Mafia Mask 58

Chapter 58 Innocent Invitation

Caleb's POV

Xavier and I escorted Heidi to JFK Airport, and I felt an unexpected hollow ache in my chest as we approached the departure gate. This woman had been my anchor through every bloody war and territorial dispute the Thorne family had faced. Years of having her steady presence as our family's guiding force, and now she was returning to her ancestral home in Sicily. The arrangement we made for her to return regularly each month felt like a small bandage on a deep wound.

"Caleb, figlio mio," Heidi said, her weathered hand gripping my arm with surprising strength, using the affectionate Italian term she'd called me since childhood. "I had lunch with Ivy and Zoe today. Little Max asked me to give you a message."

My heart jumped at the mention of his name. "What did he say, Heidi?" I couldn't hide the eagerness in my voice. That kid had wormed his way into my heart faster than I thought possible, becoming more precious to me than any territory or business deal.

"He wants you to come play with him," Heidi's eyes sparkled with the wisdom of someone who'd navigated decades of mafia politics. "And Caleb, Ivy is hurting badly. But don't you dare give up on her. In our world, the strongest bonds are forged through the greatest trials."

I pulled Heidi into a fierce embrace, breathing in her familiar scent of lavender and the old country. "I won't give up. I promise you that, on the family honor."

Heidi filled us in on her lunch, describing how Ivy looked exhausted but was trying to maintain her strength, how Zoe's new boyfriend Finn seemed like a stand-up guy with proper respect, and how Max kept asking about me with the persistence of a true Thorne. Every word about Ivy felt like a blade twisting in my gut. Days without hearing her voice, without seeing her face. I was slowly going insane.

After Heidi disappeared through the security checkpoint, Xavier and I walked back to the car in heavy silence. The weight of her absence already pressed down on me like the responsibility of running the family.

"Want to meet Max?" I asked as we got into my armored BMW.

Xavier raised an eyebrow, understanding the unspoken implications. "What are you thinking, Boss?"

"He invited me to play, didn't he?" I started the engine, already making plans. "But first, we're hitting the toy store. I want to get him something that shows he matters to our family."

Later, we stood outside Ivy's apartment building in neutral territory, and I recognized the doorman from my previous desperate visits. His face lit up when he saw me, the kind of respectful recognition that came with understanding exactly who I was in this city's hierarchy.

"Well, well! The persistent Don returns!" He grinned and leaned closer, lowering his voice with the deference of someone who knew better than to cross the Thorne family. "You still fighting for your woman?"

"Taking your advice about persistence," I replied, matching his smile while sliding a generous tip across his desk.

"Smart man. Now, I'm going to step away from this desk for a brief moment, and if someone happens to slip past while I'm checking the back office..." He winked and turned his back with practiced timing.

The apartment door opened to reveal a tall, athletic man with kind eyes and an easy smile. This had to be Finn, Zoe's mysterious perfect boyfriend who'd somehow earned approval in their tight circle.

"Can I help you gentlemen?" he asked politely, though I caught the subtle way his stance shifted, recognizing potential threat even in civilian clothes.

Before either of us could respond, I heard my name shouted with pure joy. Max came barreling across the room and launched himself into my arms, his small body colliding with mine like a heat-seeking missile. The impact nearly knocked me backward, but I caught him, feeling his thin arms wrap around my neck with desperate affection. Something deep in my chest cracked open, a warmth I'd never experienced even in my most successful territory acquisitions.

"Caleb!" Max's voice was muffled against my shoulder, but I could hear the happiness radiating from him like sunshine breaking through storm clouds.

"I'm Finn, Zoe's boyfriend," the man said, extending his hand with obvious amusement at the reunion happening in his doorway.

"The famous perfect boyfriend," Xavier grinned as we shook hands and introduced ourselves, both of us automatically assessing him with the practiced eye of men accustomed to identifying threats and allies.

Finn laughed, a slight blush coloring his cheeks. "That reputation is going to follow me forever, isn't it? Come in, please. I'll get the girls."

Inside the apartment, I set Max down and pulled out the gift I'd carefully selected from the most exclusive toy store in Manhattan. His eyes went wide as he tore open the wrapping to reveal an elaborate train set, complete with tracks, bridges, and a detailed locomotive that probably cost more than most people's monthly rent.

"This is the best present ever!" Max jumped up and down, clapping his hands with uncontainable excitement that reminded me of my own childhood before the weight of family responsibility settled on my shoulders.

"My God, Caleb," a familiar voice said behind me, laced with exasperation and something softer. "Are you trying to compete with Zoe and Finn to see who can spoil my son more?"

I turned slowly, and the sight of Ivy hit me like a physical blow. She wore a simple white sundress that made her skin glow, her dark hair falling in soft waves around her shoulders. My throat tightened, and I felt the sting of tears threatening. Without thinking, I crossed the room and pulled her into my arms, holding her against me like she might disappear if I let go, like she was more valuable than all the territory and power I commanded.

Her body was stiff for a moment, then melted into mine, and I felt her silent sob against my chest. When I finally released her, her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"I’m sorry," I said, my voice rough with emotion that had no place in the cold calculations of my usual world. "I miss you so damn much I can barely function. Heidi gave me Max’s message, so I came. I brought Xavier because we were together, and I thought..." I trailed off, suddenly unsure in a way that would have been dangerous weakness in any other context.

"Ivy, I hope you don’t mind the intrusion," Xavier said gently, his tone carrying the respect due to a woman who held such importance to his Don.

"Not at all, Xavier. Please, make yourselves comfortable," she replied, her voice carefully controlled as Max tugged her toward his new train set with the single-minded determination of a child.

Zoe appeared in the doorway, watching the scene with barely concealed amusement. Max was practically vibrating with excitement, begging us to help him set up the train in his bedroom where it could stay assembled like a permanent installation.

The men ended up on Max’s bedroom floor, following his enthusiastic but chaotic instructions for track layout. Xavier took photos while Finn and I worked on the more complex pieces, Max narrating every step with the serious intensity of someone directing a major family operation. His laughter was infectious, bright and pure, filling spaces in my heart I didn’t know were empty, making me understand for the first time why men fought wars to protect their families.

"Dinner’s ready," Ivy called from the doorway, and I looked up to find her watching us with an expression I couldn’t quite read, something between pain and longing.

They’d ordered pizza, and we ate around the coffee table while Max regaled us with elaborate stories about his train’s adventures across dangerous territories. Afterward, he climbed into my lap without invitation, continuing his tales until his voice grew softer and his eyelids heavy. When his breathing evened out, Ivy nodded toward his bedroom.

I carried his sleeping form carefully, struck by how light and trusting he felt in my arms, this perfect little person who somehow belonged to me in a way that transcended blood and DNA. After tucking him in and pressing a gentle kiss to his forehead with the reverence I’d never shown anything sacred, Ivy and I stepped into the hallway.

I couldn’t help myself. I caught her hand and pulled her against the wall, my body caging her in with the possessive intensity that drove every aspect of my life.

"Which room is yours?" I whispered against her ear, feeling her shiver under my touch. "Tell me, or I’ll have to search each one until I find it."

She pointed to the door on our right with a trembling hand. I led her inside and closed the door, then gathered her into my arms and kissed her with everything I had. All my longing, my regret, my desperate love poured into that kiss like a confession of sins. I needed her to feel what she meant to me, needed her to understand that I was dying without her more surely than any enemy bullet could kill me.

When we broke apart, both breathing hard, I pressed my forehead against hers with the gentleness I reserved for nothing else in my violent world.

"Ivy, please forgive me. Come back to me. I’m dying a little more each day without you. And Max... Christ, I miss that kid already. Please, just come home to where you belong."

Tears spilled down her cheeks like the rain that had fallen the night we first met. "Caleb, I can’t. I just can’t."

"I won’t give up," I said firmly, brushing away her tears with hands that had ordered death but touched her like she was made of precious silk. "I’ll remind you how good we were together. I’ll prove that I’m sorry, that I’ll never betray your trust again. I’ll earn your forgiveness, Ivy. However long it takes, whatever it costs."

I kissed her softly once more, then forced myself to leave the room before I completely fell apart and begged like the lovesick fool I’d become.

In the living room, I found our friends chatting and laughing, the picture of easy companionship that somehow existed in the spaces between violence and territory wars. This was what I wanted. This warmth, this connection, this family feeling. I wanted Ivy and Max in my life permanently, wanted to protect them with all the power and ruthlessness at my disposal.

"Xavier, we should go," I said, wiping my eyes discreetly while maintaining the composure expected of a family leader.

We said our goodbyes, and I promised Max I'd visit again soon, meaning it with every fiber of my being. His sleepy smile nearly undid me completely.

In the car, I told Xavier about Ivy's rejection, about how she still wouldn't forgive me despite everything I'd done to prove my devotion.

"So you're giving up?" Xavier asked with the directness of a longtime consigliere.

"Hell no. I'm more determined than ever to win her back. She's mine, and everyone in this city needs to understand that."

"Good, because she's perfect for you, Boss. But seriously, that kid Max is something special," Xavier said thoughtfully, his tone carrying implications.

"He really is," I replied, unable to keep the paternal pride from my voice.

"You know, he looks remarkably like you did at that age. Same eyes, same expressions. And the way he gravitates toward you, it's like you have some kind of blood connection," Xavier's voice carried the careful observation of someone trained to notice family resemblances and bloodline loyalties.

"I feel it too. Something I can't explain. Even if it takes Ivy forever to forgive me, I want to keep seeing Max. There's something about him that calls to every protective instinct I have," I shook my head, unable to articulate the depth of what I felt for that little boy.

"Yeah, I noticed that connection. It's like looking at a mini version of the Thorne bloodline," Xavier said quietly, his expression thoughtful as he stared out the window at our territory passing by.

"Well, we better get some rest. The family business has been suffering from our recent distractions," I said, pulling up to Xavier's secured building and trying to shake off the strange intensity of the evening.