Mafia Mask 69

Chapter 69 Sanctuary and Secrets

Ivy's POV

The black sedan pulled away from Caleb's penthouse fortress as I pressed myself against the bulletproof windows, my body still burning from our night together. Every nerve ending remembered his touch, the way he held me like I was something precious he was terrified of losing. But the hollow ache in my chest reminded me why I had to escape before he woke.

I closed my eyes against the tears threatening to fall, watching the city's dangerous streets blur past. The goodbye note I left on his silk sheets felt like a blade I had driven through my own heart. One last time, I had whispered to myself in the darkness. One final night to memorize the feel of his scarred hands claiming my skin before I disappeared from his world forever.

The driver, one of Caleb's trusted soldiers, kept checking on me through the rearview mirror, his weathered face lined with concern. He had seen too much blood and betrayal in this business to be easily fooled.

"Miss, you need me to take you somewhere safe? The boss gave strict orders about your protection."

I shook my head, not trusting my voice. How could I explain that I had just surrendered my soul to the most dangerous man in the city? That no matter how perfectly we burned together, some wounds carved by this life cut too deep to heal?

Through trembling fingers, I found my phone and called Zoe. Her voice cut through my despair like a lifeline.

"Gather the girls," I managed to whisper. "I need backup."

By the time I reached the safe house, Max was curled up on the armored sofa with Carmen, cartoons flickering across the reinforced windows. I kissed his forehead, breathing in that innocent sweetness that always anchored me to what mattered. At least I still had him. At least I had kept him safe from Caleb's world.

The scalding shower washed away Caleb's expensive cologne from my skin, but not the memory of how he growled my name against my throat like a prayer and a curse. Carmen took one look at my red-rimmed eyes when I emerged and practically pushed me toward the door.

"Go, minha filha. Your heart bleeds, and only your sisters can help stop the bleeding."

Zoe arrived like a storm of determination, already armed with plans and that fierce loyalty that had kept us alive through every nightmare since we were kids running these same deadly streets.

"What is this place?" I stared up at the imposing structure before us, all gleaming marble and old money power that screamed organized crime.

"The Venetian Club. Dad got us access through his associates. It's basically a fortress for the families and their associates. Private dining, secure meeting rooms, weapons check at the door, the works. Round-the-clock sanctuary for when our world gets too heavy." Zoe's eyes sparkled with dark mischief. "Plus the food is incredible, and after last night, I'm betting you haven't eaten."

I had to laugh despite everything. "The mafia really does live differently than the rest of us."

"Come on, the girls are waiting in our private room. And I'm starving. Emotional warfare always makes me hungry."

The club's interior took my breath away. Crystal chandeliers cast dangerous shadows across polished floors, and everywhere I looked, beautiful deadly people moved with the casual confidence of those who had never feared for their lives because everyone else feared them. The hostess, polished and professional in the way that screamed discretion bought with blood money, guided us to a private dining room where familiar faces waited.

"Zoe, this place is unreal!" Gemma jumped up to embrace us, her eyes wide as she took in the opulent surroundings that probably cost more than most people's homes.

"I know, right? And it's ours whenever we need it. I'm thinking this should be our official war room headquarters." Zoe's grin was infectious.

The thought struck me suddenly - how different this was from our old neighborhood. There, Zoe and I had been targets, too poor for protection, too proud for pity. We had only each other through those brutal years, through night classes where everyone was too exhausted and paranoid to form real bonds. But here, in this impossible dangerous world, we had somehow found our family.

"Thank you for coming," I said, my voice thick with emotion. "I don't know what I would do without you."

"Hey, that's what family is for," Nora reached across the table to squeeze my hand. "We protect our own."

"Exactly! And family means we eat, drink, and thoroughly dissect whatever gorgeous psychopath broke your heart," Ruby declared, raising her wine glass in a mock toast.

The champagne arrived just as we returned from the elaborate spread, our plates loaded with delicacies that probably cost more than most people's rent. The first sip of Dom Pérignon made everything feel slightly less catastrophic.

"Before I fall apart completely, distract me," I pleaded. "Tell me how your nights ended."

Nora's eyes lit up with wicked delight. "Oh honey, let's just say my surgeon knows his way around more than just bullet wounds. He had me handcuffed to his headboard when Zoe called. I thought he might actually cry from frustration."

"Nora!" Gemma gasped, but she was laughing.

"What? I'm just saying the man has very talented hands for removing shrapnel." Nora winked shamelessly.

"Well, my lawyer boy was the one who ended up restrained," Zoe added with mock innocence. "Silk ties from his evidence room work wonders."

"You’re all insane," Gemma groaned. "I sent Dominic home after one perfect kiss and now I’m wondering if I’ve lost my mind."

"At least you got a kiss," Ruby pouted dramatically. "I didn’t even get to sample my eye candy before everything went sideways."

"Speaking of eye candy," Gemma turned to me with knowing eyes, "the chemistry between you and Caleb could level this entire building. There’s definitely something real burning there."

Nora nodded seriously. "I’ve known Caleb for a long time, Ivy. I’ve never seen him look at anyone the way he looks at you. Like you’re the only thing standing between him and complete darkness."

My heart clenched. "That’s exactly the problem. He makes me feel like I’m his salvation when we’re alone, but then reality crashes in and reminds me of all the blood on both our hands."

"So tell us everything," Zoe said gently. "What happened in that fortress of his?"

I took a shaky breath and told them about waking up in Caleb’s arms, about the tenderness beneath his violence and the pain in his eyes that mirrored my own. I told them about the note I left, about walking away from the only man who had ever made me feel truly alive in this world of death.

"I thought I was closing that Chapter," I whispered. "But now I’m wondering if I just made the biggest mistake of my life."