Mafia Mask 84

Chapter 84 Forbidden Fruit

Ivy’s POV

"Zoe, I have to ask," I said while applying mascara in the mirror of my safehouse bathroom, "how exactly did you manage to get Finn to sign off on tonight?"

"Simple strategy, Ivy. I told him it was girls night out at the neutral zone," Zoe replied, casually touching up her blood-red lipstick that matched the color of the Thorne family crest.

"And the part about Parker’s crew being there?" I pressed, catching her eye in the reflection.

"That’s just a minor detail, honey. A very minor detail," she said with a dismissive wave of her manicured hand. "Besides, I haven’t forgotten how cozy Finn’s been getting with Caleb’s inner circle lately. And I definitely haven’t forgotten about that shameless Rossi bitch practically throwing herself at him during the territory meeting."

Her tone turned sharp at the memory, and I could see the dangerous fire in her eyes that reminded me why she’d survived this long in the underworld.

"You’re absolutely ruthless, Zo," I laughed, capping my mascara.

"It’s harmless fun, Ivy. We’re just enjoying ourselves with some connected friends in neutral territory."

The armored sedan was already waiting when we stepped outside my temporary residence in the buffer zone. We arrived at the restaurant just as Gemma and Nora were getting out of their own bulletproof vehicle, their bodyguards maintaining a discreet distance.

"Ladies, we are going to absolutely destroy these men tonight," Nora announced with her trademark confidence, adjusting the concealed weapon beneath her designer dress. "We look absolutely incredible."

"Smoking hot is more like it," Zoe agreed, checking her reflection in the restaurant's bulletproof glass doors. "Ru texted that they're already inside the private dining room, so let's make our entrance."

The restaurant took my breath away. It was clearly a front for high-level underworld meetings, with crystal chandeliers casting warm light over tables draped in elegant gray linens with crisp white overlays. The chairs were upholstered in sophisticated black and white florals, and the aroma of French cuisine masked the subtle scent of expensive cigars and power. The hostess, who I recognized as one of Parker's trusted associates, led us through the main dining room toward the exclusive back section reserved for family business.

"Ivy," Parker said, rising from his seat with that devastating smile that had charmed countless enemies into lowering their guard, "you manage to become more stunning every time I see you."

He pulled out my chair with practiced elegance, his fingers brushing mine as I sat down. I noticed how his suit jacket was tailored to conceal his shoulder holster perfectly.

"Thank you, Parker. You're looking quite handsome yourself," I replied, allowing myself to appreciate how well his navy blazer fit his dangerous frame.

"I dressed specifically with you in mind," he said, leaning closer as he pushed in my chair, his voice carrying the kind of authority that commanded respect in the neutral territories.

The conversation flowed easily as we settled in, though I noticed how strategically everyone was positioned with clear sightlines to the exits. Parker was everything Caleb wasn't - lighthearted, attentive, completely present in the moment without the constant weight of family vendettas and blood feuds. His crew had already ordered drinks, and when the wine arrived, it was perfectly chosen from what I suspected was a collection acquired through less than legal means.

"So Ivy," Parker said during the main course, his green eyes studying my face with the intensity of a man who'd built an empire by reading people correctly, "this situation with Thorne - is it actually serious?"

"It's complicated," I admitted, taking a sip of wine while being careful not to let my guard down completely.

"But is it the kind of complicated that's worth fighting a war for," he pressed, "or the kind where maybe you're questioning whether you want to be caught in the crossfire anymore?"

His directness caught me off guard. In this world, such honesty could be either refreshing or deadly. I found myself being more honest than I'd intended.

"I'm completely in love with him, but it feels like there's always another family crisis, another betrayal, another reason why we can't just be together."

"Ivy, I'm not going to pretend I'm not interested in you," Parker said, his voice dropping to the tone he probably used during high-stakes negotiations. "You're beautiful, intelligent, and you've got the kind of steel spine this life requires. I know you're confused right now, but what if you just let things develop naturally between us? No pressure, no territorial disputes, just see where it goes."

My heart skipped a beat at his boldness. This was exactly the kind of attention Caleb never gave me - focused, uncomplicated, without the constant threat of assassination attempts or family coups.

"Parker, you're an amazing man, and I do enjoy spending time with you," I said carefully, knowing that in this world, words could start wars. "But my life is a battlefield right now. I won't lead you on when I don't know what's happening with Caleb."

"Fair enough," he said, that dangerous smile returning. "But we can be allies, right? Dinner dates, drinks in my casino, all the things allies do. I promise not to read too much into it. And I'll admit, I do enjoy getting under Thorne's skin."

The mischief in his expression made me laugh despite the precarious nature of our situation.

"Yes, we can be allies," I agreed.

"Perfect. And as your ally, I'm always available when you need to send Thorne a message," he said, raising his wine glass. "Or when you want to remind him what he's losing."

"Dessert, ladies?" Silas called out enthusiastically as our plates were cleared, his casual demeanor belying the fact that he was one of Parker's most trusted lieutenants.

"Always," Nora replied, and I noticed she'd been completely absorbed in conversation with him all evening. Jude would lose his mind if he could see his woman flirting in enemy territory.

"How about trying something different tonight, Ivy?" Parker suggested, his eyes twinkling with the kind of mischief that had built his reputation. "Playing it safe is overrated in our line of work."

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, intrigued by his playful tone.

"Trust me to surprise you?"

"I'm feeling brave tonight."

When the dessert arrived, I gasped. It was a work of art - golden pastry with perfectly arranged apple slices, accompanied by a scoop of vanilla ice cream that probably cost more than most people made in a week.

"It's called tarte aux pommes," Parker explained, watching my reaction with the focus of a predator. "Classic French apple tart with vanilla ice cream. I thought you might appreciate the artistry."

I took a bite and couldn't suppress a soft moan of pleasure. The apples were caramelized to perfection, the pastry buttery and light, the ice cream providing the perfect cool contrast. I closed my eyes to savor the combination of flavors, momentarily forgetting the dangerous game we were all playing.

When I opened them, Parker was staring at me with an intensity that reminded me why he was feared throughout the neutral zones.

"This is incredible," I breathed, taking another bite.

"See? Trying new things can be surprisingly rewarding," he said, his voice carrying implications that weren't lost on me. "They say the apple is the forbidden fruit, Ivy. But it tastes pretty good, doesn't it?"

Before I could respond, Silas's uncle appeared at our table, interrupting the charged moment.

"Finally, my nephew brings beautiful women to my establishment instead of just his usual collection of dangerous associates," the older man said warmly, though I noticed his eyes held the same calculating sharpness as his nephew's.

"We're selective about our company, Uncle," Silas replied with mock seriousness.

"Ladies, thank you for gracing my establishment with your presence tonight. I hope you'll return often, and don't wait for these gentlemen to escort you."

"Now," Silas announced as his uncle walked away, "it's time to showcase our musical talents at the karaoke lounge upstairs."

"I can't wait to perform," Ruby said, practically bouncing in her seat despite the weight of the situation we were all navigating.

As we prepared to leave for the next venue, I caught Parker watching me again, that same intense look in his eyes. For the first time in weeks, I felt desired, appreciated, completely seen by someone who wasn't constantly looking over his shoulder for the next threat. It was a dangerous feeling in this world, and I wasn't sure I wanted it to end.