Mafia Mask 82

Chapter 82 Neutral Territory

Ivy's POV

We walked several blocks through the heart of Thorne territory to reach the upscale Italian bistro that served as neutral ground for legitimate business meetings. Parker and his crew were already positioned at our reserved table in the back corner, and what a commanding presence they made. Each man looked like he could grace the cover of a crime family magazine, all sharp suits and dangerous charm. The moment they spotted us approaching, they rose with the practiced grace of men accustomed to power, their welcoming smiles masking the lethal edge that came with running the city's most exclusive underground casino.

"Ladies, you look absolutely stunning. And yes, that includes our beautiful Ruby and fierce Gemma," Brenda declared, greeting each of us with the customary kisses on both cheeks that marked him as old-world Italian nobility.

We settled into the plush leather seats and ordered from the menu of authentic Sicilian dishes. Parker's associates proved to be exceptional company, keeping us entertained with stories from the casino floor and witty observations about the legitimate business world they used as cover. Silas had us laughing at his tales of high-stakes poker games gone wrong when Parker's fingers brushed against my hand. He leaned in close, his breath warm against my ear, his voice dropping to that dangerously seductive tone that reminded me why casino patrons found him so magnetic.

"Don't turn around now, gorgeous, but those soldiers who've been circling you like vultures just walked through the door."

Brenda caught sight of Caleb, Xavier, and Dominic making their entrance, their black suits and intimidating presence immediately shifting the restaurant's atmosphere. He immediately moved closer to Zoe while Beckett mirrored the protective gesture with Ruby. Parker's voice took on an even more enticing quality as he spoke, his words carrying the subtle challenge of a rival family boss.

"So tell me, beautiful ladies, when exactly will you honor us by accepting a proper invitation from us? This lunch in neutral territory doesn't really count since you'll be rushing back to Thorne Group's fortress soon."

"Never. And you need to quit pushing," Caleb's rough voice cut through our conversation from directly behind me, dripping with the barely contained violence that made him legendary in the underworld.

"Since when do you get to speak for us?" Zoe shot back, her tone sharp as the blade she kept hidden in her purse, trained as she was in the ways of surviving mafia politics.

"I'm Ivy's man and your boyfriend's boss, Zoe. Does he even know about this little rendezvous in enemy territory?" Caleb's voice carried the fury of a Don whose authority had been challenged.

"Gentlemen, why all the hostility?" Brenda attempted to diffuse the brewing storm with the diplomatic skills that kept his casino operations running smoothly in the crossfire between families. "Come on, sit down. Let's all enjoy lunch together like civilized businessmen. Waiter, if you could..."

The waiter, clearly recognizing the dangerous undercurrent of mafia tension, swiftly arranged additional place settings, and everyone squeezed around the expanded table. Despite the superficial politeness, Parker and his crew formed an impenetrable wall between us and Caleb's soldiers. Silas and Hunter immediately pulled Dominic, Caleb, and Xavier into intense discussions about territory boundaries and casino licensing while the others continued lavishing attention on Zoe, Ruby, Nora, and me.

"Ivy, my sister mentioned you have a son. I'd really love the chance to meet the little prince," Parker said, deliberately steering our conversation toward the most intimate territory possible in mafia culture.

"What the hell is your game, Parker?" Caleb abandoned Hunter mid-sentence and whirled toward Parker with lethal intensity. "You're not getting anywhere near Max. He's just a kid, and you won't use him as leverage to get to Ivy. Don't even think about crossing that line."

"What gives you the right, Caleb?" Fury blazed through me like wildfire through a weapons cache.

"He's my son. I choose which family members get to spend time with him."

"Wait, I need clarification. Are you Max's blood father, Caleb?" Parker asked, genuine puzzlement crossing his features as he processed the family dynamics.

"Yes." "No." Caleb and I spoke in perfect, contradictory unison.

"No, Parker, he's not my son's biological father," I clarified, shooting Caleb a withering glare that could have melted steel. How dare he claim dominion over my child's life like some feudal lord.

"I might not share blood with him, but I'll be his legal father soon enough. The moment Ivy accepts my proposal and joins the Thorne family officially, I'll adopt him and he'll carry our name. So back off my boy, Parker." Caleb's voice shook with the rage of a man defending his claimed territory. Complete silence descended over the table as everyone stared at us with wide, shocked eyes, recognizing they were witnessing a power struggle between rival bosses.

"That's assuming Ivy actually agrees to marry into your family," Parker replied, maintaining his easy confidence despite the palpable threat of violence.

"Oh, she will," Caleb declared with the absolute certainty of a Don who had never been denied anything he truly wanted.

"From what I understand, you two aren't even together anymore. I don't know the details of your family business, but she seems pretty furious with your organization," Parker continued his deliberate provocation.

"We'll work out our internal affairs, don't worry about Thorne family business," Caleb said, sarcasm coating every word like poison on a blade.

"Stop it, both of you. My son will not be used as a pawn in your territorial disputes. End this power play now," I commanded, cutting through their mafia posturing with the authority of a woman who had survived in their world.

"I apologize, Ivy. I never meant to disrespect your position. I genuinely enjoy being around children," Parker said, his sincerity unmistakable despite the dangerous games being played.

"Well, should we dial down the family politics and indulge in some dessert?" Beckett suggested diplomatically. "What do you say, little fish, want some cannoli with extra cream?" he asked Ruby with a playful grin that belonged to childhood friends rather than rival soldiers.

"Hey, watch the casual attitude. Don't call her that. She has status in this family," Xavier finally snapped, his patience exhausted by the disrespect shown to his boss's circle.

"It's the familiarity of someone who's known little fish since we were running numbers as kids, sweetheart," Beckett replied, his humor intact despite the underlying threat.

"You know me so well, Beck. I want cannoli with extra cream and those little cherries," Ruby said sweetly, gazing at Beckett with deliberate affection designed to provoke. Xavier shifted uncomfortably, his hand moving closer to his concealed weapon.

"And what about you, gorgeous? What's your weakness?" Brenda asked Zoe in his most seductive voice, the one that had charmed countless casino marks.

"She loves strawberry tiramisu with fresh cream. And she's also devoted to her boyfriend, who won't appreciate learning how she spends her afternoons in neutral territory," Caleb answered before Zoe could respond.

"Your turn, Ivy. What dessert makes you surrender?" Parker asked with his most charming smile, the one that had built his casino empire.

Before I could open my mouth, a server placed a decadent slice of chocolate torta directly in front of me. Caleb seized a silver fork, captured a generous piece, and brought it to my lips with the possessive gesture of a Don marking his territory.

"My Ivy is addicted to chocolate torta," Caleb informed Parker with a triumphant smile, then took a bite himself from the same fork. "We always share dessert in the Thorne family," he added, feeding me another piece with deliberate intimacy.

Parker maintained his smile, but the warmth never reached his eyes as he recognized the claim being staked. Caleb gave me no chance to protest, continuing to alternate feeding pieces of torta to me and himself in a display of ownership.

"Do you remember the first time we shared chocolate torta?" Caleb whispered against my ear as he pushed the final piece past my lips.

"Of course I remember. We were in that blood-stained office of yours, where you screwed that backstabbing snake while claiming to love me," I said, pain and rage coursing through every word. "Girls, our lunch in neutral territory is officially over."

Zoe, Ruby, and Nora immediately stood, and we began our farewells to Parker and his crew.

"Gentlemen, thank you for such a lovely afternoon. Please excuse our hasty departure, but our boss is here and the Thorne family doesn't appreciate tardiness," Zoe said with pointed irony.

"Think nothing of it, beautiful. Having lunch with you ladies was absolutely delightful. I hope we can arrange another meeting in neutral territory soon," Brenda replied with genuine warmth.

"Parker, thank you for everything. You were all incredibly gracious to invite us into your territory."

"The pleasure was entirely mine, Ivy. But let my crew escort you back to Thorne territory. Just give us a moment to settle the bill with the famiglia, and we'll provide safe passage," Parker offered like a true gentleman of honor.

"They're already running late. They can't wait around for casino politics," Dominic grumbled with obvious displeasure at the rival family's continued interference.

We departed the restaurant, and I could hear Parker telling Caleb he had really screwed up his family relationships, prompting laughter from his crew that sounded like a challenge thrown down in the streets.

Once we left the bistro and entered Thorne territory proper, Zoe, Ruby, Nora, and I erupted into uncontrollable laughter. Ruby's plan to provoke the soldiers had exceeded even our wildest expectations.

"Oh my God, Dominic's expression when Parker offered to escort us was absolutely priceless. He looked ready to start a street war," Zoe laughed so hard tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Even better was Xavier, following Ruby around like a lost, desperate lieutenant," I gasped between fits of laughter.

"Well, I was genuinely worried about my brother though. I thought Caleb might actually execute him right there in neutral territory," Ruby said, making us laugh even harder. "Ivy, I hope you're not upset that I mentioned your son to my brother's crew."

"Not at all, Ru. I don't hide Max from the family business. He's the greatest treasure in my life," I assured her warmly.

"My brother adores children. Being a father is his biggest dream beyond expanding casino operations. But from what I can tell, Caleb has formed a special connection with Max as his chosen heir, right?" Ruby asked carefully.

"Yeah, he has," I admitted, staring at the sidewalk. "I still don't understand how those two bonded so completely. Now that Caleb and I have severed our arrangement, I don't know how to handle Max's questions. Caleb keeps showing up at our safe house to see him, and Max constantly asks about his Don."

"Don't torture yourself with family politics right now. Look, since you and Caleb have ended your agreement, and Gemma and I are both unattached, why don't we plan an evening out with my brother and his crew? It could be incredible entertainment," Ruby suggested with infectious enthusiasm.

"Hey, wait a minute. Nora and I can participate too, right?" Zoe asked eagerly.

"Absolutely. Silas and Brenda will be thrilled to host more Thorne family members," Ruby laughed.

"Hey Ru, what's the real history between you and Beckett?" I asked, curiosity getting the better of me about the complex web of family loyalties.

"We've known each other our entire lives through family connections. After I came of age, he started seeing me as more than just his friend's annoying little sister. But I don't feel anything romantic for him, even though he's undeniably handsome and incredibly protective," Ruby explained honestly.

"But now with that soldier..." Zoe teased knowingly.

"Yeah, but I want to eliminate that woman who had the audacity to sit in Xavier's lap during family meetings," Ruby said with genuine anger that spoke to the territorial nature of mafia relationships. "I've already realized nothing will develop between Beckett and me. But that soldier looks absolutely dangerous in all the right ways."

We burst into fresh laughter as we approached Thorne Group's headquarters. When we returned to our legitimate business operations, we settled back into our cover work, completely satisfied that we had taught Dominic, Caleb, and Xavier an unforgettable lesson about underestimating the women in their organization.