Mafia Mask 86

Chapter 86 Playing Both Sides

Ivy's POV

The rich aroma of espresso and fresh Italian pastries drifted through Carmen's penthouse, pulling us from the restless sleep that followed our impromptu gathering. After crashing on silk cushions and designer sofas scattered throughout the living room, we looked like survivors of the most luxurious safe house meeting in syndicate history.

Max burst through the doors like a miniature tornado, weaving between the women with infectious laughter. Each of the ladies competed to shower him with attention, their genuine affection for my son filling the marble-lined space with warmth that seemed almost foreign in our world of blood and bullets. The bathroom became a battleground as we all attempted to prepare for the day, creating a symphony of chatter and playful arguments that reminded me of simpler times before I knew what it meant to live under a Don's protection.

Once Max and I were properly dressed, we gathered around the massive mahogany breakfast table where conversation flowed as freely as the freshly squeezed blood orange juice.

We were still laughing about our karaoke disasters from the previous evening when Ruby's encrypted phone vibrated against the polished wood. She glanced at the secure caller identification and activated the speaker function with a mischievous expression that spelled trouble.

"Good morning, little brother. Did you boys survive your territory planning session last night?"

"Like kings, sweetheart," Parker's voice crackled through the secured line, unusually upbeat for this early hour. "Still holed up at Ivy's fortress?"

"Guilty as charged. We're planning to maintain our position here until after lunch. What's prompted this dawn communication?"

"Well, your lovely associates completely demolished our evening operations yesterday, so my crew and I decided you ladies owe us some form of compensation," Parker said, his tone carrying the calculated charm of a seasoned casino owner.

"You boys are becoming remarkably bold with your territorial demands," Ruby shot back, raising an eyebrow at the device.

"Come on, sweetheart. Help your favorite associate out here," he pleaded, deploying the kind of persuasion that had built his gambling empire.

"What exactly are you orchestrating?"

"The Community Guild is hosting a high-stakes casino night tonight. Cards, premium liquor, influential connections. We'll provide armored transportation both directions, treat you ladies like the queens of the underworld you are." His excitement practically vibrated through the encrypted connection.

Ruby's eyes surveyed our faces, silently polling for our reactions. The unanimous approval around the table made her decision effortless.

"The girls are interested. However, we're providing our own transportation and security detail. I refuse to give any of you ideas simply because you're offering chauffeur services." Her tone carried the authority of someone who had survived too many syndicate power plays to trust easily.

"Sweetheart, you wound my professional reputation. We operate with honor. But agreed, your terms. Evening suitable for everyone?"

"Evening works perfectly. And Parker? I better not witness any of you forgetting those codes of conduct tonight. Also, you're handling all the reservations and security clearances."

"Consider it handled. Stay protected, see you tonight."

The call terminated, but Ruby's expression had transformed into something dangerously calculating. Her eyes sparkled with the kind of strategic mischief that usually preceded significant power shifts in our world.

"Ladies, how do we feel about making our other suitors work considerably harder for our attention?" Ruby's voice carried the same tone a capo might use when suggesting they expand their territory.

"What kind of warfare are you planning now? Attempting to start a syndicate conflict, or are you simply interested in building a personal army?" Zoe laughed, but her eyes showed genuine strategic curiosity.

"Nobody's initiating bloodshed, Zoe. Though if some of us are curious about expanding our influence networks, who are we to judge such ambition? The objective is having both crews competing for our favor," Ruby explained with a predator's smile.

"I'm absolutely embracing this strategy, especially the part about expanding influence networks," Nora contributed, making us all dissolve into conspiratorial laughter.

"I'm still not comprehending your master strategy here," Gemma admitted, appearing genuinely puzzled.

"Elementary tactics, Gemma. When our usual protection detail discovers our location, they'll mobilize like soldiers responding to a territory breach. So we ensure they know exactly where to locate us. Then we observe both factions compete for our allegiance. Time to make them prove their worth," Ruby outlined her scheme with obvious satisfaction.

"You realize they're going to lose their minds completely, correct?" Gemma pointed out.

"Absolutely. But can you conceive of a more effective method to teach our regular associates a lesson about taking our loyalty for granted? I certainly cannot." Ruby was practically radiating anticipation. "And we're wearing those stunning designer pieces they insisted on purchasing for us this week. The most attention-commanding ones in our wardrobes."

Since the ladies had decided to spend another night at Zoe's and my fortified apartment, we used lunch as cover for everyone to retrieve overnight essentials from their respective safe houses. This also

provided the perfect opportunity to plant the seeds of our operation, as Nora would inevitably encounter Jude and casually mention our evening plans without revealing we'd be operating within Parker's territory again.

"Mission accomplished, ladies. Did Jude take the intelligence?" I inquired the moment they returned from their tactical errands.

"He had his encrypted device activated before I even completed the briefing, speed-dialing his brotherhood network," Nora reported with obvious amusement.

"They're embarrassingly predictable in their responses," Ruby observed, rolling her eyes dramatically.

"And Finn must be climbing the walls because I transmitted a message stating I wouldn't see him today even if he arrived bearing syndicate tribute," Zoe announced with tremendous satisfaction.

We spent the afternoon entertaining Max with games and stories that kept his young mind far from the realities of our dangerous world. As evening approached, we transformed ourselves into weapons of mass distraction, each outfit carefully selected to maximize psychological impact. As the appointed hour arrived, we made our entrance into the Community Guild's private gaming floors, dressed to devastate and prepared to watch our carefully orchestrated plan unfold.

Parker and his lieutenants had secured a massive corner table in the VIP section, and their expressions lit up like Christmas morning when they spotted us approaching through the crowd. The compliments and calculated charm began before we even reached our designated seats.

"What can I procure for you beautiful ladies this evening?" Brenda asked, playing the perfect host with casino-trained precision.

"How about Sex on the Beach all around, girls?" Zoe suggested with perfectly innocent inflection.

"Excellent selection," Hunter approved while Brenda signaled for premium service.

"What’s our game tonight, ladies?" Beckett inquired, rubbing his hands together with the enthusiasm of a natural gambler.

"Blackjack. Poker requires skills we haven’t developed in syndicate strategy," Nora declared, earning knowing chuckles from around the table.

"Blackjack it is," Parker confirmed, gesturing for a private dealer to establish our gaming area.

"What are we wagering tonight? Standard chips, or something more intriguing?" Silas asked, leaning closer to Nora with obvious territorial interest.

"Control yourself," Ruby warned him sharply. "We’re playing for chips exclusively, nothing beyond that. We’re here for entertainment, not whatever you’re calculating."

Our premium cocktails arrived with perfect timing, and we raised our glasses in a toast that felt like the calm before a syndicate storm. The dealer efficiently established our private table, explained the betting parameters, and dealt our opening hand.

We had barely begun our first round when I felt a familiar hand settle possessively on my shoulder.