Mafia Mask 221

Chapter 221: Divine Intervention Needed

Dominic's POV

The shopping complex seemed like the most efficient way to handle my errands without attracting unwanted attention. Everything consolidated under one roof meant fewer stops, less exposure. I decided to hit the religious goods store first, wanting to complete that particular transaction before carrying around anything that might seem contradictory to a man in my line of work.

Inside, a single employee was engaged in animated conversation with a customer. I pulled out my encrypted phone and sent a quick message to my current distraction, letting her know she had something special coming her way tonight.

I approached the counter with the authority that came naturally to a Thorne family Capo. No time for pleasantries when business needed attention. The saleswoman could return to her gossip after handling my transaction. But the other customer had different ideas, insisting she deserved immediate service. The situation began escalating into a territorial dispute about who held priority.

My patience was already stretched thin from managing family operations when I glanced up from my secure phone. The sight that greeted me nearly shattered my legendary composure. This woman was absolutely devastating. Rich dark hair cascaded over her shoulders, framing features that could topple empires. Her body moved with a dangerous confidence that sent molten heat racing through my bloodstream. Those lips looked like the kind of temptation that could make a man forget his oath of loyalty.

Here I was, experiencing the most blasphemous thoughts imaginable while surrounded by crucifixes and holy relics. The irony would have been amusing if I weren't fighting for control.

Thank God for custom-tailored Italian suits and strategic tailoring. The growing tension in my pants would have been compromising otherwise. This gorgeous little spitfire was throwing my entire system into chaos, and that never happened to men in my position. I needed distance immediately.

When she collected her purchase and walked away with those hips swaying like a weapon of mass destruction, my pulse nearly flatlined entirely. Then she had the audacity to tell me to stop acting like a

spoiled child and mentioned leaving something for my mother's special occasion. Every predatory instinct screamed at me to grab those dangerous curves and demonstrate exactly what kind of man she was challenging.

Finally, the saleswoman focused her attention on me. I was still recovering from my encounter with that stunning force of nature. After some discussion, she convinced me to purchase a beautifully illustrated collector's Bible paired with an elegant silver rosary featuring delicate rose-shaped beads. Mom would appreciate both pieces for her upcoming celebration.

At checkout, she wrapped everything meticulously in black paper adorned with golden crosses. Then she handed me an envelope with obvious hesitation.

"Sir, the other customer requested I give you this." Her voice carried undertones of nervous respect.

Curiosity overcame caution as I examined the envelope. Elegant handwriting spelled out "For the tantrum-thrower's mother" across the front in flowing script.

I had to respect her nerve. Inside was a card featuring a children's prayer, with a personal message written on the back in that same graceful penmanship.

"Dear Ma'am, congratulations on your blessed occasion. However, I believe your son requires divine intervention to prevent darkness from consuming his soul. We must pray for lost children to find their way to righteousness and virtue. Please accept this humble prayer and dedicate it to your son's salvation daily."

Laughter erupted from my chest before I could suppress it. The sheer brazenness of this woman was unprecedented. Nobody had ever pulled something this bold with a Thorne family Capo. Mom would find this story absolutely priceless. I'd definitely share the card, and knowing her devout nature, she'd probably recite that prayer for me religiously. The whole situation struck me as brilliantly audacious.

While I stood there with tears streaming down my face from uncontrolled laughter, the saleswoman observed me like I'd completely lost my sanity. Too bad I'd never encounter that beautiful little warrior again.

I left the religious store and descended to the adult boutique that operated under our family's protective umbrella. After selecting several items for my evening entertainment, I departed feeling thoroughly amused by the day's unexpected developments.

The following morning, before heading to family headquarters, I stopped at the florist we kept on our payroll to arrange strategic deliveries. Red roses for my current companion, pristine white ones for my mother. While confirming delivery logistics and ensuring proper allocation to each recipient, my secured phone vibrated with Xavier's encrypted contact.

"Xavier, wait until you hear what happened to me yesterday," I answered, grinning at the memory.

"Save the story for face-to-face contact," Xavier replied, barely suppressing his amusement while Jude's chuckles echoed in the background.

"Hold on, weren't you supposed to be locked down in New Ramsey territory for the entire operation?"

"That was the established timeline. But Caleb suddenly developed creative negotiation tactics with the clients, and we're flying back today."

"What do you mean? Caleb never deviates from operational protocols."

"Exactly. But he contacted the clients unexpectedly, arranged an emergency summit last night, and somehow managed to close everything in a single session. Convinced them we could handle remaining business through secure channels. I still don't understand his methods."

"That's completely uncharacteristic for Caleb."

"Tell me about it. But Heidi mentioned to Jude that Caleb specifically requested the new assistant's dossier, and apparently they had some kind of intense confrontation yesterday."

"Are you serious, Xavier? Is our Don rushing back because of the assistant?" The thought of Caleb being affected by an employee was too entertaining to ignore.

"I think the sleeping predator just awakened," Xavier said, dissolving into laughter again.

"Well, if Ivy is anything like her friend, Caleb's about to face his greatest challenge."

"What friend?" Xavier's interest sharpened immediately.

"My new intelligence coordinator, Zoe Miller. Absolutely lethal, Xavier. And she doesn't take orders from anyone." I smiled, remembering how she'd handled her recruitment interview. "She and Ivy are practically blood sisters."

"You recruited Robert Miller's daughter? You're about to lose a valuable alliance," Xavier warned.

"Not happening. She already established the chain of command," I replied with dark amusement.

"And what chain of command would that be?"

"The one where I answer to her," I said, sending Xavier into another fit of laughter.

We continued strategizing before disconnecting. I made Xavier promise to report back about Caleb's reaction to meeting the assistant. This was going to be absolutely fascinating.

Chapter 222: Package Mix Up

Dominic's POV

I walked into the Thorne family's underground headquarters that morning expecting the best day in weeks. My new intelligence coordinator would finally start, which meant I could delegate some of the crushing surveillance and territory management that had been suffocating me. Plus, I was looking forward to hearing about Caleb's latest enforcement issues, and I had dinner plans with Kira tonight. Everything felt like it was falling into place perfectly.

The reinforced elevator chimed as it reached the secured floor of our operations center, and I stepped out expecting a normal morning. Instead, I found Zoe positioned near my office door like an armed

sentinel, leather jacket crossed over her chest, one steel-toed boot tapping an impatient rhythm against the concrete floor. Her expression could have frozen hell over.

Before I could even process what was happening, she launched herself at me like a guided missile.

"So this is what you call leadership, Dominic? Your territory reports look like a war zone hit them, and you have enough backlogged intelligence to bury a small army. This entire operation is one step away from complete chaos! If a federal raid is your endgame, just tell me now so I can save myself the headache of working here." The words tumbled out of her mouth in one continuous stream, and all I wanted to do was turn around and sprint back to the elevator.

"I absolutely adore her already!" Mia shouted from across the surveillance room, her grin so wide it practically split her face in half. She was clearly relishing every second of my torment.

Zoe had already established her dominance, treating me like a wild stallion that needed breaking. The metaphorical chains were already around my ankles.

"Exactly how late am I?" I asked, glancing at my watch and wondering if I had somehow lost half the day.

"The issue, Dominic, is that you are supposed to be the Capo of this operation. The captain stays with the ship. You should arrive first and leave last." She snapped her fingers directly in front of my nose. "Major changes are coming to this organization, Dominic, and you can count on that. Starting immediately, I am taking charge of your intelligence network, and you will follow my protocols while we rebuild this disaster. Accept it or I walk. Are we clear?"

"Absolutely, ma’am!" I could not suppress a laugh, but I immediately knew I had made a terrible mistake. Her stare could have melted steel.

"You find this amusing, Dominic? Will you still be laughing when the feds shut down this operation? Move. We have serious work to do. Your vacation from responsibility ends now."

"You do realize I control your territory assignments, correct?" Just like during her interview, I found myself questioning who actually ran this operation.

"Naturally! And I also understand that you are completely dependent on me, while I have countless other families who would kill for my services. So drop the attitude and let us begin." She stood with her hands on her hips like a general addressing troops. "Just so we are perfectly clear moving forward, I am now the voice inside your head that keeps you from making stupid decisions. That means I establish the protocols. I already told you, you are now under my coordination. Understood?" I found myself nodding like an obedient soldier.

Zoe strode toward my office and I trailed behind her like a loyal enforcer. We buried ourselves in territory reports for the entire morning. Her competence was undeniable, her tactical decisions swift and decisive. She handled every situation with the same ruthless instincts her father was famous for. At mid-morning, my secure phone rang and Zoe answered it on speaker.

"What do you need, Mia?" They had bonded instantly. These two would transform me into Caleb's twin, permanently grumpy and sworn off women.

"Zo, Dominic has two visitors waiting at the security checkpoint. One happens to be his mother," Mia responded, barely containing her amusement. "I have a feeling you will find this meeting particularly entertaining."

"Send them up immediately, Mia. Let us see what kind of trouble this fool has created now." Zoe looked at me with the expression of a predator spotting wounded prey.

Moments later, my mother and Kira burst through the reinforced office doors, Kira looking like she wanted to commit murder. Each woman carried an identical black gift bag, and my stomach dropped as I recognized the packages I had sent them.

"Good morning, sweetheart! You certainly gave mommy quite a surprise today." My mother beamed with joy, obviously thrilled with whatever she had received.

"Dominic darling, we need to have a private conversation immediately." Kira spoke without preamble, shooting daggers at Zoe with her eyes.

"Not happening, princess!" Zoe responded before I could open my mouth, and I stared at her in complete shock. "Dominic darling is swamped with family business. State your purpose quickly and then hit the road, sweetheart."

Zoe rose from her chair and approached my mother with surprising grace, introducing herself politely and guiding her to the chair across from my desk. Kira stood frozen, clearly expecting me to intervene.

"Who exactly is this lunatic, Dominic dear?" Kira pronounced my name with her distinctive accent, which normally charmed me but now sounded accusatory.

"Lunatic? That is rich coming from you." Zoe laughed coldly. "I might be particular about security protocols, but I am certainly not insane. However, I do have manners, so allow me to introduce myself properly. I am Zoe Miller, and Dominic now answers to me. I control his operations, manage his priorities, and decide who deserves his attention."

"So that explains this pathetic little gift, Dominic? This is how you choose to end things between us?" Kira’s voice shook with rage.

"I have no idea what you mean, Kira." I managed to speak for the first time since they had invaded my office.

My intelligence coordinator had left me speechless. Perhaps she was more than just particular about details, but I decided to keep that observation to myself. Her father had warned me she would keep me disciplined, but she was essentially taking over my entire existence. The strangest part was that I was allowing it and actually enjoying the experience.

"Really?" Kira’s tone dripped with sarcasm. "Then please explain this to me." She thrust the black bag toward me.

The card was attached to the outside of the bag. I was completely confused. Had Kira become upset because I purchased intimate items for her? We had experimented with similar things before, and she had enjoyed them. Zoe snatched the bag from Kira and read the card aloud, "I cannot wait to use this together."

Zoe reached into the bag and withdrew a black box, opening it with theatrical flair. Inside sat a rosary and a leather-bound Bible. She was thoroughly enjoying the chaos and asked in a mocking tone,

"Well, Dominic, attempting to save her soul? I had no idea you were so committed to missionary work."

Kira looked bewildered and turned to me for answers. Finally, the pieces clicked into place. At the flower shop, when I was preparing to attach the cards to the bags, Xavier had called about a territory dispute and completely flustered me.

"I mixed up the bags at the flower shop," I admitted, pointing to my mother's bag.

"May I examine your gift, Bee?" Zoe asked my mother sweetly, who handed over her bag without hesitation. She read the card first, "Stay happy, Mom!"

Zoe extracted a black box identical to the first and opened it slowly. Inside was an impressive collection: vibrating devices, enhancement equipment, a rose-shaped item with suction capabilities, a medium-sized accessory with decorative features, and an assortment of pleasure gels.

"Dominic! What is all of this?! You really want your mother to experience pure bliss!" Zoe erupted in laughter while I contemplated strangling her. "Bee, you are going to have the time of your life with these toys."

"Oh sweetheart, could you help me understand how these work? I researched them online, but I still have questions. I want to try them tonight," my mother said to Zoe while I stood there in complete horror.

My mother was a dignified woman. Since my father abandoned the family and was banished from our organization, she had never shown interest in another man, and that was many years ago. She was mature but still stunning with her blonde hair and green eyes, maintaining her slim figure and active lifestyle, but surely she was beyond thinking about such things. She was my mother! She was practically a saint! Or so I thought.

"It would be my absolute pleasure, Bee!" Zoe declared, flashing me a wicked smile. "Pleasure being the operative word!"

"Mom, Kira, I apologize, I switched the packages," I said to both women, attempting damage control. "I was at the flower shop when I received a call about territory issues and accidentally mixed up the bags. They look exactly the same."

"Oh Dominic, I must disagree! They are both black and similar in size, but look closely. One has a golden cross printed on it, and the other features a rose. The difference is quite obvious once you pay attention." Zoe was reveling in my misery.

I looked at Kira, who appeared ready to explode with fury. Then I glanced at my mother, who was examining the adult items with genuine fascination. What had I done?

"Ladies, let me fix this situation." I stood and grabbed the box containing the Bible and rosary, walking toward my mother. "We simply need to exchange them."

When I reached for the other box, my mother slapped my hand away sharply.

"Keep your hands to yourself. This gift belongs to me now, and I am not returning it," my mother snapped. "Give that religious stuff to your girlfriend because she obviously needs spiritual guidance. I already own a Bible, but these items are completely new to me. I am keeping the toys." My mother’s eyes sparkled as she clutched the box protectively.

I stared at my mother in disbelief and desperately sought help from Zoe, who was thoroughly entertained by the entire situation. She was already explaining the purpose of each gel to my mother in detail.

"Dominic, fix this disaster immediately!" Kira screamed, positioning herself directly in front of me while I held the box with the Bible. At that moment, I realized I was the one who needed divine intervention. "We need to talk privately, Dominic."

Zoe calmly stood and approached Kira, looking her up and down with obvious disdain before flipping her hair over her shoulders dramatically.

"Listen carefully, princess, this is not some cheap entertainment venue," Zoe gestured around the office with authority. "Monday through Friday, during operations hours, and whenever else I deem necessary,

Dominic belongs to this family. I am in complete control! And I refuse to tolerate trashy women contaminating a professional workspace. Turn around and remove yourself from these premises immediately."

"Dominic!" Kira screamed.

In that moment, I realized that Zoe would restore order to our operations, and I needed her expertise more than I needed Kira's drama. I had been incredibly careless with my family responsibilities, and that was unacceptable.

"Look, Kira, I apologize, but this is not an appropriate time for personal discussions." I tried to soften the rejection, but my words had the opposite effect.

"Never contact me again, Dominic!" Kira spun around and stormed out, radiating fury. Only then did I notice Mia standing in the doorway, practically dying from laughter.

I had become entertainment for Mia and Zoe. When I turned back around, I saw my mother holding the vibrating device, which was clearly activated, with the suction component pressed against her palm. She wore a huge smile, her eyebrows raised as she looked at Zoe with obvious approval, her cheeks flushed with excitement. Dear God, what had I unleashed?

Chapter 223: Threatening Shadows

Gemma's POV

"Oh Mom, I hate that I can't come with you to grandma's birthday celebration," I said while we shared lunch at our usual diner in the safer part of town, far from the Thorne family's collection territory where I worked.

"I understand, sweetheart. But she'll absolutely adore your gift, and work comes first. You know responsibility has always been our family priority, Gemma," my mother responded with that familiar strength in her voice that had carried us through every hardship.

My mother raised me single-handedly after my father abandoned his role. He was the kind of man who appeared sporadically, claiming he wanted to see me, but really just stirring up trouble with my mother

and bringing dangerous street connections to our door. Once I reached adulthood, I cut him out completely. I refused to waste energy on a father who only showed up to create chaos and had zero genuine interest in his daughter's survival.

"How long will you be gone?" I asked, knowing the neighborhood grew more unpredictable when I was truly alone.

"Several days. I took vacation time and plan to enjoy every moment. There's something wonderful about being pampered by your own mother again," she smiled warmly, and I couldn't help but mirror her expression. "You'll manage alright without me in that dangerous area?"

"Absolutely, Mom. I'll be fine." I hoped I sounded more confident than I felt about navigating Thorne territory solo.

"Now tell me what's happening in your world. How are things at that boutique?" My mother and I shared everything with each other. When my ex-boyfriend betrayed me, she offered to support me if I wanted to quit, but I knew I had to handle my own responsibilities, especially in our precarious financial situation.

"Same old struggles with the protection fees and territorial tensions, but nothing I can't handle," I replied. "Oh Mom, I forgot to mention something incredible. Yesterday, while shopping for grandma's gift, this completely arrogant man wandered into the religious goods store." I recounted the entire encounter, describing how this obviously wealthy and dangerous stranger had stumbled into the shop like he owned the entire district. By the time I finished describing his bewildered expression when confronted with religious artifacts, my mother was laughing until tears formed.

"I cannot believe you actually left that prayer card for his mother, Gemma. You're absolutely fearless!"

"Maybe next time he'll think twice before acting like he controls everyone around him. Though I have to admit, he's devastatingly gorgeous despite his terrible attitude and obvious connections to dangerous people!"

"Really? That attractive and intimidating?"

"He could easily grace magazine covers while probably ordering hits. Seriously Mom, this man is physically flawless with an aura of absolute menace. I've never encountered someone so strikingly handsome yet terrifying in my entire life."

"This stranger certainly made quite an impression on you."

"Unfortunately, yes. Too bad he's like a shooting star in our world - the probability of crossing paths again without ending up dead is basically nonexistent."

"But didn't you mention he was incredibly arrogant and dangerous?"

"Oh absolutely, but there was something magnetic about his authority. Not that I'd ever want to deal with whatever criminal empire he represents!" We both dissolved into nervous laughter.

After lunch ended, I hugged my mother goodbye, knowing days would pass before seeing her again. Walking toward the boutique in Thorne territory, I was almost there when Nick, my obsessive ex-boyfriend and local street dealer, intercepted my path.

"Beautiful Gemma, my darling!" Nick approached with arms extended, attempting to embrace me while clearly high on something.

"Stay back, Nick. Don't you dare call me beautiful or darling."

"Come on, Gemma. We absolutely need to have a conversation about us getting back together."

"There's nothing left to discuss between us," I said, trying to step around his blocking form while scanning for any Thorne family soldiers who might intervene.

"Gemma, you must give me another opportunity. I ended things with Vanessa, and being with that junkie was completely idiotic. Come back to me, Gemma. We shared incredible years before I started dealing seriously." Nick wore that pathetic expression that ignited fury in my chest.

"How convenient that you forgot about those years when you had your dick buried in Vanessa's throat while running drugs behind my back," I snapped with venom.

"I made a terrible mistake, alright? But my feelings for you are real, and I'm making good money now."

"Listen carefully, Nick. Enough of this nonsense! If you dumped Vanessa, that's entirely your problem. I'm never reconciling with you. Move forward with your pathetic criminal life." I attempted to pass him again, but he seized my arm roughly with hands that reeked of violence. "Release me immediately!"

"Things don't work that simply, Gemma." Nick's demeanor shifted completely, the dangerous edge of a street thug replacing his fake remorse.

During our relationship, Nick frequently displayed aggressive tendencies fueled by his involvement with local criminal elements. He never struck me directly, but his temper would explode inappropriately when deals went wrong. He'd shout and grab me forcefully during arguments about his increasingly dangerous lifestyle. My mother witnessed several incidents and despised him, feeling relieved when I finally ended things. I convinced myself it was just the stress of street life, but deep down knew he was becoming genuinely dangerous.

"Nick, let go or I'm calling for the Thorne family's protection!" I hissed through clenched teeth, and he reluctantly released his grip, knowing the local crime bosses didn't tolerate freelance harassment in their territory.

"Fine, I'm only backing off because your shift starts soon. But this conversation isn't finished, Gemma. We're going to resolve this, and my new connections won't be as patient as I am."

"Nick, we broke up recently. You cheated with Vanessa while dealing drugs. This makes absolutely no sense. Just forget I exist before you bring serious heat down on both of us!" I sighed heavily and walked away from his threatening presence.

"We're definitely going to talk, Gemma! And next time, I won't be asking nicely!" I heard him shouting behind me with genuine menace.

Entering the boutique, I discovered the usual trio of troublemakers had assembled. Vanessa, Sabrina, and Lia were clustered around the cash register, with Vanessa dramatically sobbing about her breakup.

"Are you satisfied now, Gemma?" Sabrina marched toward me with pure confrontation in her voice. "Nick dumped Vanessa because of you, claimed you are reconciling because he still loves you. Vanessa is completely heartbroken and now she's back to turning tricks."

I exhaled slowly, facing her with exhaustion. I was beyond tired of these women and their dangerous associations. Walking past them toward the stockroom, I simply stated,

"How amusing. When he was my boyfriend and I discovered that junkie with his dick in her mouth, nobody seemed concerned about my feelings or safety." I released a bitter laugh. "But you pathetic addicts can relax. I want nothing to do with this situation. I have zero intention of reconciling with that dangerous moron."

I pushed through the stockroom door and headed to the break room, storing my purse in the locker. Finding another job outside Thorne territory had become absolutely crucial for my survival.

The shift dragged on endlessly as Vanessa's crew continued their toxic drama in the main store. Every customer interaction felt strained, and I couldn't shake the feeling that Nick's threats weren't empty posturing. When closing time finally arrived, I was relieved to see Lila waiting outside, her familiar smile providing the first genuine comfort I'd felt all day.

"You look like hell, Gemma," Lila said, immediately wrapping me in a warm hug. "Rough day?"

"You have no idea." I quickly filled her in on Nick's confrontation and the ongoing drama with Vanessa's crew as we walked toward the small coffee shop that stayed open late for the night shift workers.

Lila listened intently, her expression growing more concerned with each detail. "Gemma, this is getting dangerous. Nick isn't just some heartbroken ex anymore - he's running with serious people now, and if he's making threats about his 'connections,' you need to take this seriously."

We settled into a corner booth, and Lila leaned across the table, her voice dropping to a whisper. "Listen, my mom's visiting my aunt upstate for the next while. Why don't you stay at my place until your mother gets back? It's not safe for you to be alone right now, especially with all this escalating."

I considered her offer, knowing she was right. The thought of spending nights alone in our apartment while Nick lurked around the neighborhood made my skin crawl. "Are you sure? I don't want to impose."

"Gemma, you're my best friend. Of course I'm sure. We'll figure out a better long-term solution, but for now, you need somewhere safe to stay."

As we finished our coffee and prepared to leave, Jeremiah, the security guard from the Thorne family operations, appeared at our table. His presence was both reassuring and ominous - the Thorne family's interest in neighborhood disputes was never casual.

"Ladies," Jeremiah nodded respectfully. "I couldn't help but notice some tension outside the boutique earlier. Everything alright, Gemma?"

I glanced at Lila, then back at Jeremiah. "Just some ex-boyfriend drama. Nothing I can't handle."

Jeremiah's expression remained serious. "Word of advice - if Nick comes around again making threats, you let me know immediately. The Thorne family doesn't appreciate independent operators causing problems in their territory, especially when it involves their employees' safety."

"Thank you, Jeremiah. I appreciate the concern."

"I'll walk you ladies to wherever you're headed tonight. Street's been unpredictable lately." Jeremiah's tone made it clear this wasn't a request.

As we walked toward Lila's apartment, Jeremiah maintained a careful distance behind us, his presence a subtle but effective deterrent to any unwanted attention. I caught sight of Nick lurking near an alley entrance, but when he spotted Jeremiah, he quickly melted back into the shadows.

"Seems like your ex got the message," Lila whispered, squeezing my arm.

"For tonight, at least," I replied, knowing this was far from over.

Chapter 224: Under New Management

Dominic’s POV

Tuesday lunch with my mother and Mia turned into an absolute nightmare after the weapons shipment mix-up disaster. The three women wouldn’t stop torturing me about it.

"Dominic, I have something else for you." I pulled the business card from that gorgeous stranger at the underground arms boutique out of my jacket and handed it to my mother.

"What’s this supposed to be?" Mom examined the card with curiosity.

I explained the whole humiliating encounter at the black market shop, and all three women exploded into giggles like teenagers, practically falling over themselves with laughter. My mother studied the card before passing it to Zoe and Mia. Still wiping tears from her eyes, she delivered her verdict.

"Dominic Frost, I raised you to be a gentleman! Your behavior at that establishment was completely unacceptable. You’re going back there to apologize to that poor dealer, and if you ever cross paths with that young lady again, you’ll apologize to her too."

"Mom, I’m absolutely not going back to that black market shop to grovel," I shot back.

"Oh yes, you most certainly are! You’re better than this childish behavior, Dominic. You’re going back because I didn’t raise some arrogant, entitled mobster!" Her tone brooked no argument, and I knew I was defeated.

"Fine, Mom, you’re right," I conceded, taking her hand. "Now can you please return that tactical case I accidentally sent you?"

"Absolutely not!" She fired back without hesitation. "It's honestly the most thoughtful gift you've ever given me. I'm keeping it, and I plan to put it to excellent use for home defense."

"Mom..." I stared at her in horror.

"What's your problem, Dominic? Just because she's your mother means you think she doesn't need protection? Or maybe you think her age disqualifies her from owning proper security equipment? That's pure ageism!" Zoe called me out mercilessly.

"Zoe, that's my mother!" I protested weakly.

"So what? You think the family business doesn't affect her too?" Zoe mocked.

"You're acting like a child, Dominic," Mia chimed in. "My husband and I love having proper security measures, and when he's on family business, I handle my own protection."

"Mia, that's way too much information." I buried my face in my hands while all three burst into fresh peals of laughter.

Back at the Zenith Systems offices, Zoe simply labeled me sexist and said I should be ashamed for not recognizing that my mother was a vibrant, beautiful woman who had every right to own tactical equipment and even have a bodyguard. My innocence lay in ruins.

However, I had to admit one truth: Zoe was completely revolutionizing my operations. She decided to call me every morning to drag me out of bed and guarantee my arrival at the office by eight sharp. For several solid days, we'd been maintaining a brutal pace, working late into the evenings on family business.

Wednesday brought office lunch, and Zoe regaled me with stories about her boyfriend, whom she called her prince. She was clearly the dominant force in that relationship; the poor guy probably followed her around like a lovesick puppy. I found myself curious to meet him. Zoe mentioned her friend working with Caleb, but refused to show me any photos.

Early that evening, Xavier called. He'd already mentioned that Caleb was falling hard for his right hand, who was apparently stunning and keeping our Don completely distracted.

"Xavier, how did your day at Thorne Syndicate go?" I answered while Zoe sat across from me, glancing up from her work.

"Man, it was incredible! And the night's just getting started. We're taking Heidi and Ivy to dinner. Come join us, bring your intelligence officer." Xavier's enthusiasm was infectious.

"That sounds perfect, I'd love to have dinner with you all..." I was mid-sentence when I heard Zoe clear her throat pointedly.

"We still have mountains of laundering reports today, Dominic!" Zoe warned. I rubbed the back of my neck and decided not to push my luck.

"You know what, Xavier, I can't make it. My handler hasn't given me permission to leave yet." Xavier's laughter exploded through the phone.

"Your handler or your warden?" Xavier was dying with laughter. "I'm dying to meet Zoe! Finally, someone's got you on a leash."

"Yeah, unfortunately for me. And I'm not even sleeping with her." I commented while watching Zoe, who shot me a dark look.

"Not even in your most delusional fantasies, Dominic." Zoe replied, and Xavier's laughter intensified because he'd caught every word.

I said goodbye and hung up. I studied my intelligence liaison, who had her eyes glued to her tablet screen, and decided to test the waters.

"Zoe, exactly how long are you planning to keep me on this tight leash?"

"For the rest of your natural life, Dominic! For the rest of your life!" She didn't even lift her eyes from the screen.

Thursday brought our meeting at Thorne Syndicate. Beyond friendship, we maintained business partnerships, so regular meetings were essential. Usually our meetings happened over lunch or dinner, often at the Social Union bar, but Zoe had demolished that tradition and scheduled the meeting at Caleb's legitimate front company.

At least I'd escape my office for a while; I was starting to resemble a vampire from being trapped indoors constantly. And I'd finally meet this mysterious Ivy, although Zoe had warned me countless times not to get any ideas about her. The meeting was scheduled for after lunch, so I at least convinced my deputy to eat at a restaurant en route.

At Caleb's company, we were escorted directly to the conference room. When Ivy walked in, I was absolutely speechless - she was breathtaking! She and Zoe embraced warmly before Zoe introduced us.

"Zoe, I'm going to have serious words with your father. When he recommended Ms. Ivy for this position at Thorne's, he failed to mention she was a goddess!"

Ivy flashed me a charming, slightly flustered smile and shook my hand. I hadn't even registered Caleb's entrance until his voice boomed like thunder.

"Dominic, keep your hands and eyes off my assistant. Miss Brooks isn't like those women you typically pursue!"

God, now everyone was critiquing my dating choices. But I detected definite possessiveness in Caleb's tone. I found it absolutely hilarious; my friend had never displayed such behavior over any woman. I looked from Ivy to Caleb with amusement. I could see he was completely devoted to her. I couldn't resist the opportunity to torment him.

"Well, well, the untouchable Caleb Thorne is showing jealousy over you, Miss Brooks! How fascinating! But, my dear friend Caleb, I'm not sure I can resist staying away from such beauty."

"But you'd better stay away, Dominic." Xavier entered saying. "You wouldn't want to provoke our Don's wrath." He smiled mockingly, relishing Caleb's predicament. "But who's this lovely lady with you, Dominic?"

"Don't even attempt it, Xavier. This is Zoe Miller, and besides being Robert's daughter, she has a boyfriend who looks like he stepped from a fairy tale. In summary, untouchable like Miss Brooks, no wonder they're best friends," I answered, rolling my eyes.

"Oh, what a tragedy! But you two could introduce me to a friend as beautiful as yourselves, right? I'm feeling incredibly lonely..." Xavier adopted a pitiful expression that made everyone laugh.

"Good God, Xavier, you have absolutely no shame!" Caleb said in exasperation.

"Unfortunately, we don't have another super attractive and sweet friend like us to introduce you to, Mr. Black, sorry," Zoe replied laughing.

Caleb rolled his eyes and ordered us to control our hormones. As if he wasn't losing his mind over his stunning assistant. It would be tremendously entertaining watching my friend, the most serious and composed of our trio, maintain his unshakeable devotion.

After the meeting, Zoe and I returned to the office, or rather my prison cell. It was beginning to feel like solitary confinement. We were working on money laundering reports when Zoe checked her phone and suddenly addressed me.

"It's your lucky day, Dominic!" She looked up at me. "I have to leave. So I'm releasing you early."

"Wow, what miracle is this, my handler showing mercy?" I joked, but noticed her concern. "What's wrong, Zoe? Any problems?"

"I have to go. Max has a fever, and Ivy is taking him to the doctor," Zoe said, standing and collecting her belongings.

"Who's Max?"

"Oh, here we go. I'll keep this brief because I'm pressed for time. Max is Ivy's son and my godson. He's still a toddler. Ivy isn't married, so the father isn't involved in Max's life, doesn't even know Max exists."

"I understand. Want me to drive you?" I thought it wise not to probe further into family matters.

"No need, I have my armored car." When she reached the door, she turned back. "I'm releasing you early today, but I don't want you arriving late or hungover tomorrow."

I smiled at how Zoe was already controlling me completely. This was actually beneficial for me. I'd been somewhat careless with the family operations, and I knew I was wrong.

Chapter 225: Second Chance Discovery

Dominic's POV

Friday evening arrived with blessed relief when Zoe finally released me from my operational duties early.

"Seriously? You're cutting me loose early again?" I couldn't hide my amazement as I watched her pack up the surveillance equipment from our command center.

"Don't get too excited. I could easily bury you under a mountain of territory reports, but I have plans tonight. This week has been absolutely draining, and frankly, you've been a complete nightmare to manage since you started that reckless street war with the rival gang."

"Please, no extra assignments. I'm running on fumes here. But I owe you something important."

Zoe's eyebrows shot up as she settled back into her chair, wearing that predatory smile I'd grown to recognize. "Oh, this should be interesting."

"I might hate myself for admitting this, but you saved my operation this week. I was letting everything slide, making reckless decisions with our family's territory. You forced me to get my act together. So thank you."

"I knew you'd see it my way eventually!" Her triumphant grin spread across her face. "For that rare moment of honesty, I'm granting you weekend freedom. But if you drag yourself in here Monday morning reeking of alcohol and regret, you'll wish you'd never been born."

"Scout's honor, I'll behave myself." I threw up my hand in mock solemnity.

After Zoe swept out of our headquarters like a conquering general, I grabbed my phone and dialed Xavier. Time to blow off some steam at the Social Union.

"Tell me Caleb is completely gone over Ivy," I said, sliding into the booth across from my best friend at our usual underground casino.

"The man's absolutely whipped. And she's just as bad for him." Xavier's eyes lit up with gossip.

"Give me details. I need entertainment."

"Caught them practically devouring each other in his private office this afternoon. Multiple times recently." Xavier leaned forward conspiratorially.

The conversation flowed as easily as the drinks. Seeing Caleb finally fall for someone who wasn't a complete disaster felt like witnessing a miracle. I filled Xavier in on Zoe's iron-fisted management style and how she'd been systematically dismantling my bad habits in running our money laundering operations.

"Honestly, Dominic, you needed someone exactly like Zoe to snap you out of whatever spiral you were in. You were starting to mirror your father's worst impulses when he was still with the family." Xavier's words hit harder because they rang true.

"Yeah, I was acting like a complete--" My confession died mid-sentence as I spotted trouble walking through the entrance. "Xavier, we need to evacuate immediately. The unholy trinity just arrived, and I cannot handle Beatrix's drama tonight."

"God, not those three again. Yara's performance at Thorne Enterprises this week was enough psychological warfare for a lifetime. Caleb actually banned her from all family properties." Xavier was already reaching for his wallet.

"Wait, he actually banned her?" The idea delighted me more than it should have. "Maybe I should apply for a transfer to Caleb's inner circle. Sounds like you guys know how to handle troublemakers."

"Let's get out of here before they spot us, and I'll give you the full story."

We bolted for the exit, but not before hearing the women calling our names across the casino floor. Once we hit the parking lot, Xavier suggested hitting a different establishment since it was Friday night and we deserved some mindless fun.

The underground club provided exactly the distraction I needed. Between drinks, stories about family politics, and watching Xavier make questionable decisions, I didn't check the time until very late. I stumbled home to my secured apartment and collapsed into bed, dead to the world.

The shrill ring of my phone dragged me back to consciousness. Without opening my eyes, I fumbled for the device.

"Zoe, I swear I'm not hungover..." I mumbled, forgetting it was Saturday and assuming my taskmaster handler was calling to torture me.

"Who the hell is Zoe, Uncle Dominic?" My nephew Vincenzo's voice cut through my fog.

"Isaac, Vincenzo, what kind of hour is this to be making phone calls?" I groaned into the pillow.

"Uncle, it's mid-afternoon. Now tell me about this Zoe person." The kid's persistence rivaled his mother's.

"She’s my new intelligence liaison," I managed, still refusing to open my eyes.

"Is she attractive?"

Vincenzo was a teenager drowning in teenage hormones while my sister continued treating him like he was still in elementary school. By default, I’d become his unofficial guide to understanding women, much to my sister’s horror. It was a delicate balance between educating the kid and avoiding my sister’s wrath.

"She’s gorgeous and more terrifying than your mother. Drop by the offices next week if you want to meet your match." I finally sat up, accepting defeat.

"Definitely will. But Uncle Dominic, can we meet at the mall today? I need advice about something important."

"The mall? You know I’d rather have root canal surgery than spend time in that teenage wasteland."

"Come on, Uncle Dominic! I’m not going to your boring old man hangouts or sitting in your heavily guarded house."

"Keep calling me old, kid, and I’ll let your mother keep you wrapped in bubble wrap forever. See how you like that level of protection."

"Don’t be cruel! Please just meet me at the mall."

Later that afternoon, I found myself navigating the Saturday afternoon chaos of suburban retail hell, my concealed weapon making me paranoid about security cameras. Heading toward the food court, I passed a women’s clothing boutique and stopped dead in my tracks.

There she was. The stunning woman from the religious store who’d been haunting my thoughts since our encounter in my protection territory. She was helping an elderly customer select dresses, her

movements graceful and professional. So she worked here. Fate had just handed me a second chance I'd thought was lost forever.

I couldn't interrupt while she was with a customer, but now I knew where to find her. The possibilities suddenly made this mall trip worthwhile.

My nephew's crisis turned out to be typical teenage anxiety about a girl he'd been casually seeing. She was older, which had him convinced he was out of his league and needed to rush into physical intimacy to keep her interested.

"Age doesn't determine experience or expectations," I explained. "Treat her with respect, take your time, and don't let anyone pressure you into anything you're not ready for. Real connection can't be rushed."

"Want me to drive you home?" I asked as we prepared to part ways.

"Mom sent the armored car. She's getting more paranoid every day about family security. I can't wait to see what happens when Carmen starts dating." He rolled his eyes, referring to his younger sister.

"When that time comes, she might ease up on you. Mothers in our world worry differently about daughters," I offered, hoping to give him some perspective on our dangerous lifestyle.

After Vincenzo left, I decided to follow through on my mother's advice. I returned to the religious goods store and offered a sincere apology to the saleswoman, who seemed genuinely surprised by the gesture. While there, I browsed until I found the perfect small gift, leaving with a plan forming in my mind.

I circled back to the clothing boutique, but my mystery woman had already left for the day. The store was closing, and she was nowhere to be seen. No matter. Now I knew where to find her, and next time, I'd be ready.

Chapter 226: Legal Protection Secured

Gemma's POV

"Thank God weekend collections end early," Lila breathed as we met at the boutique's reinforced entrance.

"My feet are killing me," I groaned, shifting my weight from one aching foot to the other. The marble floors of Thorne territory businesses were unforgiving, especially after dealing with nervous clients all day.

"Jeremiah got called away on family business, so no escort today," Lila mentioned. "Can't complain though. He's been watching our backs like a hawk."

"He really has. The family takes care of their people. Want to call for a car together? I can't handle the subway right now," Lila suggested.

"I'll cover the ride. I'm completely drained too." We headed toward the exit, both laughing despite our exhaustion from another day in Thorne family retail operations.

The moment we stepped outside, Nick emerged from the shadows between buildings. That familiar predatory smirk spread across his scarred face. My stomach plummeted as I realized he'd been stalking our workplace again. He positioned himself directly in my path and seized my arm with bruising force.

"Let's go, Gemma. I'm taking you somewhere we can have our conversation," Nick commanded rather than asked.

"Get your filthy hands off me, Nick. We have absolutely nothing to discuss," I shot back.

"We have plenty to discuss, sweetheart. The quicker you stop this ridiculous game, the sooner everything goes back to how it was," Nick replied, attempting to drag me toward the alley.

"I said let go." I wrenched my arm away and backed up several steps. "Don't put your hands on me again. I've told you to disappear from my life."

"You're coming with me, and we're settling this. You're coming back where you belong, Gemma, because you're mine," Nick declared with that same cold smile that used to terrify me.

"If you take one more step toward me, I'll scream loud enough for every soldier on this block to hear," I warned.

"Everything under control here, Gemma?" Mason's voice came from behind me. He was one of the Thorne family's street enforcers assigned to protect the retail district. "Lila radioed that some punk was bothering you ladies."

"This is private business between me and my woman, tough guy," Nick informed Mason dismissively.

"I'm not your tough guy. You need to disappear immediately and stop harassing these women, or I'll hold you here until the family decides what to do with you," Mason stated firmly, his hand moving to the weapon concealed beneath his jacket.

I wrapped my arms protectively around myself while Nick raised his hands in mock surrender, shooting a venomous glare at Lila. He began retreating but couldn't resist one final threat.

"This conversation isn't finished, Gemma. You know it isn't."

"Come on, ladies, I'll make sure you get out safely," Mason offered.

"We're calling for pickup, Mason," Lila told him.

"Perfect. I'll stay with you until the car arrives," Mason replied, remaining vigilant until we were safely inside one of the family's unmarked vehicles.

"Gemma, I hope you don't mind me saying this, but you need to talk to someone higher up about Nick. He's stalking you, and the way he spoke today was genuinely frightening," Lila said once we were safely in the car.

"You're absolutely right, Lila, but I suspect I'll need stronger evidence before the family takes serious action. Mom returns later this week, so I'll discuss it with her then. She'll know the right approach."

"Perfect. Until she’s back, you’re staying with me. And whenever your mom travels, you’re staying over too."

"Thanks, Lila. You’re saving my life."

The next morning, shortly after checking in, Jeremiah summoned me to the boutique’s secured entrance.

"Gemma, I heard about yesterday’s incident," Jeremiah said immediately. "We held a security briefing, and every soldier on this street has been told to watch for trouble. You’re protected here."

"Jeremiah, I can’t express how grateful I am to all of you," I said, feeling enormous relief knowing I could at least work without fear.

"Don’t mention it. But you need to take this up the chain. He hasn’t escalated to anything extreme yet, but situations like this tend to worsen. His stalking behavior is already crossing lines," Jeremiah counseled.

"Lila said the same thing. But I’m lost about what steps to take. Mom arrives later this week, and I’ll get her advice then."

"Here’s what I’ll do. I’ll share a contact with you. He’s a lawyer who handles family business. My sister had similar boyfriend troubles, and this attorney got her the protection she needed. It might not solve everything, but if he’s just making threats, it could scare him off," Jeremiah explained.

"That sounds like exactly what I need. Please text me his information. Thank you so much, Jeremiah."

"No thanks necessary. I’ll send it over. Now let’s get back to work, and signal if you need anything," he said with an encouraging smile before walking away.

Later in the week was my day off, and I arranged for Mom to collect me from Lila's protected apartment when she returned. I refused to wait alone at our house. Once we got home and Mom had settled in, I explained everything that had been happening. Her face showed immediate concern.

"Gemma, your friends are giving you sound advice. Call that lawyer and see if he can meet with us today," Mom urged.

"Mom, you just got back from traveling. You must be exhausted."

"I'm too worried to rest. Let's handle this situation now."

I dialed the number Jeremiah had given me. The secretary was extremely helpful and said the attorney could squeeze us in late that afternoon. Mom and I arrived at his office precisely on time. After hearing my complete story, he responded professionally.

"Unfortunately, I encounter cases like yours frequently in our circles. It's wise that you're seeking help early. I'll petition for a restraining order and file a police report, but that doesn't mean you can lower your guard yet."

"What exactly do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm hoping the restraining order will intimidate him enough to make him back off permanently, but you must remain vigilant," the lawyer cautioned. "You work in Thorne territory with competent security, which is excellent. You'll be safe inside protected areas. However, exercise extreme caution in neutral zones and on open streets. I strongly recommend having someone accompany you whenever you leave protected territory. Apply this same rule everywhere you go. Don't create opportunities for him to approach you."

Following the attorney's comprehensive guidance, we returned home. Mom immediately started discussing selling our house and moving to an apartment within Thorne family residential areas. I attempted to calm her anxiety, but she was deeply shaken.

The next morning, the lawyer called with news that he'd already secured the restraining order. His efficiency was impressive. I immediately informed Jeremiah and thanked him for the referral. He requested a copy of the legal document and took it directly to the district security chief.

The restraining order provided some peace of mind, but I intended to follow every single one of the lawyer's safety recommendations.

Chapter 227: Messenger Boy Tactics

Dominic's POV

Sunday dragged by in a haze of dangerous obsession. The mystery woman from that boutique in Thorne territory had invaded every corner of my mind, and I couldn't shake the image of her defiant dark eyes or the way she'd dismissed me like I was just another street punk instead of a feared Capo. I considered showing up at her workplace with my full security detail, but cornering her during business hours seemed like a move that would send her running straight to witness protection.

Then inspiration struck during Sunday dinner at my sister's house. Penelope, my sister, was telling war stories about how her husband Ramon had won her over back when they were just street kids, complete with handwritten messages passed through mutual contacts before they'd even been properly introduced through family channels.

"He had this kid Milo deliver the most ridiculous pickup lines to my school," Penelope laughed, stirring her homemade sauce in her kitchen. "They were so pathetic I couldn't help but find them endearing. That's how I knew he was serious about getting past my family's security."

Old school courtship. Why hadn't I thought of that approach?

I waited until late evening to call my nephew, forgetting that teenage boys actually keep reasonable bedtimes, unlike those of us who live in the night world.

"Uncle Dominic?" Vincenzo's voice was thick with sleep. "Is everything okay? Did something happen with the family?"

"Sorry, kid. Forgot you weren't running on underworld hours like your old uncle." I glanced at the reinforced clock on my office wall, noting it was well past bedtime hours. "I need a favor this week."

"School night, Uncle. Whatever family business it is, can't it wait?"

"I'll have the driver pick you up after classes tomorrow in the armored sedan. Consider it a business proposition with the organization."

That got his attention immediately. "Business proposition?"

"I'll make it worth your while. Just trust me on this one, Vincenzo."

The next afternoon, Vincenzo strutted into my office at Zenith Systems with the cocky confidence only teenage boys raised in mafia families possess. His swagger was abruptly halted when he spotted Zoe organizing classified intelligence files at her bulletproof desk.

"Uncle, what exactly did you need me to..." His words died as his eyes widened, taking in Zoe's professional but undeniably lethal appearance.

"Zoe, meet my nephew Vincenzo. Vincenzo, this is Zoe, the woman who keeps my entire operation from burning down around us."

My nephew, apparently channeling every terrible pickup line he'd ever overheard from the soldiers, stepped forward with a grin that would make his father proud. "Damn, even the FBI database couldn't find someone as fine as you."

I couldn't contain my laughter while Zoe fixed me with a look that could melt steel armor.

"Really, Dominic? You're already corrupting the youth with your pathetic game?" Despite her scolding tone, amusement danced in her predatory eyes.

"That masterpiece was all him," I managed between chuckles.

Zoe approached Vincenzo with the calculated grace of a trained killer, looking him up and down with theatrical consideration. "You know what, kid? If you were legal and not family, I might actually consider it. You're pretty cute for Thorne blood."

Poor Vincenzo turned the color of fresh blood, and I felt a stab of something that might have been jealousy watching my deadliest associate flirt with my teenage nephew.

"So you'd consider my underage nephew, but your boss gets nothing?" I challenged, enjoying this rare moment of levity in our violent world.

"He's got better lines than you do, Dominic. I'm heading out for my lunch surveillance run. Try not to corrupt him too much while I'm gone."

After Zoe left, Vincenzo collapsed into the nearest leather chair like his legs had given out.

"Holy shit, Uncle. How do you concentrate on territorial business with her around?"

"Watch your mouth, and I'm a professional," I lied smoothly. No need for him to know that Zoe had me wrapped around her perfectly manicured, trigger-happy finger.

"Come on, we're going to conduct some reconnaissance."

"Since when do you go to civilian shopping centers?"

"Since today. I'll explain in the armored car."

During the drive through Thorne territory, I outlined my plan while our security detail followed at a discrete distance. Vincenzo listened with growing disbelief, occasionally shaking his head at what he clearly considered the worst strategy in organized crime history.

"Why don't you just walk up to her with proper introductions like a normal made man?"

"Where's the challenge in that? Besides, haven't I taught you anything about the art of conquest? The best territories require careful siege tactics."

We passed by the boutique first, but she wasn't working today. I led Vincenzo to an upscale stationery store where I purchased expensive cards with matching envelopes, then we settled into the shopping center's food court to begin my campaign.

"There she is," I said, spotting the familiar figure at a table near the windows.

"Uncle, she's gorgeous, but I think you're setting yourself up for total annihilation. A woman like that probably has half the city's wise guys throwing themselves at her feet."

"Trust me, kid. By the end of this siege, she'll be surrendering to me."

I pulled out the first card and wrote carefully before sealing it in the envelope. The coffee shop across from the boutique would serve as my command post.

"Alright, here's your first delivery mission." I handed over the card.

Vincenzo opened it and read aloud: "Temptations like you deserve sinners like me." He looked at me with pure horror. "Uncle, this is absolutely terrible. She's going to think you're some kind of psychopath."

"Just deliver the message, smart mouth."

What felt like an hour of waiting for enemy intelligence passed before Vincenzo returned, looking slightly traumatized.

"Okay, so this little messenger service is going to cost you extra protection money. She nearly called mall security, which would have meant real cops. I'm pretty sure she thinks you're stalking her." He handed me a folded piece of paper.

Her response was written in elegant script: "You should be ashamed of exploiting your nephew for this juvenile behavior. Do you have no dignity?"

"What exactly did you tell her?"

"She was about to call mall security, which would have meant involving outside law enforcement, and you know what Mom would do to both of us if we brought heat on the family. So I did damage control. Told her my uncle saw her, thinks she's beautiful, but he's too honorable to approach directly without proper introduction."

I had to admit the kid had the quick thinking of true Thorne blood. Penelope would indeed have our heads if we compromised family security over my romantic pursuits.

Chapter 228: Family First Always

Dominic's POV

"Dominic, I need to leave the territory early tonight." Zoe's voice cut through our afternoon discussion about smuggling routes as she grabbed her encrypted phone, her expression shifting from focused to tense.

"Already calling it quits? Here I thought my intelligence chief had more endurance than this." The teasing comment rolled off my tongue automatically, but something in her demeanor made me pause.

"Save the jokes for another day, Dominic. I really don't have the bandwidth to deal with your smart mouth right now." Her hands moved quickly, collecting classified documents from my desk with an urgency that caught my attention.

The worry lines creasing her forehead weren't something I was used to seeing on Zoe's typically composed face. In our line of work, showing weakness could get you killed.

"Talk to me, Zoe. What's going on?" My voice dropped the playful tone, genuine concern taking its place. In the Thorne family, we protected our own.

"Family situation. I just need to handle something at home." She exhaled heavily, shoving the last of her surveillance reports into her tactical bag with more force than necessary.

"You know I'm here if you need backup on anything, right? Whatever it is." The offer hung between us as she paused at my desk. In this business, backup meant armed intervention.

"I appreciate that, Dominic. Really. I'll see you in the morning." Her smile was strained as she rushed toward the door of my office at Zenith Systems, our money laundering front.

After she left, I tried reaching Xavier, but my call went straight to voicemail. His text was brief and dismissive, promising to call back later. The rest of my evening felt oddly incomplete without knowing what had rattled Zoe so thoroughly. In our world, personal problems had a way of becoming family problems fast.

Xavier never did call, which gnawed at me more than I expected. The next morning, I made it to the office early, positioning myself by the elevators with a self-satisfied grin, ready to tease Zoe about beating her to work for once.

My smugness evaporated the moment I saw her face. Dark circles shadowed her eyes, and her usual professional polish was replaced by barely contained fury. When Zoe looked ready to kill someone, it usually meant someone was about to die.

"Zoe, what the hell happened?" The words tumbled out before she could even acknowledge me.

"Caleb happened, that's what. And Xavier too. God help me, Dominic, you better not be involved in whatever power play they're running." Her voice carried a dangerous edge as she stormed past me toward her office.

I caught her arm before she could disappear behind her desk, steering her into my office instead. My assistant appeared with coffee as if summoned by the tension radiating from both of us.

"Start talking," I said, settling into the chair across from her, my hand instinctively checking the gun holstered beneath my jacket.

"Your precious brothers haven’t filled you in yet?" The sarcasm dripped from every word. "How convenient."

"Nobody’s told me anything. Xavier’s been radio silent since yesterday. What did they do?"

What Zoe told me next made my blood pressure spike. Caleb had banished Ivy from Thorne territory without warning, accusing her of skimming from weapons shipments and leaking intelligence to rival families. The accusations came with a side of public humiliation that made my jaw clench.

"Look, I’ve known Caleb for years. This isn’t his usual style. He’s calculated, methodical. Something doesn’t add up here." I watched Zoe’s eyes flash with indignation. "But regardless of what’s going on with him, Ivy doesn’t deserve to be left defenseless on the streets. I want to bring her into my operation."

"You want to what?" Zoe’s eyebrows shot up.

"There’s an opening in Jenkins’s crew. You’ve met Jenkins, he runs that unit like it’s a vacation resort compared to the rest of this blood-soaked empire. It could be exactly what Ivy needs right now, a chance to rebuild under family protection."

"You’re serious about this?" Disbelief colored her voice.

"Why wouldn’t I be? Your father vouched for her personally when he recommended her to me initially. His judgment has never steered me wrong." I leaned forward, meeting her skeptical gaze. "Caleb might be my brother in arms, but he’s acting like an idiot right now. And apparently, he’s threatened to blacklist her from working anywhere in the territory."

"He said what?" Zoe’s voice went dangerously quiet.

"Which is exactly why I’m going to make sure Ivy lands on her feet. Tell her she starts tomorrow morning under my protection. Now, can we please get some work done? I’m already missing your usual efficiency in managing our networks."

"Getting spoiled by my information management skills?" A hint of her usual sass crept back into her tone.

"Absolutely. And I'm genuinely hurt that you didn't even acknowledge my early arrival today. I was expecting at least some recognition for my effort."

"Fine, you'll get a gold star later," she laughed, the tension finally breaking.

When Xavier finally called during lunch, his explanation confirmed what I'd already suspected. Both he and Caleb were handling this situation like complete amateurs. The evidence against Ivy was circumstantial at best, and their investigation was sloppy by Thorne family standards.

"She's starting with my crew tomorrow," I informed him bluntly. "And I won't tolerate any interference from either of you."

Ivy's first day went smoothly until I heard raised voices coming from Zoe's office. Through the doorway, I could see Caleb getting the verbal lashing of his life from my intelligence chief.

"I'd love to hear your explanation for the mess you've created with Ivy," I announced from the doorway, making Caleb spin around. "Because from where I'm standing, you've destroyed a good soldier's reputation based on hunches and paranoia."

The conversation that followed in my office revealed the depth of Caleb's regret, but also his desperation. Zoe's protective instincts were in full force, defending Ivy with the fierce loyalty I'd come to expect from her.

Eventually, I convinced Zoe to let them talk privately. Jenkins sent Ivy up from the lower floors, and Zoe and I retreated to the conference room to give them space.

Ivy emerged a short while later, tears streaming down her face. I offered what comfort I could and sent both women home early with armed escorts.

Caleb needed support too, despite his mistakes. That evening, Xavier joined us at my safehouse, and we worked through several bottles of whiskey trying to make sense of the situation.

The following morning arrived with Zoe's disapproving glare greeting my disheveled appearance.

"You reek of alcohol, Dominic. I specifically told you I didn't want to see you hungover while managing family business." Her tone could have frozen hell over.

"It was a mercy mission, Zoe. Caleb needed support, and he's going through hell right now." My head felt like it was splitting in two.

"A hell of his own making," she shot back.

"But he's genuinely sorry. Now help me reschedule today's meetings. We need to fit in a presentation for the Thorne Syndicate account."

"What are you scheming now?" Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"Nothing underhanded. It's legitimate front business with significant revenue potential." I'd promised Caleb I'd help him professionally, even if I couldn't fix his personal disasters.

The meeting was a financial success for both operations, but watching Caleb and Ivy try to maintain professionalism while their personal wreckage lay between them was painful for everyone involved.

The next day brought another hangover after Caleb's latest emergency drinking session. Zoe's patience had officially expired.

"Should I ban you from seeing your brothers during active operations?" She handed me aspirin with the expression of a disappointed parent.

"Caleb called me, I couldn't abandon him." I sprawled across the office couch, feeling like death warmed over.

"You’re taking the morning to recover, but you’re working this afternoon. No excuses."

The day crawled by unproductively. By evening, guilt over my wasted time prompted me to suggest weekend surveillance work.

"Want to put in some weekend hours? I’ll pay overtime," I offered.

"Not a chance. My boyfriend arrives tomorrow." Her face lit up with genuine happiness for the first time all week.

"Right, the mysterious prince. When do I get to meet this guy?"

"We’ll figure something out soon."

"How’s Ivy adjusting to the new position?"

"She loves it. Jenkins’s crew has been incredibly welcoming, and she’s already making connections. Her mood has improved dramatically." Zoe’s smile was warm with satisfaction. "You’ve earned serious points with me for this, Dominic. That means I’ll have your back when you need it most."

"Good to know I’ve got an ally."

"I’m leaving now, and Dominic? Show up sober next week or we’re going to have problems."

The next morning, I called my nephew to arrange our mall meeting. I’d promised him money for playing messenger all week, and I was desperate to see my goddess again.

I arrived early and decided to check if she was working. What I discovered made my pulse quicken. Through the store window, I spotted Zoe and Ivy browsing with my goddess helping them select outfits.

Perfect timing.

I slipped inside, positioning myself behind a display rack. My goddess and Zoe were focused on the fitting room, waiting for Ivy to emerge. When she did, wearing a dress that should have come with a warning label, I couldn't resist moving closer.

The black fabric hugged every curve, and when Zoe asked Ivy to turn around, I stepped into view.

"Well, Ivy, now I understand why Caleb's losing his mind trying to win you back. You look absolutely devastating in that dress," I announced, enjoying the way all three women turned to stare at me with varying degrees of surprise and embarrassment.

Chapter 229: Playing with Fire

Gemma's POV

For an entire week, I had been receiving cryptic messages from the dangerous stranger who had turned my world upside down. The same man I was certain controlled half the protection rackets in our district had somehow infiltrated my daily routine with his relentless pursuit.

His notes contained bold threats disguised as flirtatious invitations, yet he had not stepped foot in our boutique since that first terrifying encounter. Instead, his nephew Vincenzo served as his courier, appearing every afternoon with sealed envelopes that made my hands tremble. On that very first day, I cornered the young man behind the jewelry counter until he confessed his uncle had recruited him for this deadly game. He even showed me a photograph to prove his connection to the Thorne family operations. That confirmed my worst fears about who was orchestrating this elaborate chase.

The notorious Capo was hunting me through written words. I was curious to see how long he would maintain this predatory charade before showing himself, but I found myself genuinely terrified by our paper correspondence. Vincenzo turned out to be surprisingly charming despite his family connections, eventually seeking my advice about protecting his girlfriend from rival family threats. We struck an uneasy deal: I would help him with romantic guidance, and he would keep secret the fact that I knew his uncle's true identity in the Thorne crime organization. He would arrive at my store, deliver the daily collection of threatening notes disguised as love letters, and I would craft careful responses to each one. We were playing a dangerous game with the predator while the Capo believed he was being exceptionally clever. We had turned the tables on him completely, though I knew one wrong move could be fatal.

I had just finished sharing coffee and pastries with Vincenzo when he excitedly reported that his girlfriend adored the protection charm I had helped him select from our jewelry collection.

"Remember our agreement, Vincenzo. Your uncle cannot discover our friendship," I warned him as we prepared to part ways, knowing that family betrayal in their world meant death.

"Absolutely not. I am thoroughly entertained watching my uncle pursue you like this. You should leave now before he shows up." I quickly departed from the food court area, my pulse racing.

I was making my way back to the boutique when I encountered Zoe and Ivy strolling through the mall with their usual intimidating bodyguard detail. We exchanged careful greetings, and I remembered the stunning new arrivals that had been delivered that morning. They would be perfect for these two dangerous women, so I nervously invited them to browse the collection. Ivy had just emerged from the fitting room looking absolutely lethal in one of the black dresses that perfectly complemented her reputation.

My heart nearly stopped beating when I heard that familiar voice conversing with my customers. I turned around to find the gorgeous Capo standing in my store like he owned it. He appeared even more devastatingly dangerous than during our first encounter, dressed casually in dark jeans and a fitted black shirt that did nothing to hide the gun holster at his side. I forced myself to breathe steadily and pretended complete ignorance of his identity. After all, I was representing my workplace professionally, and crossing a Thorne family member meant certain death.

I retrieved coordinating accessories for the women to complete their outfits, both looking absolutely breathtaking and terrifying. I maintained my innocent facade, though I was acutely aware that the Capo was studying me intently with his penetrating gaze that had probably been the last thing many people ever saw. He settled into a chair like a king surveying his territory and began chatting easily with the women, who clearly served in his organization. What a terrifying coincidence. His attention remained fixed on me throughout their conversation like a predator marking its prey.

Unlike our previous encounter, his behavior was respectfully menacing. He was openly praising the women, though his notes had already revealed his deadly confidence to me. Suddenly he reached for my hand, sending electric currents of fear through my skin. He addressed me as beautiful lady with friendly warmth that barely concealed the threat, requesting my name and complimenting how I had enhanced his associates' appearance. Through Vincenzo, I already possessed considerable dangerous information about him, including his reputation for eliminating rivals.

"I am Gemma," I responded as though meeting him for the first time, hoping my voice didn't betray my terror. He lifted my hand to his lips in a courtly gesture that felt more like a claim of ownership. He was certainly laying on the lethal charm.

"Gemma, you possess impeccable taste," he said, his eyes traveling deliberately along my figure like he was memorizing every detail. "If you were selecting an evening gown from this collection for yourself, which would capture your attention?"

"Are you purchasing something for your woman?" I asked with feigned naivety, knowing that asking about a Capo's personal life was dangerous territory.

"I am currently unattached, darling. However, I would enjoy presenting a gift to a very special friend," he replied with a smile that could stop hearts permanently.

I went to retrieve a dress I had been admiring since its arrival, hoping to appease him. It was absolutely stunning and carried a substantial price tag that meant nothing to someone of his wealth and power. The gold sequined creation was daringly short, featuring a wrap-style skirt and dramatically plunging neckline, with delicate straps that created an intricate pattern across the back. It was undeniably seductive and probably perfect for the kind of woman who moved in his deadly circles. I also selected matching gold sandals adorned with Swarovski crystal details. When I presented the dress, I watched his eyes ignite with predatory interest.

"Would you consider modeling it so I can envision how it might appear on my friend?" He requested, and I recognized his true intentions immediately while my blood turned to ice.

Customers frequently asked us to try on pieces when selecting gifts for wives, girlfriends, or daughters. I always accommodated these requests as part of my professional service without hesitation. However, I was not planning to make this easy for my persistent and dangerous admirer, despite the risk.

"I apologize, sir, but that would not be appropriate. However, if she shares my approximate measurements, it will look absolutely perfect. I can guarantee that," I responded with professional politeness, praying I hadn't just signed my death warrant.

"Very well, I will purchase it," he said, catching me off guard with his easy acceptance. "Additionally, I am gifting these two ladies their dresses and accessories. Before you object, I insist, as Zoe's boss and a friend to our Don's wife. Consider it a gesture of appreciation for your excellent service, and Ivy recently secured an exceptional territory expansion for me." His generosity was impressive and terrifying, showing the kind of money that flowed through criminal enterprises. He handed me his black credit card, flashed that devastating smile, and told the women, "We should organize an evening out so you can debut these gorgeous pieces at the casino."

The women gave me their selections and I proceeded to the register with trembling hands. This sale would generate an excellent commission for me, assuming I lived to enjoy it. I wrapped everything with enthusiasm, genuinely enjoying serving these dangerous but beautiful customers despite my fear.

I bid farewell to the women, and when I turned to present the shopping bags to the Capo, he requested a business card. I understood he wanted my personal contact information, having navigated similar dangerous situations before with men who didn't accept refusal. Since he was obviously the deadly predator type who took what he wanted, I simply handed him our store's business card. Then they departed like a lethal storm passing over.

Sunday found me working alone, which proved exhausting and terrifying. Vanessa and Sabrina had stepped out for refreshments and Lia had the day off. I was lost in thought when I heard that increasingly familiar voice that made my survival instincts scream.

"Beautiful Gemma." The Capo entered my store with the confidence of a man who owned everything he surveyed.

"Good evening, sir. Please do not tell me your friend was dissatisfied with her gift," I responded cordially, maintaining my customer service demeanor while calculating escape routes.

"I have not presented it to her yet, though I am confident she will appreciate it." He captured my hand across the counter and kissed it gently, a gesture that felt like a brand of ownership.

"Please inform her that if the fit or style is unsuitable, she may return for an exchange," I said with my practiced professional smile, hoping normal business protocol might protect me.

"I will convey that message. But why maintain such formality with family business? You need not address me as sir," he said with obvious dangerous charm.

"Then how should I address you?" I asked, though I already knew his reputation from our correspondence and hearing the women call him boss repeatedly.

"Have I neglected to introduce myself properly?" He asked, and I shook my head. "How terribly rude of me. I am Dominic Frost. The pleasure is entirely mine, Gemma."

"Likewise." I could not suppress my nervous laughter. "I see your mother continues praying for you," I teased him, immediately regretting my boldness.

"Ah, so you do remember our encounter," he smiled with obvious satisfaction that looked predatory. "My mother was quite stern with me and insisted that if I encountered you again, I must offer a proper apology. Therefore, please forgive my thoughtless behavior during our first meeting."

"You are forgiven," I smiled, acknowledging that he could be quite appealing when he chose to be, though no less dangerous. "Tell me, did your mother appreciate the gift you selected for her?"

"You will not believe what transpired with that gift. Ultimately, she preferred the small card you included and demanded to meet the woman who had such courage."

"I cannot believe it. You actually gave it to her?" I was laughing at the absurdity, though I knew his mother was probably as dangerous as he was. My intention had been to irritate him, and he had treated the card as an amusing challenge.

"Naturally I did, since you addressed it to her. However, she demanded that I apologize properly and pursue you with honor. I have already visited the store to apologize to the saleswoman and..." Dominic produced a small wrapped package from his pocket. "I purchased this for you, hoping we might meet again, and here we are."

"You bought me a present?" I found his gesture endearing despite the danger and accepted the package. "It is part of my apology and my protection."

I opened the wrapping to discover a small box containing a beautiful keychain featuring a tiny gun with a crucifix and two small Thorne family medallions that marked me as under their protection.

"It is lovely, Dominic, thank you," I said, examining the delicate but deadly keychain that would probably save my life someday.

"There is also a card."

He retrieved an envelope from his pocket, addressed in the perfectly masculine handwriting I recognized from our correspondence: "Sorry for being rude the other day, but you were the one who was wrong to resist family business."

I began laughing at his audacity. I opened the envelope to find a small card containing the same prayer I had sent to his mother. On the reverse side was written: "I am a complete fool, perhaps I need more people besides my mother praying for me. I apologize for my attitude and pledge my protection."

"How sweet. I will pray for your soul daily," I said, smiling. "Though your handwriting bears a striking resemblance to someone else I know."

At that moment, Zoe and Ivy entered the store with their security detail, both appearing quite cheerful and deadly.

"So, boss, have you decided to expand into fashion?" Zoe asked Dominic with obvious sarcasm that only someone in his inner circle would dare.

"Are you ladies tracking my movements?" Dominic teased in response, though there was real menace beneath the playful tone.

We chatted briefly and ended up arranging to go out the following Saturday to one of their controlled establishments. I exchanged phone numbers with the women under Dominic’s watchful eye, and we planned to meet for lunch during the week at a Thorne family restaurant. They said their goodbyes and left with their bodyguards, but Dominic remained behind like a predator claiming territory. The troublesome duo Vanessa and Sabrina returned, and Vanessa immediately began flirting shamelessly with Dominic, clearly not recognizing the danger.

"Hello there. May I assist you? Gemma works so slowly," Vanessa said, practically throwing herself at Dominic.

"No thank you. Gemma is absolutely perfect," Dominic dismissed her with cold authority and guided me toward the lingerie section like he owned the place. "Who possesses handwriting similar to mine?" He smiled, knowing exactly what I meant.

"My secret admirer who sends me threatening love letters," I teased back, feeling bold.

"Should I eliminate this competition?"

"Perhaps not yet."

He gave a mischievous smile that promised violence. "Gemma, you have not given me your personal number."

"Why would I do something so dangerous?" I asked, smiling.

"Because we are family now," Dominic said, his attention caught by a white lace bodysuit on display that looked expensive and seductive. "What an exquisite piece."

"It truly is gorgeous, crafted from French lace and tulle. Notice how delicate the construction is," my sales instincts engaged as I showed him the garment, trying to maintain normalcy. He looked from me to the bodysuit and retrieved his black credit card from his wallet.

"Please wrap one in your size," he smiled with obvious dangerous mischief.

"I believe you would require a much larger size, Dominic," I smiled back, feeling reckless.

"Very amusing," Dominic laughed without shame. "It is for my friend who will wear the dress and who needs protection."

"Is this friend becoming something more?"

"Definitely." He winked at me with predatory intent. "And I still want your phone number."

I took his card and the bodysuit and proceeded to the register, my hands shaking slightly. I created an elegant package and handed him the bag. I took one of our cards and wrote where he could not see: "I am running away from dangerous problems..." Then I slipped the card into the bag like a message in a bottle.

"It has been my pleasure serving you again," I said and walked him to the door, knowing I was playing with fire.

Dominic kissed my hand and bid farewell with a wink that promised this was far from over. Lila was observing everything from the cosmetics store across the corridor with an enormous smile, completely unaware of how much danger I was actually in.

Chapter 230: Arms Dealer Recruited

Lila’s POV

I had just finished helping a customer select the perfect cover story when I spotted him lurking outside the storefront again. Gemma’s mysterious protector was back, practically burning holes through the bulletproof glass as he surveilled her territory across the street. The Capo was completely hooked.

All week long, I had been thoroughly entertained by Gemma’s stories about this guy. The encrypted messages he had been sending through his nephew, the way that adorable kid had already charmed her with his innocent cover operations. That boy was absolutely precious, and if his uncle possessed half the lethal competence the child displayed, Gemma had struck gold in this dangerous world.

But she was terrified. That worthless street thug Nick had really done a number on her confidence with his obsessive stalking. Someone needed to give my best friend the push she desperately needed, and I was more than happy to be that someone.

Besides, this mysterious Capo was absolutely devastating. Gemma deserved a man who looked at her like she was worth starting a war over, not like the last loser who could not keep his hands off other dealers.

I quickly fired off an encrypted text to Gemma, warning her about her audience and telling her to maintain operational security. Then I sauntered over to him with my most professional black market dealer smile plastered across my face.

"Looking for something special today, sir?"

He turned toward me with the kind of confused expression made men get when they are caught conducting unauthorized surveillance. I could practically see the tactical calculations running through his head as he scrambled for cover.

"I am acquiring supplies for my associate," he finally managed, looking like he wanted to disappear into the shadows.

Oh, this was going to be fun. I was not about to let this opportunity slip by. Not when I could make a killer sale and help my girl navigate the treacherous waters of mafia romance at the same time.

"Let me guess," I said, dropping my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Your associate happens to work at that clothing boutique in your protection territory across the street?"

The color drained from his handsome face so fast I almost felt sorry for him. Almost.

"Look," he said, glancing around with the paranoia of a seasoned killer. "I can explain this situation."

"I am listening." I crossed my arms and waited with predatory patience.

He ran a hand through his golden hair, looking absolutely miserable for a man who could probably eliminate half the city. "Fine. I am not really acquiring supplies. I wanted to observe her safety protocols."

"Well, at least you are honest now." I tapped my fingers against my arm thoughtfully. "But I am going to have to call family security if you are just here to conduct unauthorized surveillance on our territory."

His emerald eyes went wide with the kind of panic that suggested he knew exactly how Thorne family security operated. "No, wait. I will purchase something. I swear I am not some unaffiliated stalker."

"That depends," I said, enjoying every second of his discomfort. "On who exactly you are monitoring, this little shopping expedition could become very expensive for your operations."

I swear I saw him mentally calculating whether strangling me would be worth the inevitable war with rival families. The thought made me smile even wider.

"It is Gemma," he admitted through gritted teeth. "And before you interrogate me further, yes, I am interested in establishing a relationship with her. Very interested."

Now we were getting somewhere. "Excellent choice. She is absolutely incredible."

His entire demeanor shifted, like he had been waiting for someone to discuss tactical advantages. "She really is, is she not?"

"The best," I confirmed. "Beautiful, intelligent, fearless, talented. But that pathetic street scum ex-boyfriend of hers really damaged her psychological defenses when he betrayed her trust with some trashy corner dealer."

Something lethally dark flashed across his aristocratic features. "He betrayed her?"

"Multiple times. She has been maintaining defensive protocols ever since." I studied his face carefully, recognizing the murderous intent building behind those eyes. "So what is your operational budget looking like? Because if you want to impress a woman of Gemma’s caliber, it is going to require significant resources."

"Trust constraints are not an issue," he said without hesitation, and I believed him. "Just do not liquidate my entire weapons cache."

Famous last words. Clearly, this man had never shopped for high-end surveillance equipment and personal protection gear before. This was going to be educational for both of us.

I spent the next while carefully selecting items that would complement Gemma's security needs while demonstrating his serious intentions. Military-grade communication devices, luxury personal defense accessories, the kind of protection jewelry that cost more than most people's annual income. While I worked, I told him everything about Gemma that would make him fall even harder.

Her passion for maintaining cover in hostile territory, her incredible instincts for survival, the way she illuminated when she discussed something that mattered to her. How she had been wounded but was slowly learning to trust the family again.

When I finished assembling what was essentially a professional bodyguard's dream arsenal disguised as elegant gifts, I sent Gemma a quick encrypted message telling her to step out for reconnaissance in just a few minutes.

At the register, I watched his face as I calculated item after item. The total climbed higher and higher until it reached a number that would make most street dealers faint.

When I turned the screen toward him, he went completely pale.

"This cannot be accurate," he said weakly.

"Oh, it is accurate." I tried not to laugh at his expression. "Quality protection costs serious money, sweetheart."

He looked like he was somewhere between having a panic attack and calling for backup. But he handed over his black card without another word.

"You need to move quickly," I said as I processed the payment with professional efficiency. "Gemma is about to leave her store, and I will have this delivered to your secure location."

He fumbled for his wallet and pulled out a business card with hands that definitely were not shaking from fear of combat. "Contact me immediately. I want to offer you a position in my organization."

Well, that was unexpected. And potentially very lucrative.

I watched through the reinforced window as he practically sprinted across the street with lethal grace, timing it perfectly to intercept Gemma as she stepped outside. Then he had the absolute audacity to act surprised to see her, like it was some magical coincidence rather than a carefully orchestrated tactical maneuver.

The man was a better operator than I had given him credit for.

The next day was my scheduled rest period, and I decided to pay him a visit. If he was serious about that job offer, I was not going to let such an opportunity slip away.

The address on his business card led me to a gleaming downtown fortress that made my jaw drop. When the private elevator opened onto the top floor, I suddenly realized I might have significantly underestimated exactly which tier of the organization I was dealing with.

A friendly older woman at the security checkpoint directed me through a set of impressive reinforced doors that probably cost more than most people’s cars.

"Good morning!" A stunning blonde woman greeted me warmly. I recognized her immediately from the intelligence briefings about Thorne family operations.

"Good morning," I replied, lifting the delivery bag. "I am here to make a delivery to Dominic Frost and discuss potential business arrangements with him."

Her eyes lit up with predatory curiosity as she spotted the specialized equipment supplier logo. "Oh, this should be fascinating. I have seen you operating at the territory mall, have I not? At the security supply store?"

"That is correct. And I have observed you conducting surveillance at Gemma’s boutique plenty of times."

"Dominic has been monitoring Gemma, has he not?" she asked with a knowing smile that suggested she had access to all the family's operational intelligence. "This is going to be good. Come on, I want to witness his reaction."

She led me into an enormous corner office that screamed lethal authority, where Dominic sat behind an imposing mahogany desk that could probably stop rifle rounds. When he looked up and saw me, his expression was absolutely priceless.

"Well, well. My favorite little arms dealer," he said, standing up with a rueful smile that did not quite hide his respect. "I was wondering when you would conduct this follow-up operation."

"Arms dealer?" the blonde woman asked, clearly delighted by this development.

"Zoe, meet Lila. Lila, this is Zoe, my intelligence coordinator and the person who keeps this organization running smoothly." He gestured between us with dangerous elegance. "Zoe, Lila here convinced me to drop a substantial amount on protection gear yesterday, and I believe we need her operational expertise on our team."

Zoe burst into laughter that sounded like silver bullets. "A substantial amount? On protection gear? This I absolutely have to hear."

We settled into the plush chairs in front of his desk while Dominic recounted yesterday's tactical disaster. By the time he finished, Zoe was practically in tears from laughing so hard.

"Lila, I adore you already," she said, wiping her eyes with lethal grace. "Dominic, recruiting her is the smartest strategic decision you have made in quite some time."

"So," Dominic said, leaning back in his chair with the confidence of a man who owned half the city's underground, "are you interested in putting those persuasion skills to work for our family?"

I looked around the impressive office, thought about the possibilities, and smiled with genuine predatory anticipation. "When do I start?"

The next morning, I walked into my new position with excitement coursing through my veins like adrenaline before a hit. Something told me this was going to be the beginning of something absolutely deadly.