with Gemma, the sales associate who had helped us navigate the world of high-fashion formal wear. He looked up with his characteristic teasing smile when he spotted us approaching.

"Are you two developing a habit of following me around the city?" he asked with mock suspicion, his tone light but his eyes automatically scanning the area around us with the practiced vigilance of someone accustomed to potential danger.

"You wish you were that interesting," I shot back, laughing at his expression of feigned offense. "We brought my son to the entertainment center for some fun," I explained, acknowledging Gemma with a warm wave.

"Ah, the legendary Max. I swear I don't know who talks about that kid more enthusiastically, you two or Caleb. Where is he? I've been looking forward to meeting him," Dominic said, his eyes scanning the boutique expectantly.

"He’s at the children’s center with Zoe’s boyfriend, who also happens to be his godfather," I replied, though I couldn’t help but feel curious about Dominic’s comment regarding Caleb’s apparent habit of discussing my son.

"Another person I need to meet then, this lucky man who managed to win over our dear Zoe," Dominic said, turning to Gemma with an appreciative grin. "She’s been claiming he’s the perfect boyfriend."

"Oh honey, if you’ve found yourself a genuine good one, don’t let him slip away. You’ve discovered a rare treasure," Gemma said with genuine warmth and enthusiasm.

"Well, ladies, since Mr. Perfect is part of the picture now, we should organize something entertaining soon. You can debut those stunning dresses we selected," Dominic suggested, though his eyes kept drifting to Gemma in a way that made his real motivation transparently obvious.

"I absolutely love that idea, boss. Gemma, you’re definitely joining us. It’s going to be incredible," Zoe said enthusiastically, not giving the woman any opportunity to politely decline.

"I would be delighted to join you. And I’m actually free soon, so the timing couldn’t be more perfect," Gemma said, her excitement genuine and infectious.

We quickly exchanged contact information and began making preliminary plans to meet during the week to properly coordinate our evening adventure. Just as we were finalizing our impromptu planning session, Zoe’s phone buzzed with a text message from Finn informing us that they were waiting at the food court, probably exhausted from their adventures.

We bid farewell to Dominic and Gemma, promising to stay in touch about our developing plans, and headed off to reunite with our boys for the remainder of our afternoon together.