Mafia Mask 87

Chapter 87 Moving the Party

Ivy's POV

When I felt familiar fingers brush against my skin, electricity shot through my entire body. Caleb's touch always had this effect on me, setting every nerve on fire with the dangerous intensity that marked everything about the Thorne family. Behind us, Jude's voice cut through the private lounge's controlled atmosphere.

"Seriously, Nora? Every single time I track you women down, you're practically attached at the hip to these guys." Jude's complaint sent us into fits of laughter, though his hand never strayed far from his concealed weapon.

"Playing innocent now, are we?" Caleb's hand found my shoulder, his grip possessive and warm, the kind of territorial claim that marked a Don's woman. "You orchestrated this whole gathering, didn't you?"

"Last I checked, nobody sent you an official family summons," Zoe shot back without even glancing at Finn's increasingly dangerous expression, the kind that usually preceded bloodshed in our circles.

"Oh really? So my devoted wife just happened to mention exactly where she'd be conducting business and when, purely for pillow talk?" Jude's voice dripped with the sardonic edge that made him one of Caleb's most feared lieutenants.

"I was saving you the trouble of having your surveillance teams tail me again, but that doesn't mean I wanted you or your crew of killers here," Nora fired back, her tone sharp enough to cut through armor plating.

Parker and his neutral territory enforcers were clearly enjoying watching the Thorne family's inner circle squirm. That's when Brenda decided to play diplomat with her trademark lethal charm, the kind that had helped her survive multiple different family wars.

"Look, we're all trapped in the same web of blood and bullets now. Why don't we make the best of it? High-stakes poker, imported liquor, strategic conversations. What do you say, gentlemen?"

"If you want us to tolerate your presence in our territory, you'd better agree, because we're not abandoning our positions," Gemma declared, watching them exchange the kind of calculating glances that preceded either alliance or assassination.

The guys had no choice but to accept our terms. Sharing tables with Parker's neutral zone operators was becoming our new reality, whether the Thorne hierarchy liked it or not. They settled into the reinforced leather chairs and signaled the bartender for drinks, each movement carefully measured in the way of men accustomed to violence.

"So what's the stake tonight? Territory? Information? Or are we keeping it simple with cash?" Xavier asked, rubbing his hands together with the obvious excitement of a man who'd survived more family wars than most people had birthdays.

"Keep your mouth shut, Xavier," Dominic snapped, clearly trying to prevent another disaster like the last time weapons had been drawn over card games. But it was already too late for caution.

"Well, since we all operate in similar circles of influence, let's make this interesting," Silas suggested with the kind of sly grin that usually preceded either brilliant strategy or spectacular bloodbaths.

"Nobody's betting anything that involves us personally, Silas. Absolutely not," Zoe warned immediately, her voice carrying the deadly seriousness of someone who'd learned to navigate family politics with her life on the line.

"We could always relocate to my fortified compound for a more private game," Brenda said casually, as if she were suggesting afternoon tea rather than moving to a location specifically designed for interrogations and executions. I watched Caleb's jaw clench with territorial aggression.

"Nobody here is compromising operational security in front of outsiders," Caleb growled, his protective instincts firing on all cylinders in the way that made grown men flee for their lives.

"I’m with Caleb on this one," Parker agreed quickly, recognizing the dangerous shift in the Thorne Don’s demeanor. "Let’s stick to traditional stakes and see where the evening takes us."

We all nodded our agreement, understanding the unspoken rules of engagement. The game began with the kind of careful tension that marked all interactions between rival family interests. The atmosphere was surprisingly controlled, even pleasant by our standards. The guys were actually maintaining civility, which was practically miraculous given their usual approach to conflict resolution.

But Zoe had other plans brewing behind those calculating eyes. I caught her typing rapidly on her encrypted phone, sending messages to our secure group channel.

"This is way too civilized. They’re practically forming a peace treaty. We need to introduce some chaos into the equation."

A few minutes later, I noticed Ruby’s expression growing more mischievous by the second. Her eyes were practically sparkling with whatever scheme she’d developed, the kind of look that usually preceded either brilliant manipulation or spectacular disasters.

"What if we changed the stakes completely? Started betting favors instead of money?"

"Are you completely out of your mind?" Gemma responded instantly, her voice pitched higher than usual with genuine alarm.

"Think about it strategically. Whoever wins gets to choose someone for a private conversation," Ruby explained as if it were perfectly reasonable rather than potentially explosive.

"I appreciate where your head’s at, but we can’t execute that kind of operation here. Management would have us removed before we could draw weapons," Zoe said, though her eyes were already gleaming with dangerous possibility.

"Xavier’s got that incredible secure facility at his estate. If everyone’s willing to relocate, I bet I could convince Xavier to extend hospitality," Nora suggested, already calculating the strategic advantages.

We were all intrigued by the possibilities. Time for Nora to work her considerable influence without revealing our actual objectives to the men.

"Xavier, you should invite everyone back to your compound. This place is getting compromised with too many civilian witnesses, and the security situation is becoming unstable. Plus, you've got that amazing strategic operations room just sitting there unused."

"You know what, Nora? That's excellent tactical thinking. This venue is definitely becoming too exposed for family business," Xavier agreed readily, his mind already shifting into operational mode.

"Perfect. Let's relocate this gathering, ladies," Dominic said, standing and offering his hand to Gemma with the formal courtesy that marked old-school family traditions.

"We're only moving if the neutral zone operators come too," Zoe announced, staying firmly planted in her position of power.

"What, we have to drag those potential security risks along too?" Finn complained, his face twisting with the kind of annoyance that usually preceded violence in family disputes.

"Watch your tone, Finn. Show proper respect. They're our allies and they were here conducting legitimate business first. If we're changing locations, they're coming with us under our protection," Zoe scolded him with the authority that came from being connected to the Thorne inner circle.

"Unless they'd prefer to decline our hospitality, in which case we're maintaining our current positions," I added firmly, my tone carrying the unmistakable edge of someone who'd learned to navigate family power structures.

"Come on, Ivy," Caleb protested, clearly frustrated by the tactical complications.

"What's the problem, gentlemen? Concerned we might present too much competition for your territory?" Beckett asked with the kind of smile that was pure calculated provocation.

"Not even remotely. It would be my absolute honor to provide secure hospitality to all of you at my family estate. Shall we make our strategic withdrawal?" Xavier responded with the exaggerated politeness that marked dangerous family diplomacy.

"Alright, we accept your gracious invitation under neutral zone protocols. You're absolutely right about this location becoming tactically compromised," Parker agreed with the smooth professionalism that had kept him alive in the neutral territories.

As we prepared to evacuate the lounge, the inevitable question of secure transportation arose. Zoe immediately took control before anyone could start organizing convoys that might compromise our operational security.

"Nobody's traveling with anybody outside their established chains of command. I've got my armored vehicle, and all the women are coming with me. That's final."

"God, you're absolutely devastating when you're taking operational command like that. I'm completely captivated by a woman who knows how to handle tactical situations," Brenda said with genuine admiration, his eyes fixed on Zoe with the kind of respect reserved for proven survivors in our world.