Mafia Mask 211

Chapter 211 Fighting for Life

Ivy's POV

Roman forced Caleb toward the family office at gunpoint while tears streamed down my face. The moment they vanished from sight, the door opened quietly and Justin slipped inside, pressing his finger to his lips for silence.

"Mrs. Thorne, my deepest apologies," Justin whispered with urgency. "I have no understanding of how he breached our compound security, but we will resolve this matter. Please proceed upstairs immediately, move silently, and remain with the children. My men will stand guard. Our contacts in law enforcement are already en route."

"Caleb! Justin, Roman will execute him!"

Terror consumed every fiber of my being.

"You have my solemn oath, ma'am, that will not occur. However, I require your family secured on the upper floor. I will not fail you again." Justin steadied me as I rose from my position.

"This betrayal is not your fault, Justin," Carmen whispered shakily. She had been held at gunpoint when I arrived earlier. "Forgive me, Ivy, but he pressed the barrel to my temple as I departed my residence and concealed himself in my vehicle. I should have permitted him to end my life instead!"

"Never speak such words! You had no alternatives available. Now we must verify my children's safety upstairs. Max will be awakening soon," I said, struggling to maintain composure in my voice while keeping her calm.

Upstairs, I confirmed both children remained in peaceful slumber. I instructed Carmen to monitor them and rushed to my bedroom to change from my nightwear. I swiftly pulled on dark leggings, a black shirt, and running shoes. As I moved toward the staircase, family security blocked my path.

"Understand this clearly, I am descending whether you assist or obstruct me. If you prevent my use of these stairs, I will launch myself from that window, and you can explain to your Don how I came to be broken on the grounds below!" I threatened the guard, who reluctantly stepped aside.

Returning to the main floor, I discovered Inspector Adler and Daniel entering, both fixing me with disapproving stares.

"Ivy, return upstairs this instant!" Daniel commanded in a harsh whisper.

"Absolutely not!" I snapped in response. "I must witness my husband's survival with my own eyes."

"And you believe placing yourself in jeopardy accomplishes that goal?" Daniel demanded.

"If that is what circumstances require!" I shot back, beyond caring about their concerns. Caleb's survival was my sole priority.

"Ivy, we have established a complete perimeter around the estate. We are preparing to breach that office. Where are your children positioned?" Adler approached me directly.

"Secure in their rooms with Carmen and the secondary nanny," I replied. "And you cannot simply storm that office. He has his weapon pressed against Caleb's skull!"

"We comprehend the situation and will execute this operation safely," Adler assured me.

"I dismiss your assurances, I am accompanying your team," I declared firmly.

"Ivy, you will not be positioned anywhere near the line of fire!" Daniel's eyes blazed as if his glare could force my compliance.

"I will remain behind your officers. But I am proceeding!" I insisted, and he exhaled in frustration.

"If there exists absolutely no alternative!" Daniel conceded defeat.

We advanced slowly and silently through the corridor. Reaching the office door, we found it slightly ajar. We froze in complete silence. Roman's voice drifted from within.

"You understand, Caleb, I have always desired this estate. It is absolutely magnificent. I attempted to acquire something comparable, but could not secure property in this exclusive territory. Wealth alone proves insufficient, you require the proper family name. You privileged elites are identical, existing within your protected sphere and excluding all others." Roman's breathing grew labored. "But my strategy was flawless - you would marry Yara, and we would relocate here alongside you, and when I demolished your empire, I would establish my dominance and become master of this compound. But you destroyed my blueprint."

An officer hurled an object into the office, creating a loud crash. When Roman instinctively turned toward the distraction, Inspector Adler shouted, "Get down, Caleb!"

Two gunshots erupted and my heart pounded violently. I attempted to rush forward, but Daniel restrained me. When he finally permitted my entry into the office, I thought death would claim me. Caleb lay motionless beside the desk, while Roman writhed on the floor being restrained. Roman had sustained a leg wound. I rushed to my husband, who had been shot in the chest. Desperation overwhelmed me completely.

"Caleb, Caleb, my love, speak to me..." I sobbed, cradling his face.

"My angel, everything will be acceptable," Caleb whispered weakly.

Daniel knelt beside me, pressing cloth against Caleb's wound.

"Stay calm, brother, everything will be acceptable, but you must remain conscious, do not close your eyes. I understand this is difficult, but you need to stay awake," Daniel spoke while Caleb kept his gaze locked on mine.

The ambulance seemed to take an eternity. When paramedics arrived, they requested I step back so they could treat my husband. I stood and walked to Roman, restrained on the floor. I wanted to destroy

him, but death would be too merciful - better for him to survive and spend his existence confined in our family's dungeons because when he eventually emerged, he would be ancient and broken.

But I wanted him to suffer! I stared directly into his eyes and placed my foot on his wound, applying my full weight, making Roman scream in agony.

"You understand, Roman, if I ended your miserable existence right now, I suspect these officers would claim self-defense," I said with fury. "But I want you imprisoned in our deepest cells. I want you trapped in a freezing, filthy, reeking dungeon, with zero visitors. I want you to lose your sanity in that cage. And you can guarantee I will spend whatever resources necessary to keep you locked away for your remaining years, which I hope are numerous. And if possible, I will even compensate our most violent soldiers to visit you daily."

When I stepped back, I noticed the officers around me smiling with satisfaction. Daniel stood behind me and said,

"Your wish is our command, Ivy. We will ensure our former underboss becomes a legend of suffering, and you will not spend a single dollar on it. Now accompany Caleb. I have already contacted the family and told them to help care for the children."

"Thank you, Daniel! Thank you everyone!" I smiled at the officers and followed the stretcher to the ambulance.

During transport to the hospital, the paramedic updated me on my husband's condition, which was severe, but he was fighting and they were maintaining his stability.

At the hospital, I waited in the family room where Dominic, Jude, Xavier, Finn, Scott, and Heidi had already gathered and embraced me. Within minutes, Zoe and Ruby arrived, assuring me to remain calm because Gemma, Nora, and Lila stayed home to assist Carmen with the children. The compound was secure since security had thoroughly swept everything. Soon Dr. Taylor approached us.

"My dear, I have an update." Dr. Taylor said, grasping my hands. "Caleb's condition is critical, but he has been taken to surgery and will be operated on by my finest surgical team. The positive news is that the bullet missed his heart, but it is lodged extremely close to a major artery, making this delicate surgery. It will require considerable time. But I will keep you informed."

"Thank you, doctor," I said, feeling my legs weaken. "May I examine you?" Dr. Taylor asked.

"That is unnecessary, I am acceptable," I replied.

"Very well. You need to consume something because Caleb will need you strong to support his recovery." The doctor cautioned me and coaxed a weak smile from me.

"Do not worry, Taylor, I am already heading to the cafeteria to bring her nourishment," Zoe said and departed without waiting for my response.

"Gentlemen, Caleb has lost significant blood. We require donors," Dr. Taylor announced.

"Leave this to me, doctor. I will organize it immediately. Scott, can your people send word throughout our organization and arrange for volunteers to arrive?" Xavier said, retrieving his phone.

"Absolutely. I will handle it." Scott grabbed his phone and exited the room with Xavier.

I sat there repeating to myself that I could not lose him, I could not lose Caleb. Our family required him, he had to survive.

Soon Xavier returned to inform me that they had far exceeded the necessary number of donors, but blood donations continued as both our soldiers and Adler and Daniel's police contacts wanted to contribute.

The surgery lasted many exhausting and torturous hours. Periodically, a nurse would enter the waiting room to report that surgery was still ongoing, but he remained stable. When the doctor finally arrived with news, I froze.

"Mrs. Thorne, I am Dr. Grant Santos, I performed your husband's surgery. Everything proceeded successfully and we extracted the bullet. Your husband will remain in the ICU until he awakens, as he is still not beyond the critical period. But the prospects are the most favorable possible. He is still in recovery, and as soon as feasible, a nurse will escort you to see him."

"And how long until he awakens, doctor?" I asked anxiously.

"I cannot specify precisely. He lost substantial blood, his body requires time to recover, different individuals respond differently. But since your husband is young and healthy, I believe within the next day or so he should awaken. If he remains stable, he will be transferred to a regular room," Dr. Grant concluded with a smile, and I thanked him.

Chapter 212 Eyes Open Again

Ivy’s POV

I sat motionless beside his hospital bed in the private wing reserved for Thorne family emergencies, my fingers interlaced with Caleb’s still hand. Days had crawled by since the surgeons wheeled him out of that operating room, and the silence was suffocating me. The steady beep of monitors provided the only soundtrack to my vigil, punctuated by hushed conversations from our security detail stationed just outside the ICU.

The family doctor’s words echoed in my mind on repeat. Stable condition. All we can do is wait. But waiting felt like drowning in slow motion while knowing Roman’s network might still have sleeper agents hunting us.

Then I felt it. The slightest pressure against my palm. My heart lurched as I snapped my head up, searching his face desperately. Those steel-blue eyes I’d fallen in love with years ago flickered open, bringing light back into my shattered world.

"Caleb." His name fell from my lips like a prayer answered. "Thank God, you’re awake." My voice cracked with relief as I squeezed his hand. "Don’t move, baby. I need to get the doctor right now."

I forced myself to release his hand and hurried to our private medical team, my legs unsteady beneath me. "He’s awake," I managed to tell Dr. Grant, already turning back toward his room before he could respond.

"I was terrified I might lose you," I whispered, reclaiming my place beside him and grasping his hand like an anchor in this storm of violence that had become our lives.

Dr. Grant appeared moments later, his expression professionally warm despite knowing exactly who his patient was. "Well, our most formidable don has decided to rejoin us," he said with a careful smile before addressing Caleb directly. "You're in our secure wing because you sustained a gunshot wound during what I'm told was a family dispute. I'm Dr. Grant, and I need to run some tests to assess your condition."

I watched anxiously as the doctor checked Caleb's reflexes, tested his grip strength, and monitored his vital signs. The medical equipment surrounding us felt like a barrier between my husband and the deadly world we ruled together.

"I'm going to remove the breathing tube now," Dr. Grant explained. "You'll likely experience some throat discomfort for several days, but that's completely normal."

Caleb winced as the tube was extracted, his first independent breath in days raspy and labored. Even wounded, his presence commanded the room.

"How are you feeling?" the doctor asked once Caleb had adjusted.

"Like I got hit by enemy fire," Caleb croaked, his voice barely above a whisper. "But grateful to be breathing on my own."

"Understandable. You endured a lengthy surgical procedure to extract the bullet, and you've been unconscious for several days," Dr. Grant explained patiently. "Your body needs time to recover from the trauma."

After the doctor left us alone, Caleb's eyes found mine with an intensity that made my chest tighten. I knew that look. He wanted answers about the syndicate's status, and he wouldn't rest until he had them.

"Tell me everything," he said, his voice gaining strength. "What happened after I went down? And what about Roman?"

"You remember me being in that warehouse?" I asked, studying his face for any signs of confusion.

"Fragments. But I distinctly remember seeing you there, and it scared the hell out of me." His jaw clenched despite his weakened state.

"I couldn't sit at home knowing you were walking into a trap," I said firmly. "I wasn't going to hide while the man I love faced that bastard alone."

Caleb's expression shifted between admiration and frustration. "How long have you been camped out here?"

"I'm not neglecting our children, if that's what you're worried about," I assured him. "I come here in the mornings, go home for lunch and to care for the babies, then return in the afternoons. Xavier and the boys have been rotating security shifts, though this wing has strict visiting protocols. Actually, Xavier's planning to stay overnight with you once you're moved to a regular room."

Caleb tried to shift position and grimaced. "Roman. What happened to that piece of shit?"

A nurse entered to administer his pain medication before I could answer. I waited until she left, then leaned closer to his bed.

"One of our soldiers put a bullet in his thigh during the takedown. The injury was severe enough that the prison doctors had to amputate his leg," I explained, watching Caleb's face carefully. "He's still in the federal medical facility, but they're transferring him to maximum-security soon."

I continued, detailing how Roman had infiltrated our compound, how the investigation had unfolded, and how close we'd all come to losing everything to his betrayal. I told him about the interrogation sessions where Roman had finally confessed to everything - the embezzlement, the sabotage, his plans to destroy our family from within. The authorities had been thorough, extracting every detail about his network and remaining loyalists.

"It's finally over," Caleb said, and for the first time since this nightmare began, his smile reached his eyes.

"Baxter and Derek provided extensive testimony to the feds," I added. "Inspector Adler told me they've traced all of Roman's offshore accounts and remaining loyalists. They missed him at his safehouse because he was already stalking us. He followed us when I met with Brodie, then waited for the right moment to strike our home." My voice trembled as the memory surfaced. "I've never been so terrified."

Caleb lifted our joined hands to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss to my knuckles. "It's over now. We're safe."

During his recovery, I noticed the guilt eating away at Jude, our nanny. She blamed herself for not being more vigilant during the attack, even though she had successfully kept the children safe. To help ease the burden on our household staff and provide better security for the children, we decided to establish a small daycare center within our compound. This would allow Jude to focus on Max while other trained caregivers could help with the quadruplets under our direct supervision.

I also began transitioning to remote work where possible, coordinating our legitimate businesses from home so I could be more present during this vulnerable time. The children needed stability, and after everything we'd been through, I wanted to be closer to them.

By evening, they'd moved Caleb to a private room where the family could visit without the strict ICU limitations. Our entire crew came by to see him, and the relief on everyone's faces was palpable. Seeing Caleb alert and talking had lifted a weight from all our shoulders.

Leaving his side felt like tearing away part of myself, but I had responsibilities at home. The quadruplets needed their feedings, and Max had been struggling without his father's presence. I kissed Caleb goodbye and left him in Xavier's capable hands.

The following weeks established a routine that became my lifeline. Mornings and afternoons at the hospital, evenings at home with the children. Max video-called his father daily, but virtual connection couldn't replace physical presence for a young child missing his dad.

When Caleb was finally discharged, he still required physical therapy and careful monitoring. The hardest part for him was being unable to hold our babies while his wound healed.

Several weeks passed before the doctor cleared Caleb completely. His recovery had been textbook perfect, with no lasting complications. During this time, we'd worked tirelessly to recover the family assets Roman had stolen, and the financial bleeding had finally stopped.

Tonight, we'd successfully gotten all infants down for the night and had just finished Max's bedtime routine. After a tickling session with his father and goodnight kisses, Max had finally settled while Caleb read him "Jack and the Beanstalk."

"Finally, everyone's asleep," Caleb said as he emerged from our walk-in closet wearing nothing but boxer briefs, his perfectly sculpted physique on full display despite the healing scar. I couldn't help but laugh at his obvious intentions.

"The quadruplets are still very young infants," I reminded him with raised eyebrows.

"Daddyyy. Mommyyy." Max's voice shattered the moment as he scrambled onto our bed. Caleb pulled back, his expression so comically frustrated that I burst into laughter.

"Hey, buddy. Weren't you sleeping?" Caleb asked with remarkable patience.

"I woke up, daddy," Max announced. "I want another story."

"How about this, Max," I intervened. "We'll all close our eyes and go to sleep together."

In the darkness, surrounded by my husband and son, I finally felt peace settling over our dangerous world.

Chapter 213 Hunter Becomes Prey

Roman's POV

I have rotted in this concrete tomb for far too long now. How did my perfect scheme crumble into nothing? For many years, I had been systematically bleeding the Thorne empire dry, skimming millions from their operations without detection. But when the moment arrived to deliver the final blow and seize control of the most powerful crime family on the East Coast, everything collapsed. All because of

that insignificant woman. Ivy destroyed everything the night I eliminated Caleb's parents. He should have died alongside them in that car bomb, but he was with that naive girl instead of attending the family dinner as planned. From that cursed evening, my carefully constructed world began its descent into chaos.

Now I festered in this putrid wasteland, my body shattered and my spirit crushed beyond recognition. I could not even complete what I started with that arrogant bastard Caleb. My bullet found its mark in his shoulder, but before I could deliver the killing shot, white-hot agony exploded through my right leg. The prison doctor delivered his verdict with the emotional detachment of a coroner. The shotgun pellets had fragmented upon impact, obliterating nerves, arteries and bone beyond any hope of reconstruction. Amputation at the hip was the only option to prevent sepsis. They severed my entire leg, leaving me unable to use any prosthetic device. These rusted metal crutches became my only companions in this crippled existence.

After the amputation surgery in the prison medical wing, they dragged me from the sterile infirmary to a cell block controlled by the most violent predators in the system. The moment I displayed signs of recovery, they threw me into a cage with several apex predators who circled me like sharks sensing blood.

My first night taught me the savage hierarchy that governed this concrete jungle. When one of the inmates approached with obvious malicious intent, I made the fatal mistake of challenging his authority. I called him worthless scum, a pathetic excuse for a man who would never amount to anything beyond these walls. His response was swift and merciless. While his cellmates pinned my arms and held me down, he violated me with brutal savagery. That night marked my transformation from hunter to prey. They passed me around like currency, trading my degradation for cigarettes and protection from rival gangs. Every evening brought fresh humiliation as different inmates claimed their piece of me. For an extended period, I endured this systematic torture until my desperate pleas finally moved the warden to relocate me to a different block.

Recently I arrived in new territory. Several unfamiliar faces observed me from the shadows, but these predators maintained their distance. The absence of immediate violence felt like a blessing from above. During recreation time in the concrete yard, I positioned myself against the chain-link fence, surveying the maze of razor wire and guard towers that defined the boundaries of my world. Correctional officers watched from their elevated positions, maintaining careful distance from the inmates below.

A familiar voice cut through the ambient noise of the exercise yard. I turned to see Brodie approaching with his lieutenants Baxter and Derek flanking him like attack dogs.

Relief flooded through my chest at the sight of recognizable faces. These men possessed the muscle and connections I desperately needed to survive in this hellscape.

Derek spoke first, his voice dripping with manufactured sympathy. "Well, well, how the mighty have fallen. Missing that leg, are we? You look like death itself, a broken shadow of the man who once commanded respect."

I swallowed what remained of my pride. "The operation went sideways at the docks."

Baxter displayed a cruel smile that revealed gold dental work. "So we heard through the grapevine."

"I offered you backup muscle for that job, remember? But you insisted on playing the lone wolf against the Thorne family. Look where that arrogance got you." Derek's reminder cut deep because it contained truth. He had offered additional firepower for the kidnapping operation, but I had refused to trust anyone else with my master plan.

Brodie stepped closer, his eyes gleaming with predatory satisfaction. "The real problem, little Roman, is that you abandoned your crew when the heat got too intense. That kind of betrayal carries serious consequences in our line of work."

The exercise yard began to shift around us. Inmates converged from all directions, forming a tight circle that trapped me in the center like a gladiator arena. The guards made no move to intervene, and ice water ran through my veins as I realized what was happening.

"Come on, Brodie. I was hiding for survival purposes. You understand the logic behind that decision." My voice cracked with mounting desperation.

Brodie's tone remained conversational, almost friendly in its casual menace. "Sure, I understand the reasoning. But you could have assisted us from the shadows, could you not? I heard through reliable sources that you even threw your own daughter under the bus to save your worthless hide. What kind of father betrays his own flesh and blood?"

Rage flared in my chest despite my vulnerable position. "Watch your tone when addressing me, Brodie. You know exactly what I am capable of accomplishing."

His laughter was cold and hollow, echoing off the concrete walls. "Oh, I know precisely what kind of rat you truly are, Roman. But here is some new information for you to process. The rules have fundamentally changed since your imprisonment. You are no longer the same man who once commanded fear and respect throughout the underworld. In this place, you are just another broken victim waiting to be devoured by stronger predators."

Brodie gestured to someone positioned behind me. My crutches were kicked away with vicious force, sending me crashing face-first onto the unforgiving concrete. I caught myself with my palms, feeling the rough surface tear through skin. When I managed to look up, I saw the brothers Caleb and Fisher on either side of me, each gripping one of my crutches like medieval weapons. Their faces displayed masks of barely contained murderous rage.

Brodie crouched down until his face was level with mine. His smile was the expression of a demon savoring fresh torment.

"Like I explained, you hold no special status here whatsoever. But me?" He stood and spread his arms wide, addressing the bloodthirsty crowd. "I rule this kingdom of the damned with absolute authority. Enjoy yourselves, gentlemen."

Brodie turned his back and walked away as the mob descended upon me like rabid animals. Fists and steel-toed boots rained down from every direction. I curled into a defensive ball, desperately trying to protect my vital organs as the savage beating continued without mercy. Blood filled my mouth, and my vision blurred from the repeated impacts to my skull. Through the haze of excruciating pain, I wondered why the guards remained motionless in their towers, observing my destruction with apparent indifference.

Consciousness abandoned me on the blood-stained concrete floor of that prison yard.

When awareness returned, I found myself lying on a narrow cot in the prison medical facility. Every nerve in my body screamed in agony. My face felt like raw meat, swollen beyond recognition. Several ribs were undoubtedly fractured, each breath bringing fresh waves of torment. My remaining good leg throbbed with such intensity I wondered if they had broken bones there as well.

The prison doctor, a weathered man with dead eyes, examined me with the enthusiasm of someone inspecting spoiled meat. He spoke without looking up from his clipboard.

"Multiple contusions, possible concussion, several fractured ribs. You'll live, unfortunately. No permanent damage to vital organs."

I tried to speak but only managed a groan through my swollen lips.

"Save your strength," he said coldly. "You're going to need it where you're headed."

Hours passed before Warden Martinez entered the medical bay. He was a massive man with scarred hands and the bearing of someone accustomed to violence. His presence filled the small room with an oppressive weight.

"Mr. Morrison," he said, pulling up a chair beside my cot. "I trust you're enjoying your stay at our fine establishment?"

I struggled to form words through my damaged mouth. "The... guards... they just... watched..."

His laugh was harsh and without humor. "The guards? Son, this isn't some country club. This is a place where the strong survive and the weak become entertainment. What happened to you out there? That was justice being served."

"I need... protection..."

"Protection?" He leaned forward, his voice dropping to a whisper. "From who? Brodie runs half the criminal operations in this place. His word is law among the inmates. You crossed him on the outside, betrayed his crew, threw your own people under the bus to save yourself. Did you really think there wouldn't be consequences?"

The warden stood and straightened his uniform. "Here's what's going to happen, Morrison. You're being transferred to solitary confinement. Not for your protection, mind you, but because dead inmates create paperwork I don't want to deal with."

"How long?"

"As long as I deem necessary. Could be weeks, could be months. Depends on whether Brodie decides you've suffered enough." He moved toward the door, then paused. "Oh, and Morrison? That little empire you built on the outside? It's being carved up between your former associates as we speak. Your daughter has already switched sides, claiming she was coerced into helping you. Smart girl, that one."

The door slammed shut, leaving me alone with my pain and the crushing weight of my failures.

Two guards arrived within the hour to transport me to solitary. They loaded me onto a wheelchair since I couldn't support myself on crutches in my condition. The journey through the prison corridors felt like a funeral procession.

Solitary confinement was a concrete box barely large enough to contain a cot and toilet. A slot in the door allowed for food delivery and minimal contact with the outside world. The walls seemed to press closer with each passing hour.

As I lay on the thin mattress, staring at the ceiling, I realized the full scope of my downfall. Everything I had built, every alliance I had forged, every plan I had executed – all of it had crumbled because of one woman and my inability to eliminate one stubborn target.

The hunter had indeed become the prey.

Chapter 214 Rock Bottom Rising

Dominic's POV

I couldn't figure out how to make Gemma forgive me anymore. Weeks had dragged by like this in the suffocating atmosphere of our famiglia's compound. What kind of fool was I to fall for Beatrix's manipulative games that nearly cost us a crucial alliance with the eastern territories? But I had to find some way back to her. I couldn't just let Gemma slip away from me, not when she meant everything to our family's future and to my own survival in this blood-soaked world.

Yesterday at Thorne's fortress, seeing her again hit me like a punch to the gut. She looked absolutely stunning in that black dress that hugged her curves, more radiant than ever despite the danger that constantly surrounded us all. But the moment I walked through those heavily guarded doors, she bolted

like she'd seen a ghost. That's how it always went now. Every time our paths crossed at family gatherings or territory meetings, she'd vanish before I could even get a word out, leaving me standing there like some pathetic street soldier who'd lost his nerve.

"Dominic, snap out of it! Are you even listening to me?" Zoe's sharp voice cut through my thoughts as she snapped her fingers inches from my nose. Her tone carried that familiar edge that came from years of navigating the treacherous waters of our criminal underworld.

"Sorry, Zo. My mind was somewhere else," I muttered, straightening up in the leather chair behind my mahogany desk. The office overlooked our legitimate construction business that served as a front for the family's more lucrative ventures.

Zoe sat across from me, supposedly updating me on yesterday's sit-down with the other families that I'd sent her to handle in my place. For weeks now, I'd been completely useless at managing our operations, my concentration shot to hell while rival families circled like vultures, sensing weakness.

"Listen, Dominic, if you can't handle running your crew, then step aside. Either you get your act together and start acting like a real capo, or I'm walking away from this mess," Zoe said, leaning back with her arms crossed. She'd grown up in this life just like the rest of us, knew better than anyone that showing weakness in our world was a death sentence.

"Maybe you should just take over the territory," I said without thinking, the words tumbling out before I could stop them.

"Are you out of your mind?" Her eyes went wide with disbelief, and I could see the genuine concern beneath her anger. "You think the old men would accept a woman running things? They'd have both our heads mounted on pikes before sunset."

"I'm serious. You could handle the legitimate businesses, at least for now, while I figure out how to fix my life," I explained, voicing the thought that had been eating at me for days. The family's patience with my current state was wearing thin, and I knew it wouldn't be long before someone decided I was more liability than asset.

"What kind of pathetic excuse for a made man are you turning into?" Zoe's hands clenched in her lap as she stared me down with the intensity of someone who'd survived more than one assassination

attempt. "Get it together, Dominic. You want one day to wallow? Fine. But that's it. No more. In our world, weak men don't just lose respect—they lose their lives."

"Zo, I can't stop thinking about Gemma. It's destroying me from the inside out," I confessed, my voice barely above a whisper in case the walls had ears. Even in our own territory, paranoia was a survival skill.

"Here's the truth, Dominic. Weak men abandon everything when things get tough. And women in our families despise weak men more than they fear bullets," Zoe's voice was brutally honest, cutting through my self-pity like a blade. "If you want any chance of winning Gemma back, you need to prove you're still the soldier she fell for. Look at yourself right now. You're a disaster. Stubble covering your face like some street junkie, hair that looks like you cut it with a knife, wrinkled shirt that screams desperation, crooked tie that wouldn't pass muster at a funeral home wake. I'm starting to wonder if you even bother showering anymore. You've turned into a walking advertisement for failure, and Gemma will never respect you again if you keep this up."

"What am I supposed to do, Zo? I feel dead inside," I said, dropping my head onto the cool surface of my desk, the weight of family expectations and territorial responsibilities crushing down on me.

"You're a complete wreck. First, we're getting real food in you, because all you've been doing is drowning yourself in whiskey like some common drunk," Zoe grabbed my arm and hauled me up with surprising strength. "Come on. We're leaving now, and you're going to start remembering what it means to be a man of our family."

Minutes later, we sat at a corner table in the Italian bakery that had been paying protection money to our family for generations. The elderly owner treated us like royalty, bringing out plates of fresh antipasto, prosciutto sandwiches, cannoli still warm from the oven, plus strong espresso and fresh-squeezed blood orange juice. Zoe watched me like a hawk, making sure I actually ate while we talked about salvaging what remained of my reputation.

"So tell me, what do you do when you're not pretending to manage your crew?" Zoe asked, tearing into a piece of focaccia with practiced efficiency.

"Recently?" I asked, and she nodded grimly. "I drink myself into oblivion at whatever safe house will have me. When I'm not passed out somewhere, I'm at that dive bar near the docks that Xavier owns. But I always stop by Thorne's compound first to check on the alliance negotiations."

"Those Thorne kids are incredible, aren't they?" Zoe's whole face lit up talking about the next generation of one of our most powerful allied families. "And that boy Max is getting sharp as his old man—scary smart for someone so young."

"Max looks exactly like Caleb did at that age," I smiled for the first time in days, remembering my old friend before the weight of leadership had settled on his shoulders. "Thorne was always the sharpest guy in our crew, quick-witted and charming as hell. It wasn't until his parents got blown up in that car bombing that he became this cold, calculating boss. Then Ivy showed up and reminded him he was still human."

"They're absolutely perfect together," Zoe beamed with happiness for her friend, her expression softening in a way that was rare in our brutal world.

"You and Finn have that same magic," I pointed out, referring to her relationship with one of Xavier's most trusted soldiers. "That's what I want, Zo. That kind of deep, lasting partnership that can survive bullets and betrayals."

"But Dominic, relationships in our world don't just happen by accident. They're built through blood, sweat, and constant vigilance. Love isn't enough on its own when people are trying to kill you both. You need absolute loyalty, unshakeable trust, the willingness to die for each other without hesitation, and the strength to rule together when necessary," Zoe explained carefully, her voice taking on the wisdom of someone who'd learned these lessons the hard way. "Every relationship in our families faces life-and-death tests regularly. Territory wars, family vendettas, police raids—they all come up constantly, and you have to face them as a unit. Most importantly, you need to be with someone whose weaknesses you can protect, and whose strengths complement your own when the shooting starts."

"That makes sense," I nodded, sipping my espresso slowly and feeling the caffeine begin to clear the fog from my brain. "Zo, how do I get Gemma back?"

"First rule: don't give up yet, because in our world, giving up means accepting defeat permanently. Second rule: become the Dominic she fell for in the first place. Confident, well-groomed, commanding respect from your soldiers and fear from your enemies." Zoe placed her warm hand over mine, her touch steady and reassuring. "You see, Dominic, you have to be strong enough to protect yourself before you can protect anyone else. And in our business, protection is everything."

"I get it," I replied, staring down at the table and feeling something like hope stirring in my chest for the first time in weeks.

"Perfect, because we're both taking the rest of the day off. I'm dragging you to get a complete makeover and new wardrobe that says 'dangerous man in control' instead of 'pathetic has-been.' Tomorrow morning, you're going to sit in that office and run your territory like the capo you were born to be. After that, I'll help you win Gemma back using every dirty trick I know." Zoe spoke like a general planning a military campaign, which in our world, wasn't far from the truth.

"You'll actually help me win her back? Or will you sabotage me like you did with Thorne when he was chasing Ivy?" I asked suspiciously, remembering how she'd played both sides of that particular war.

"What are you talking about?" Zoe looked genuinely confused, though in our business, innocent expressions were often carefully practiced lies.

"When Caleb was desperately trying to get Ivy back after that whole exile disaster, you promised to help him track her down. But you were really just keeping your girlfriend informed about his every move so she could stay one step ahead," I reminded her.

"Oh right, that!" Zoe's face broke into a mischievous grin that reminded me why she'd survived this long in a world that chewed up and spat out the weak. "But this time I'm really going to help you. I believe you're truly sorry for whatever stupidity you pulled with Beatrix. Besides, if you hurt Gemma again, I'll personally ensure you wake up wearing concrete shoes at the bottom of the harbor."

"Christ, Zoe, don't even joke about that. Just thinking about it makes me want to check my life insurance policy."

"Then don't screw up again, you cheating bastard," Zoe laughed with genuine warmth, the sound carrying both affection and lethal promise.

We finished our meal and headed out to execute Zoe's transformation plan, while somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered if this time would be different, if I could really become the man Gemma deserved in this dangerous world we both called home.

Chapter 215 Private Sanctuary

Ivy’s POV

Managing the family’s financial operations from the safety of our fortified estate had its advantages, but I found myself missing the adrenaline rush of the Thorne Group offices more than I expected. Still, the thought of leaving my children unprotected for an entire day in this dangerous world made my chest tighten with maternal fear. When my encrypted tablet chimed in the afternoon, Caleb’s face filled the screen, and my heart did that familiar flutter it had been doing since our blood oath wedding.

"Hello there, my beautiful queen," he said, that devastating smile spreading across his scarred features as he propped his chin on his hand in that way that never failed to make my pulse quicken, even after all the violence we’d survived together.

"Well hello yourself, my dangerous Don. Missing me already?" I couldn’t help but tease him, loving the way his ice-blue eyes darkened slightly at my playful tone.

"Every second we’re apart leaves me restless," he replied, his voice dropping to that husky register that sent shivers down my spine. "Listen, my deadly angel, how about we disappear tonight? Just the two of us, somewhere the family can’t reach us."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. "An impromptu escape? What’s gotten into you, Mr. Thorne?"

"The overwhelming need to have my incredible wife all to myself, away from blood and bullets for a few hours," he said simply, but there was something deeper in his expression, something that made my breath catch in recognition of the predator beneath his civilized mask.

"I love the sound of that sanctuary."

"Is that a yes then, tesoro?"

"That’s absolutely a yes," I grinned at the screen, already feeling excitement building in my chest despite the ever-present danger that surrounded our lives.

"Perfect," Caleb's smile turned wickedly pleased. "I'll see you tonight, my lethal beauty."

The restaurant Caleb chose was a discrete establishment owned by one of our allied families, with private booths that cast golden shadows across his sharp features. Throughout dinner, he seemed unusually focused on me, his attention more intense than usual, as if memorizing every detail in case tomorrow brought another war to our doorstep. When the waiter approached with the dessert menu, Caleb waved him off with the authority of a man accustomed to absolute obedience.

"We'll take the chocolate cake to go, and close our account," he said smoothly, his tone carrying the subtle edge that made even allied soldiers nervous.

"Taking dessert to our safe house now?" I raised an eyebrow, intrigued by this deviation from our usual heavily guarded routine.

"It's been far too long since we shared chocolate cake properly, without the threat of assassination attempts," he said, that mischievous glint in his eyes making my stomach flutter with anticipation despite the dark reminder of our reality. He reached across the table to take my hand, his fingers tracing over my wedding ring. "I've been craving that particular memory from before the war escalated."

Instead of heading to our fortified estate, Caleb drove us to his old penthouse apartment, the one where we'd spent countless passionate nights before marriage and children made us prime targets in the syndicate world. When he pulled into the private underground garage, I stared at him in confusion, noting the additional security cameras that hadn't been there before.

"I thought this could become our private sanctuary," he explained, his voice soft but certain as his hand moved to rest on the concealed weapon at his hip, an automatic gesture. "A place that belongs only to us, somewhere we can disappear when we need to remember who we are beyond Don and Eleanor, beyond the blood on our hands."

My heart melted at his thoughtfulness, even as I appreciated the strategic wisdom of maintaining a secure secondary location. "Caleb, that's perfect," I whispered, reaching up to cup his face, feeling the familiar texture of his scars. "This place holds so many beautiful memories for us, from before the killing became our daily routine."

He climbed out and circled the car, lifting me effortlessly into his arms with the strength that had protected me through countless firefights. His mouth crashed against mine in a kiss that promised everything and more, tasting of danger and devotion. By the time we reached the apartment door, my entire body was humming with need that had nothing to do with survival instincts.

Once inside, Caleb moved behind me with predatory grace, his hands gentle as he swept my hair to one side. His lips found the sensitive spot on my neck that always made me weak, the same spot where enemy bullets had once grazed too close.

"God, Ivy, you have no idea how desperately I've missed having you like this, without checking for snipers," he murmured against my skin, making me tremble with want. "Wait right here for me, queen."

He disappeared into the kitchen, returning with our cake and a single fork, moving with the fluid efficiency of a man trained to kill. Settling onto the leather couch, he placed the dessert on the coffee table and looked at me with an expression that made my knees weak, ice-blue eyes burning with possession.

"My beautiful Eleanor, would you join your Don?" His voice had taken on that formal tone from our early days, when he was still the terrifying syndicate leader and I was just his financial consultant, and I felt heat pool low in my belly.

The moment I sat beside him, Caleb's hands were on me, exploring and claiming with the same intensity he brought to territorial conquest. His fingers found the hem of my dress, sliding it up my thighs with deliberate slowness that spoke of a man accustomed to taking what he wanted. When his knuckles brushed against my most sensitive area, I couldn't suppress the moan that escaped, a sound of surrender that would have been dangerous in any other context.

With one swift movement that showcased his lethal efficiency, he removed my underwear, leaving me exposed and aching for his touch. Then he pulled away, settling back with that infuriating smirk I both loved and hated, the expression that had intimidated countless enemies.

"You know, I was just thinking about that morning in my office," he said casually, taking a bite of cake as if he hadn't just set my entire body on fire with the skill of a man who understood power in all its forms. "When I had you remove your panties and kept you that way all day while we planned our next territorial expansion."

"Oh really?" I managed to keep my voice steady despite the fire burning through my veins like liquid violence. "And what brought that particular memory to mind, Don Thorne?"

"The fact that history is about to repeat itself, but this time without the threat of rival families interrupting," he grinned wickedly, pushing a large black shopping bag toward me with the confidence of a man who always got his way.

Inside the bag was an elegant box filled with the most exquisite lingerie I'd ever seen, pieces that cost more than most people's annual salary. Delicate lace, silk, and satin in every color imaginable, each piece more tempting than the last, fit for a mafia queen.

"Fair warning, my deadly angel," Caleb said, feeding me a bite of cake with the same hands that had strangled our enemies, "I plan to destroy every single piece, so don't get attached to them like you did to that dress after the warehouse shootout."

Two could play this dangerous game. I selected a scandalous red number that was barely more than strategically placed lace, with rhinestones catching the light and the word "LETHAL" emblazoned across the back in metallic letters, a gift clearly chosen with my reputation in mind.

Standing slowly, I moved to the coffee table directly in front of him with the predatory grace he'd taught me. His eyes tracked my every movement as I began the slow process of putting on the lingerie, making sure he saw every inch of skin as I slid the delicate fabric up my legs, each motion a reminder of the power I held over this feared syndicate leader.

When I reached my knees and stood to continue, Caleb set down his cake, his breathing becoming noticeably heavier. The bulge in his tailored pants was impossible to ignore, and I felt a surge of feminine power knowing I could affect the most dangerous man in North America so completely.

"Not so fast, tesoro," he said roughly when I moved to adjust my dress. His hand wrapped around my wrist with the same grip that had once crushed a rival's windpipe. "It's only polite to show me how my gift looks on my queen, don't you think?"

"Of course, my Don," I replied, using the same breathless tone from that day in his office when he'd first claimed me as his. I turned slowly, letting him take in every angle, every curve accentuated by the sinful red lace. His sharp intake of breath was all the approval I needed.

"Absolutely stunning," he growled, his voice rough with desire. "But I think we need to see how durable this particular piece is, don't you?"

Before I could respond, his hands were on me again, fingers tracing the delicate straps with reverent touches that quickly turned possessive. The expensive lace didn't stand a chance against his eager exploration, tearing away like tissue paper beneath his skilled hands.

"Caleb!" I gasped as cool air hit my heated skin, but there was no real protest in my voice.

"I warned you, my beautiful queen," he said with that wicked grin, already reaching for another piece from the box. "We have all night, and I intend to test every single one."

The next few hours passed in a haze of silk and satin, passionate kisses and gentle caresses, each piece of lingerie meeting the same fate as the first. By the time we collapsed together on the couch, surrounded by the remnants of his expensive gifts, I felt thoroughly claimed and completely satisfied.

"Was this your plan all along?" I asked, tracing patterns on his chest as we shared the last of our chocolate cake.

"From the moment I saw that collection," he admitted, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. "I needed to see you in each piece, needed to be the one to remove them all."

"You're insatiable, Don Thorne."

"Only when it comes to you, Eleanor Thorne," he replied, his arms tightening around me protectively. "Only ever you."

In this private sanctuary, away from the violence and chaos of our daily lives, we were simply Caleb and Ivy again - two people desperately in love, finding solace in each other's arms. Tomorrow would bring new threats, new challenges, but tonight belonged to us alone.

Chapter 216 The Hunter Returns

Gemma’s POV

I was reviewing the latest shipment manifests at my desk when Katelyn approached, her usual maternal confidence replaced by visible concern. She held an envelope in her manicured hands, the kind that had seen too many years navigating the dangerous waters of our organization’s legitimate front operations.

"Gemma, this came through our secure mail system, but it doesn’t have the proper family seal," she said, lowering her voice to barely above a whisper.

My blood turned cold as I recognized the spidery handwriting. The same feminine script that had been haunting my private mailbox for weeks before Nick was arrested. My fingers trembled as I tore open the envelope, already knowing what nightmare awaited me inside.

"He’s out, little dove. Did you think about me while I was locked away? Prison walls couldn’t keep me from you forever. Time to come home where you belong with me. I know exactly where you spend your days now. All my love, Nick."

The letter slipped from my nerveless fingers, drifting to the polished marble floor like a death sentence. Katelyn immediately retrieved it, her face hardening as she read the contents. Years of working within the Thorne organization had taught her to recognize genuine threats.

"We need to contact security immediately," she said with the authority of someone who had survived decades in this business.

"Wait, please," I managed, my voice barely audible. "Let me process this for a moment."

But rational thought was impossible. My mind spiraled back to that terrifying night when Nick held a blade to my mother’s throat, his eyes wild with obsession. The restraining order had been meaningless paper to him then, and apparently time behind bars had only intensified his fixation.

"How did he discover my workplace?" I asked, though the answer was obvious. Prison connections ran deep in our world. Someone had fed him information, possibly for the right price or favor.

Katelyn settled into the chair beside my desk, her presence offering comfort despite the terror coursing through my veins. "Sweetheart, you cannot face this alone. We must inform Caleb, Jude, and the others immediately."

"I refuse to burden them with my problems. They have enough enemies to deal with," I protested weakly.

"This isn't about burden, it's about family protection," Katelyn said firmly. "That man threatened you and your mother. He represents a direct challenge to our organization's ability to protect its own."

Before I could respond, my phone buzzed with a message from an unknown number: "Counting down the hours until we're together again, beautiful. Very soon now."

Katelyn witnessed my face drain of color and immediately stood. "I'm calling Jude right now."

Soon, Jude appeared at my workstation, his usual jovial expression replaced by the cold professionalism that made him one of Caleb's most feared enforcers. He read the letter and message, his jaw tightening with barely controlled fury.

"This changes everything," he said grimly. "We're implementing full protection protocols and bringing in our security specialists."

"But what if this is just psychological warfare? What if he's simply trying to terrorize me?" I asked desperately, grasping for any hope that this nightmare might not become reality.

"Gemma, listen carefully," Jude said, his voice carrying the deadly seriousness that came with years of eliminating threats. "Men like Nick don't make idle threats. He spent time in a cell planning this obsession. We take no chances with family."

Ivy materialized at my desk, having been alerted by my emergency message. When Jude briefed her on the situation, her face went ashen with protective fury.

"You're staying at our compound tonight," she declared immediately. "Caleb's estate has the most advanced security systems on the East Coast."

"I can't run and hide forever," I said, tears beginning to fall. "And what about my mother? What if he targets her?"

"We'll protect her as well," Jude assured me. "But right now, we need to focus on securing your safety."

My phone rang, and seeing my mother's number, I answered with shaking hands.

"Gemma, there's a man here claiming to know you," my mother's voice was tight with instinctive fear. "He says he's an old friend, but something feels wrong about him."

"Mom, listen to me very carefully," I said, my voice surprisingly steady despite my terror. "Go to Ryder's restaurant immediately. Don't pack anything, just leave through the back door right now. That man is extremely dangerous."

"Gemma, what's happening?" my mother asked, and I could hear panic creeping into her voice.

"It's Nick, Mom. He's been released from prison. Please, just get to Ryder's safe house and call me when you arrive."

After ending the call, I looked around at the concerned faces surrounding me. Jude was already coordinating with security personnel on his phone, Ivy was sending rapid-fire messages to the other wives, and Katelyn was gathering my personal belongings from the office.

"I should have reported those earlier letters to the family," I said, guilt washing over me like a tide.

"Stop that immediately," Katelyn said with authority. "You were trying to handle a personal matter without involving the organization. But now we all work together to eliminate this threat."

Xavier appeared, summoned by Ivy's emergency message. His usual easy demeanor was replaced by the cold calculation that made him Caleb's most trusted lieutenant as Ivy updated him on the situation.

"We're moving you to a secure location soon," Xavier said. "My team is already downstairs."

"What about my responsibilities here? I can't simply disappear," I protested.

"Caleb is already handling arrangements with management," Ivy assured me. "They're implementing enhanced security protocols and you'll work remotely until this situation is permanently resolved."

As we prepared to leave, my phone buzzed again. This time it was a photograph showing the front entrance of our building, taken from across the street. The accompanying message read: "I can see your workplace, dove. No hiding from destiny."

Xavier saw the message and his expression turned lethal. "Security teams are already sweeping the area, but we need to evacuate you through our private exit immediately."

The following moments became a blur of controlled urgency. Katelyn maintained her protective grip on my hand as Jude and Xavier escorted us through corridors I hadn't known existed within the building. Ivy stayed close, her own protective instincts in full force.

"Where are we going?" I asked as we entered a private elevator I had never seen before.

"Somewhere completely secure," Jude said simply. "Caleb maintains safe houses specifically for these situations."

As the elevator descended, I realized that my peaceful existence within the organization's legitimate operations was ending. Nick had found me, and he was making it clear that prison had only deepened his dangerous obsession.

"He won't simply give up," I whispered, more to myself than anyone else.

"Neither will we," Ivy said with iron determination, squeezing my hand. "You're family, Gemma. We'll ensure he never threatens you again."

Looking at these people who had become my chosen family, I felt a flicker of hope pierce through the terror. Whatever happened next, I wouldn't face it alone. But as we reached the secure garage level and I saw the additional armed protection waiting, the reality struck me: my life had just changed forever.

Nick was free, and he was hunting me.

Chapter 217: Before Everything Changed

Dominic's POV

The amber liquid in my glass caught the dim light of the Social Union as I sat with my closest allies, Caleb Thorne and Xavier Black. Our regular nights at the underground establishment had become our sacred tradition, a way to decompress from the constant vigilance required in running our respective operations within the Thorne crime family. Tonight, however, my curiosity was getting the better of me.

"Caleb, what happened with that woman I recommended for your legitimate front operation?" I leaned forward, genuinely interested in his response.

Caleb's jaw tightened slightly, his usual calculating expression growing even more rigid. As the Don of our organization, he rarely discussed personnel matters outside of official family business. "That falls under Heidi's jurisdiction, Dominic. She's conducting a video interview in the morning. From what I understand, Heidi has already vetted her background thoroughly, spoken with Kyle Miller, and seems rather impressed with her qualifications for our cover operation. The hiring seems inevitable."

His clinical tone told me he was deliberately avoiding details, which only fueled my curiosity further. In our world, every new face represented either an opportunity or a potential threat.

"Robert mentioned she's exceptionally capable at maintaining legitimate facades," I pressed, watching his reaction carefully.

"According to Heidi's assessment, yes," Caleb replied curtly, his fingers drumming against his whiskey glass with the controlled rhythm of a man accustomed to life-and-death decisions.

"Come on, didn't Heidi share any personal details? She must have seen photographs, reviewed her credentials for front work..." I persisted, knowing I was pushing his buttons.

Caleb's eyes flashed with the dangerous irritation that had made lesser men disappear permanently. "Dominic, I don't give a damn about my employees' physical appearance. Their ability to maintain our cover operations without drawing federal attention is my only concern." His voice carried the edge that suggested the topic was making him uncomfortable, though in our line of work, discomfort could prove fatal.

Xavier's laughter cut through the tension from across our table. "You're forgetting our Don lives and breathes family business, Dominic. Nothing else registers on his radar except territory and tribute."

"Actually, I did ask Heidi about her," Xavier continued with a mischievous grin that would have been charming if not for the blood permanently staining his hands.

My attention snapped to him immediately. "What did she tell you?"

"To keep my distance from the new applicant. Nothing more specific than that." Xavier's reputation with women was legendary throughout the organization, and Heidi's warning made perfect sense given how our business partnerships could be complicated by personal entanglements.

"Can we please stop analyzing my potentially future cover operation manager?" Caleb's voice rose slightly, causing both Xavier and me to laugh at his obvious discomfort.

His growing agitation was becoming more entertaining by the minute, especially considering how he'd tortured suspected informants without breaking a sweat.

"Damn it! There goes our peaceful evening," Xavier muttered, his expression souring as Yara Rossi strutted through the entrance with her usual entourage of wannabe crime family princesses.

"I warned you we should have chosen the gambling den," Caleb grumbled under his breath. "Apparently, that's the only establishment in this city where that insufferable woman can't track me down through her family's connections. I'm leaving before she sinks her claws into me. Xavier, in the

morning at the private airfield." Without another word, Caleb slipped out through the club's side exit, his bodyguards seamlessly flanking him.

"Territory expansion?" I asked Xavier, watching Caleb's tactical retreat.

"New business alliance in Ramsey territory. We'll probably be there for several days establishing new revenue streams," Xavier explained, finishing his drink while keeping one eye on potential threats.

"Damn it! Now who's going to give me information about Thorne's new cover operation assistant?" My frustration was genuine.

"Don't even consider asking Heidi," Xavier laughed, standing to leave. "She guards Don Thorne's interests like a pit bull."

"Where did my precious kitty disappear to?" Yara's voice pierced through the club's ambient noise, her shrill tone making everyone within earshot cringe.

"I had no idea you owned a cat," Xavier replied sarcastically, grabbing his jacket. "Dominic, I'm out of here. We'll continue this conversation when I return from Ramsey territory."

"Don't leave so soon, handsome," Elza purred, her voice equally grating.

"Get lost, Elza," Xavier shot back, not bothering to look at her as he headed for the exit, his hand automatically checking for his concealed weapon.

"Well, ladies, the table is yours if you want it. I'm leaving as well." I stood, ready to make my own escape before this social situation became a security liability.

"You're not going to abandon me here without giving me a little goodbye kiss, are you?" Beatrix pressed herself against me, her lips forming an exaggerated pout.

"I’m not the type for innocent kisses, Beatrix. But I could offer you something more interesting in my car," I replied with a knowing smile.

Beatrix had her appeal. She was younger than my years, tall with platinum blonde hair that cascaded down her back, brown eyes, and a slender frame. More importantly, she understood the rules of engagement in our world and was adventurous in bed. Since I was already here and needed to maintain certain appearances for territorial security, why not end the evening with some physical satisfaction?

"Let’s go then," Beatrix whispered, her smile turning predatory as she pulled me toward the exit.

The parking lot was dimly lit, perfect for what I had in mind. I always parked my armored vehicle in the back corner, specifically for occasions like this. The privacy was essential, and the reinforced steel provided additional security against potential ambushes.

"Are we going straight to your safehouse?" Beatrix asked, her excitement evident.

My car was positioned against the wall, parked in reverse for maximum tactical advantage and quick escape routes. I opened the back door and whispered against her ear, "We’re not going to my place tonight. My mother is visiting. This will have to do." I turned her around, guiding her body onto the seat with her legs hanging down. She laughed softly, clearly enjoying the dangerous spontaneity that came with my lifestyle.

I leaned over her, my voice low and commanding. "This needs to be quick. I don’t have much time before my next security check."

I pushed her dress up around her waist and slid her panties down, running my fingers along her entrance. She was already wet, responding immediately to my touch. I played with her, building her arousal while she began moaning. I freed myself from my pants, stroking my length while rubbing the head against her most sensitive areas. Her moans were becoming theatrical, too loud and obviously fake, threatening to kill my arousal entirely and potentially compromise our security.

I covered her mouth with my hand, leaning down to whisper harshly in her ear. "Stay quiet. Not a sound. We can’t attract unwanted attention in this neighborhood."

She nodded frantically, and when I removed my hand, she covered her own mouth. I stood, retrieved a condom from my pocket, and rolled it on efficiently. Gripping her waist firmly, I thrust into her completely in one powerful motion.

I moved fast and hard, chasing my release while simultaneously working her clit with my fingers. When I felt her body convulse around me, I increased my pace, the sound of our bodies connecting echoing in the confined space. I climaxed silently, my body tensing as waves of pleasure washed over me.

Afterward, I withdrew quickly, disposed of the condom, and cleaned myself with tissues from my car. I zipped up my pants and helped adjust her clothing before pulling her off the seat and kissing her cheek perfunctorily.

"I need to leave, Beatrix. Family business calls. We'll talk soon," I said, directing her back toward the club entrance. The excuse about family business was convenient and accurate – in our world, business never truly stopped.

"That was too fast," she complained, her disappointment obvious.

"I warned you it would be quick," I replied matter-of-factly. "Did you finish?"

She nodded and smiled. "Then we accomplished what we set out to do. We'll talk later." I gave her another brief kiss on the cheek and got into my car.

I knew my behavior was callous. This wasn't how a gentleman treated a woman, regardless of how promiscuous or annoying she might be. But I had been completely honest with Beatrix from the beginning, just as I was with all the women I slept with. I told her explicitly that I felt nothing for her and that we would never have a relationship, but she insisted she only wanted physical satisfaction. So we hooked up occasionally, and I never gave her false hope about anything more.

The truth was simple: I had sex but never committed. I preferred this arrangement because it meant I wasn't deceiving anyone and wasn't becoming a bastard like my father, who had betrayed our family's code of honor and brought shame upon our bloodline. After his exile from the organization, his behavior became even more despicable, transforming into an aging parasite who burned through whatever money remained to him on opportunistic young women who never stayed with him for long.

My father had become what people in our circles called a disgrace to the family name. He no longer wanted any responsibilities within the organization and had abandoned his blood obligations to pursue adventures with gold-digging women. The family council gave him an ultimatum: accept exile or face permanent consequences. He chose exile, and I made sure he received a minimal monthly allowance, enough to support a modest lifestyle far from our territory. Predictably, even the opportunistic women didn't last long once his resources dwindled.

Now I was a man in my early thirties, Capo of our money laundering operations, who deliberately avoided romantic relationships. In our world, emotional attachments were vulnerabilities that enemies could exploit. But I had no idea that everything was about to change, and that my carefully constructed walls were about to be shattered by a woman who would prove stronger than any fortress I'd ever built.

Chapter 218: Oscars Daughter

Dominic's POV

When I walked into the Zenith Systems offices Friday morning, Mia intercepted me before I could even reach my door. My secretary had been with our money laundering operation for many years and earned the right to speak her mind about family business. At nearly retirement age with a solid marriage and steel-gray hair pulled into a tight bun, she was immune to my usual charm and kept our relationship strictly professional, even when bullets were flying.

"Mr. Frost, your desk is drowning in urgent family matters and these coded messages came in this morning." She thrust a stack of encrypted communications held together with a paper clip into my hands.

"Christ, do these soldiers start working at dawn?" I muttered, already feeling the familiar weight of territorial disputes settling on my shoulders.

"They start early, but you rolled in running late, so the calls from the street piled up." Mia's tone carried just enough disapproval to make me feel like a scolded child facing the Don. "Handle your business!"

Ever since my last liaison officer Carla stormed out recently, my operations had descended into complete chaos. I desperately needed to find a replacement and get my territory back under control. Sleeping with my intelligence contact after hours on my desk had been monumentally stupid. Again.

The next morning she had sauntered in with bedroom eyes and sultry smiles, clearly expecting our arrangement to continue beyond information gathering. I had to shut that down immediately, explaining we needed to maintain operational security. She went ballistic, hurled my crystal paperweight against the wall, and quit on the spot, threatening to expose family business to rival crews.

I was seriously contemplating hiring a male coordinator like Xavier did with Jude. It would eliminate complications and maybe I could keep someone for longer periods without worrying about pillow talk reaching enemy ears. The constant cycle of vetting and training new people was killing my efficiency in managing street operations.

By mid-afternoon I had returned dozens of calls from lieutenants and cleared half my intelligence reports, but my desk still looked like a turf war had exploded across it. I had skipped lunch and my stomach was growling in protest while I reviewed territory disputes and collection numbers.

My encrypted phone buzzed with a message from Heidi thanking me for recommending Ivy Brooks, who had just been hired as Caleb's new operational coordinator. I was curious about what kind of woman could handle my workaholic friend, but I followed Xavier's advice and simply replied that I was glad our family network worked out.

Mia appeared in my doorway carrying a plate with a turkey sandwich and a glass of fresh watermelon juice. She set both down with the authority of someone who had survived many years in our world.

"Eat this right now. You have a mountain of territorial business left and I refuse to visit you in the morgue because you collapsed from hunger." Her tone brooked no argument, showing the steel that kept her alive in this business.

"Mia, you are an absolute lifesaver," I said gratefully as she headed back to her desk with a satisfied smile, knowing she was one of the few people who could order around a Capo.

The secure line rang and Mia announced it was Robert Miller. No matter how deep I was in family business, I always took Robert's calls immediately.

"Robert, you old wolf! How have you been? You still owe me that round at the private club we talked about," I greeted him warmly.

Robert had been my father's closest associate in the organization and became my mentor when I inherited my position at a young age after the old man's exile. His guidance had been the difference between success and complete destruction during those early years when I was drowning in blood money and barely out of high school.

"I'm doing excellent, son. I'll be in Port Serenity soon and we'll finally have that meeting." His voice carried its usual warmth and calculated caution. Unlike my father, Robert had always been devoted to family honor with an unshakeable moral code within our world.

"I heard Caleb hired the woman you recommended. Heidi says she's incredibly qualified and already streamlining operations," I mentioned, remembering how Robert had asked me to help place someone during our last clandestine meeting.

"Caleb won't regret that decision for a second. Ivy is driven, professional, and absolutely brilliant at managing sensitive information," Robert confirmed with obvious pride in his network placement.

"Please tell me she's completely unattractive," I said with a laugh.

"Actually quite the opposite, son. She's probably one of the most stunning women I've ever encountered." Robert chuckled heartily. "But she's definitely not your type. Or Xavier's either. She takes family business seriously."

"Robert, why didn't you mention she was gorgeous when you asked me to find her a position in our organization?" I asked, genuinely curious.

"Because I know exactly how you operate, Dominic. Ivy needs job security that lasts for extended periods without complications. And even though she would never fall for your usual tactics, she would shut you down so hard you'd never recover from the humiliation."

"So she's perfect for Caleb then. Two workaholics who live and breathe family business." I grinned at the thought. "But now I need you to find me a coordinator too, since mine just imploded spectacularly."

"Seriously? For the reason I'm imagining?" His tone suggested he already knew about my operational weakness.

"Exactly. I’m honestly considering hiring a man this time to avoid complications."

"Actually Dominic, I called to ask another favor, but this might solve both our problems. My daughter is Ivy’s closest friend, practically sisters. She decided to move there with Ivy and needs placement in our network."

"Is your daughter unattractive?" I hadn’t seen Robert’s daughter Zoe in many years, not since she was a gangly teenager with metal braces covering her teeth. Robert burst into laughter.

"She looks exactly like her mother did at that age." That information made my stomach drop because Robert’s wife was absolutely breathtaking.

"Robert, I value our partnership too much to risk destroying it with personal complications," I said carefully.

"And you won’t destroy anything! Zoe doesn’t fall for smooth-talking players like you. She’s too independent and stubborn." Robert sounded completely confident. "She has a serious boyfriend back home, some civilian she’s crazy about. According to her, he’s basically perfect. You wouldn’t stand a chance, but she’ll keep your operations organized and secure."

I leaned back in my chair, considering the proposition. Running money laundering operations for one of the most powerful crime families on the coast was overwhelming enough. Our territory had expanded exponentially since I took control, and managing the flow of dirty money was becoming unmanageable without proper support.

"Will she actually stay for extended periods without creating security risks?" I asked skeptically.

"And I promise not to interfere with your working relationship whatsoever," Robert assured me with the gravity of a blood oath.

"Have her send me her background information. You know my secure address. I’ll arrange a meeting and see if this arrangement could work for family business."

Chapter 219: Message for Mother

Gemma’s POV

Monday crawled by with excruciating slowness despite my bone-deep exhaustion from working until the boutique closed yesterday. My body screamed for rest, but my empty bank account had other plans. This retail job at Exquisite Boutique was slowly draining my soul, even with its decent commissions from the wealthy clientele who frequented our upscale location in Thorne family territory. New out of college with my business degree, I was trapped by my lack of connections and desperate need for survival money.

What made every shift unbearable was sharing workspace with Vanessa after I caught her on her knees servicing my ex-boyfriend Nick in our storage room. The image still burned in my mind like battery acid. She had turned the other girls against me, poisoning the atmosphere until every workday felt like navigating a field of hidden knives.

That cursed night haunted my every waking moment. I had only stepped out for a quick food run since Mom was away on business. Nick, that bottom-feeder street thug, sometimes lurked around closing time, and I had been naive enough to trust him completely. When I returned early, Sabrina and Lia practically tackled me, frantically trying to block my path to the back room. Their obvious terror should have been my warning.

I shoved past them and slammed on the storage room lights. There was Nick with his dirty fingers twisted in Vanessa’s bleached hair while she worked him with her mouth like some back-alley whore. My stomach nearly turned inside out. They were so lost in their pathetic betrayal that several heartbeats passed before they realized I was watching.

I began a slow, sarcastic clap. "Bravo, you two could make decent cash in the kind of videos they sell behind convenience stores." Then I walked out without another word, leaving my purse behind because I couldn’t stomach breathing the same air as them for one more second.

Now Nick and Vanessa paraded their sordid relationship like a weapon designed specifically to slice me open. Every public grope and whispered conversation felt calculated to maximize my humiliation.

I positioned myself near the entrance when two striking women paused at our window display. The sapphire dress I had arranged there this morning was already working its magic. I straightened my shoulders and approached with practiced professionalism.

"Good evening, ladies. Welcome to Exquisite Boutique. I'm Gemma. What can I help you find tonight?" My smile felt authentic for the first time in days.

"Hi Gemma, I'm Ivy and this is Zoe." The brunette radiated a warmth that immediately put me at ease, though something in her confident bearing suggested she was accustomed to getting what she wanted. "That blue dress in the window caught my attention. Would it be possible to try it on?"

"Absolutely, it just arrived this morning and it's absolutely stunning. Please, make yourselves comfortable while I get it for you." I guided them to our luxurious fitting area, already mentally selecting accessories that would complete the look flawlessly.

While Ivy changed, Zoe mentioned they were new to the neighborhood and Ivy needed something impressive for meeting her new employer. When Ivy emerged from the dressing room, even I gasped softly. The dress clung to her curves like liquid midnight, transforming her from beautiful to absolutely devastating.

"You look incredible," I whispered, meaning every syllable. The sale practically closed itself as she added matching heels and delicate undergarments to her purchase.

"We'll definitely return, Gemma. You have impeccable taste." Ivy smiled warmly as I handed over their elegantly wrapped packages along with my business card.

After they departed, I grabbed my purse and announced to my less-than-beloved coworkers that I was taking my break. Grandmother's birthday was approaching, and since neither of us could visit the other this year due to the dangerous state of the neighborhood, I needed to find the perfect gift for Mom to deliver.

The religious goods store tucked away in the mall's forgotten corner carried unique handcrafted items that couldn't be found elsewhere. A delicate door scapular with an engraved prayer immediately caught my attention. The elderly saleswoman was explaining its spiritual significance when a commanding voice cut through our conversation.

"I need something for my mother." The man barely lifted his eyes from his phone, addressing the saleswoman as if I were invisible furniture.

"She’s currently helping me," I said coolly, irritation flaring instantly at his arrogance.

"Look, I don’t have all day to wander around shopping like some people apparently do. She’s the only worker here." His tone dripped condescension as he finally glanced up from his device.

My breath caught despite my anger. He was devastatingly handsome in that dangerous way that made sensible women make foolish choices. Tall and powerfully built, with emerald eyes and golden hair that looked like it had been crafted by angels. His perfectly tailored suit probably cost more than my yearly rent. Everything about him screamed money, power, and the kind of arrogance that came from never hearing the word no.

"Excuse me?" I couldn’t mask my disbelief at his audacity.

"She helps me quickly, then returns to your little conversation. Simple logic." He spoke as if the solution was obvious to anyone possessing basic intelligence.

"Even if I had unlimited time, which you’ve rudely assumed, she was already assisting me when you strutted in here acting like you own the entire building. That’s called basic human decency." I maintained steady eye contact, refusing to be intimidated by his imposing presence or obvious wealth.

"I’m not rude, I’m efficient. You’re browsing casually while I have actual responsibilities. If she had helped me first, I’d be gone and you could resume your chat." His jaw tightened with obvious frustration at being challenged.

"Wow, you’re completely clueless about treating people with respect." I turned to the saleswoman, whose discomfort was written across her face. "I’ll take the scapular, please wrap it beautifully."

She nodded gratefully and hurried toward the register while he stared at us with incredulous fury.

"You’re seriously going to make me wait?" His voice carried a dangerous edge that probably intimidated most people into submission.

"Keep playing with your phone and stop behaving like a spoiled brat. She’ll finish with me in a moment, then you can purchase whatever guilt offering you had in mind." I threw him a triumphant look over my shoulder. "Maybe I’ll even leave a special message for your poor mother."

At the counter, a display of prayer cards gave me a wickedly petty idea. I selected one with particular care, paid for my items, and wrote a brief note on the accompanying envelope. After requesting that the saleswoman give it to the arrogant stranger after I left, I walked away feeling absolutely victorious.

He was going to lose his mind when he read what I had written for his unfortunate mother.

Chapter 220: Taking Control

Dominic’s POV

Monday morning hit like a sledgehammer, and the whiskey from last night’s territory meeting was exacting its brutal revenge. My body felt like it had been worked over by rival family enforcers, every muscle screaming in protest. The dangerous lifestyle of a Thorne family Capo was taking its toll, and I was seriously questioning whether my habit of celebrating successful money laundering operations was worth these punishing mornings.

But today brought salvation in the form of my interview with Zoe Miller, my new intelligence coordinator. After checking with my network of informants and contacts, everyone confirmed she was a force to be reckoned with in the underworld information game. Professional, efficient, and apparently capable of keeping even the most unruly family lieutenants in line.

Mia swept into my Zenith Systems office carrying a stack of laundering contracts that needed my signature. As she placed the documents on my mahogany desk, her eyes gleamed with that particular look she got when she had underground gossip to share.

"I spoke with Heidi this morning," she began, settling into the leather chair across from me like she was preparing for a detailed briefing. "She says Don Caleb finally found someone brave enough to work directly under him."

I glanced up from the financial papers, pen hovering over the first signature line. These documents would funnel another million through our legitimate businesses by week's end. "The woman Miller recommended for Thorne operations. Word through the family channels is she's extremely capable."

"Oh, she's capable alright," Mia said with a knowing smile. "But Heidi doesn't think she'll survive in that inner circle long."

That caught my attention immediately. I leaned back in my leather chair, studying Mia's expression with the sharp focus that made me one of the family's most trusted Capos. "What makes you say that?"

"Because according to Heidi, this Ivy woman is absolutely stunning. Like she walked straight out of a high-end magazine stunning."

I raised an eyebrow. In our world, beauty could be both an asset and a deadly liability. "And that's a problem because?"

"Because Xavier Black can't keep his hands to himself around beautiful women, and Don Caleb has the personality of a cactus dipped in acid," Mia said with a dramatic sigh. "Ever since his parents were eliminated in that supposed accident, Caleb's been impossible to work for. Cold, demanding, completely shut off from everyone except you and Xavier."

I couldn't argue with that assessment. Caleb had built walls around himself so high that most family associates gave up trying to climb them. He was brilliant at running our operations but terrible with people, especially employees who couldn't handle his direct communication style and violent outbursts.

"Well, from what Miller told me, she's tougher than she looks," I said, leaning forward conspiratorially. "But if Thorne drives her away with his charming personality, I'll recruit her for Zenith Systems immediately."

"You're incorrigible," Mia laughed, shaking her head. "Oh, and before I forget, your father called again from his exile. He's got another new girlfriend and wants to tell you all about how she's 'the one' this time."

I groaned audibly. My father Marcus's romantic adventures were the last thing I wanted to deal with while nursing a hangover and managing family business. The man had been banished from Thorne territory for betraying family codes, but he still felt compelled to share every detail of his pathetic new life with me.

Instead of calling him back, I grabbed my secure phone and dialed Xavier's encrypted number.

"Already missing me, little Dominic?" Xavier's voice came through with its usual cheerful energy. The man maintained perpetual optimism despite being our family's most ruthless military strategist, which sometimes made me wonder if he was actually human.

"God, yes," I said, rubbing my temples. "I've never wanted an excuse to visit the Syndicate Thorne headquarters more desperately."

"You heard about the new inner circle situation?" Xavier's voice carried the same curiosity we'd all been feeling about Caleb's latest hire.

"Put me on speaker if Jude's there. I have intelligence to share."

"Jude's right here at the hotel bar. Don Caleb's upstairs in his penthouse office, naturally."

"Of course he is," I muttered. The man lived and breathed family business. "Listen, Mia got information from our network."

"Mia's a treasure," Jude's voice joined the conversation. "What's the intelligence report?"

"Apparently Miss Ivy is magazine-cover gorgeous, but Mia thinks she won't last long with you animals in the inner circle."

Xavier laughed. "Why's that?"

"Either you'll seduce her, or Thorne will terrorize her with his charming leadership style," I said. "But I'm warning you both, if she quits, I'm recruiting her for my operations immediately."

"Right, because you won't try to charm her yourself," Jude said sarcastically. "You and Xavier are identical when it comes to beautiful women."

"Hey, I appreciate women," Xavier protested. "There's a fundamental difference between appreciation and predation."

We continued exchanging information until it was time for my video interview with Zoe Miller. I hung up and dialed her secure number, expecting a standard professional conversation about intelligence coordination.

When her face appeared on my encrypted screen, I was completely unprepared. She was absolutely gorgeous, with sharp intelligent eyes and an aura of complete confidence that radiated danger. Automatically, I flashed my most practiced charming smile.

"Wipe that ridiculous grin off your face right now, Dominic," she said with deadly calm that would make seasoned enforcers nervous. "Let me be crystal clear from the start. If you think you're going to charm or seduce me, abandon that fantasy immediately. Try it, and I'll make your life so miserable you'll beg me to terminate our arrangement. Are we understood?"

My smile vanished instantly. I stared at her through the screen, completely speechless. In my world, few people dared speak to a Capo this way.

"Excellent," she continued without missing a beat. "Now for heaven's sake, pull yourself together. You look like you've been through a turf war. Fix that tie, smooth down your hair, and clean up that disaster you call a workspace."

I found myself automatically adjusting my tie and running fingers through my hair while frantically organizing papers into neat piles. The woman had been talking to me for moments and I was already following her orders like a green recruit.

"You do realize I'm interviewing you, right?" I managed to say. "If I hire you, I'll technically be your superior in the family hierarchy."

"Wake up, Dominic," she said with a laugh that was both beautiful and terrifying. "You're going to hire me because I'm exactly what you need, and we both know it. You need someone who won't be intimidated by your money, your reputation, or your family connections. Someone who'll keep you organized and functional despite your obvious commitment to chaos."

She paused, studying me through the camera with those penetrating eyes that seemed to see straight through my Capo facade.

"In this working relationship, I'm the one in control. You'll be my well-trained, well-behaved little project. Do exactly what I tell you, and maybe I'll let you think you're in charge sometimes."

I was simultaneously insulted and impressed. "Are you always this confident, or is this a special performance for me?"

"I know exactly who I am and what I'm worth," she said firmly. "I don't need validation from Capos, boyfriends, or anyone else. I'm here to do a job, and I'm the best at what I do."

"Your father was right about you being unique," I said, making my decision. "You start tomorrow."

I gave her the necessary security clearances and operational details, ending the call and sitting back in my chair with a mixture of excitement and terror. I'd just hired someone who might actually be able to control me, and the thought was both thrilling and deeply unsettling.

After informing Mia about the new hire and sending a quick encrypted message to Miller confirming I'd hired his daughter, I decided to focus on more pleasant tasks. I had plans to see Kira, the flight attendant who'd messaged about being in town tonight.

Tomorrow would bring new challenges with my formidable new intelligence coordinator, but for now, I could enjoy my last day of complete operational chaos.