Mafia Mask 231

Chapter 231: Give Me Your Phone

Gemma’s POV

This week had been extraordinary for the boutique’s operations. My sales figures were breaking records, and I was finally finding my footing in this dangerous corner of Thorne family territory. Lila had accepted Dominic’s offer to join his money laundering operation at Zenith Systems after proving herself during a high-stakes consultation with rival family contacts. I celebrated her success, but her departure left me strangely isolated in the shop that sat squarely within Capo Dominic Frost’s protected zone.

Dominic had established a concerning pattern at the shopping complex. Every single day during my lunch break, he materialized without fail, sweeping me away for coffee meetings that left my pulse hammering against my ribs. He kept demanding my contact information with an intensity that bordered on obsessive, and I found myself relishing the control I wielded over this feared Thorne family enforcer. The situation’s absurdity wasn’t lost on me that his own nephew Vincenzo possessed my number while the dangerous Capo remained completely excluded.

One day delivered an unexpected lunch invitation from Vincenzo, who was eager to introduce me to his girlfriend. She proved to be genuinely sweet, though she possessed enough nervous energy to fill a room when meeting someone connected to her boyfriend’s lethal family. After we finished our meal and walked back toward the boutique, Vincenzo intercepted me at the entrance with that signature smile that seemed to be a Frost family trait.

"You look absolutely stunning today," he said with inherited charm that reminded me exactly of his uncle’s predatory confidence. "Listen, I won’t be patrolling the mall next week because of finals. Mom will have my head if I don’t focus on academics instead of family business."

"Smart choice, sweetheart. But why the advance warning?" I asked, genuinely curious about his reasoning.

"Because I need to ask you for a massive favor."

"I’m listening."

"Please, for the sake of everyone's sanity, give Uncle Dominic your phone number. He's already threatening to resume those handwritten notes next week, and I cannot continue serving as his personal communication courier. The secondhand embarrassment from a Capo acting like a lovesick teenager is unbearable." Vincenzo pressed his palms together in exaggerated supplication, making me dissolve into laughter.

"Fine, you've worn me down. I'll meet him for lunch tomorrow and finally end his suffering. But I'm going to torture him just a little longer first."

"You're a lifesaver! Oh, and Grandma and Mom are desperate to meet you. Any possibility you could join us for dinner soon?"

"Soon, honey. Send them both my regards."

I embraced Vincenzo and his chattery girlfriend goodbye. Right on schedule, Dominic emerged for our daily coffee routine, his eyes brightening dangerously the moment they found me.

The next day's lunch arrangement involved meeting Zoe and Ivy, though I suspected ulterior motives behind the casual invitation. Zoe had been orchestrating connections, allegedly helping Ivy's former associate arrange a reconciliation meeting. She claimed Dominic had only agreed to facilitate Ivy's introduction to one of his contacts if I participated in the lunch as well. Zoe was developing quite sophisticated manipulation skills.

After we concluded our meal, Dominic escorted me back to the boutique, his hand occasionally making contact with mine in ways that sent dangerous electricity racing up my arm. He mentioned having territorial business during our usual coffee time, genuine frustration darkening his features.

That moment inspired my decision to surprise him.

"I'm going to miss you," I confessed, the admission escaping before I could contain it.

"Only if you choose to," he replied, moving closer with predatory grace.

"But you're the one who'll be handling family obligations." I smiled up at him, enjoying the way his green eyes intensified.

"If I had your number, I could contact you later," he leaned down until his breath scorched my ear, "maybe a private call when you're comfortable at home."

"You're absolutely ruthless," I breathed, my heartbeat accelerating at his suggestion. "You're going to destroy me completely. Give me your phone."

I quickly programmed my number into his contacts, and he rewarded me with a smile that could have illuminated the entire complex.

"I'm calling you tonight, beautiful," Dominic murmured before pressing a kiss perilously close to my lips, leaving my knees unsteady.

That evening, I took exceptional care with my shower and settled into bed to await his call. When my phone finally rang, my heart crashed against my ribs like a caged animal. I forced myself to take several steadying breaths before answering.

"I can hear you trying to calm yourself," Dominic's amused voice came through the speaker, making me laugh until tears threatened.

"Dominic, you're impossibly arrogant," I said, wiping my eyes.

"Obsession makes everyone desperate, gorgeous."

"Is that what this is? How did your territorial meeting go anyway?"

"Painfully tedious. I kept fantasizing about being with you instead, especially after you admitted I'm going to destroy you completely. Because I absolutely will."

"You’re already making progress," I admitted.

"Not even remotely close to what I have planned. When I really ruin you, you’re going to worship every second."

"Your confidence is staggering."

"It’s not confidence, Gemma. I just understand exactly what I’m capable of."

"I can sense that." Dominic’s lethal arrogance was surprisingly magnetic. "Are you being honest though? How frequently do you actually think about me during the day?"

"Constantly, woman." His exaggerated sigh made me giggle. "Are you in bed right now?"

"Yes."

"What are you wearing?"

"Absolutely nothing." Dominic’s sharp intake of breath made me grin wickedly. "Just teasing. I’m in pajamas."

"I want to see them."

"Control yourself, Dominic."

"I don’t want control. Come on, show me."

"You first."

"Deal." Dominic positioned his phone against something stable and knelt on his bed.

He wore nothing except white boxer briefs that left absolutely nothing concealed. My mouth went completely dry as I absorbed his perfectly sculpted torso, every muscle defined and demanding to be touched.

"Enjoying the view, Gemma?" His cocky grin confirmed he knew exactly what effect he was creating.

"I could use those abs for target practice," I blurted without thinking, immediately covering my mouth in horror. Dominic's smile turned absolutely predatory.

"I could remove everything if you want a more complete view."

I cleared my throat, attempting to regain some composure.

"You're such a shameless exhibitionist," I managed, though my voice sounded breathless.

Dominic stretched out on his bed, one arm behind his head like he was posing for some dangerous magazine cover. From my angle, I had an unobstructed view of his chest down to those sinfully tight boxers that were doing nothing to hide his obvious arousal.

"Your turn, Gemma," he commanded with authority that made my stomach clench.

"I'm not modeling my sleepwear for you."

"Yes, you are, because you want this as desperately as I want to see."

"According to who?"

"If you didn't want this, you wouldn't have chosen that particular outfit knowing we were video calling."

"Your ego is massive," I said, trying to sound irritated despite the heat building in my core.

"It’s not ego, Gemma. I know you’re not immune to me any more than I am to you. Let me see what you’re wearing."

"Fine." I positioned my phone against the bedside lamp and mirrored his earlier pose.

Dominic’s breathing became audibly heavier, his confident smirk vanishing as he took in my appearance. I had chosen a pale pink babydoll set from the boutique, all delicate lace that left little to the imagination. The shorts barely covered anything, and the camisole top strained against my curves.

"Christ, Gemma. You’re going to kill me," Dominic sat up abruptly, and I could see exactly how affected he was. "Turn around. I need to see all of you."

"Not until you return the favor," I challenged.

Dominic disappeared from view briefly, repositioning his camera toward a leather chair. When he reappeared, he was facing away from me, completely naked. The sight of him made my hands clench against my sheets. He turned slowly, meeting my eyes through the screen before settling into the chair.

"Now you’ve seen everything," he said calmly, his hand moving to stroke himself with confident ease. "Your turn, Gemma. I want to see it all."

Chapter 232: Digital Desire

Gemma’s POV

I remained perfectly still, my eyes fixed on his hand as it moved along his hardened length. The desperate urge to taste him consumed me, making my mouth water with anticipation. He released a low, dangerous chuckle and spoke my name again, his voice carrying that familiar edge of authority that came with commanding respect in the Thorne family territory.

"Keep looking at me like that and I'll abandon this shipment meeting and be at your apartment in minutes," Dominic warned, his voice thick with desire and barely contained violence. "Come on, beautiful. Move for me. I want to see every inch of that gorgeous little number you're wearing."

I rose from my position on the bed and stepped into the camera's view, rotating slowly to give him the complete display he demanded. Even through the screen, I could feel the intensity of his gaze, the same predatory focus he used when surveying his territory or interrogating enemies.

"Gemma, you're absolutely divine," Dominic breathed, gripping his phone tighter with hands I knew had spilled blood just hours earlier. "Now, would you remove that tempting little outfit for me? Please, I need to see you."

"And what makes you think I would do that for a dangerous man like you?" I challenged him, knowing how much he enjoyed my defiance.

"Because I can tell you're enjoying this power play as much as I am. Because I know you're already burning up inside thinking about what I could do to you with these hands. And because I'm certain you want to drive the most feared Capo in this city completely insane with need."

"You assume quite a lot for someone who kills people for a living."

"My assumptions about human nature are rarely wrong in my line of work. Can you honestly say I'm mistaken about you?"

I chose to embrace my boldness since the attraction between us was undeniable and lethal. Our physical connection was inevitable, and despite the danger of being involved with a high-ranking member of the Thorne family, the timing felt right. Why not torment this powerful, deadly man deliciously during this secure video session? I turned away from the camera and began lifting my silky top, drawing it over my head before facing him again with my arms crossed protectively over my chest. I slowly lowered my arms, pausing strategically while my hands provided minimal coverage. Dominic's attention was completely captured, his green eyes burning with the same intensity I'd seen when he discussed eliminating threats to his operation.

"God, Gemma, when I finally get my hands on you..." Dominic's breathing became labored, and I could see his intense arousal building as he momentarily forgot about the dangerous world outside this intimate moment.

I grinned and let my hands drift down my torso, sliding my fingers under the waistband of my tiny shorts. I pushed them down and leaned forward to step out of them, bringing my body closer to the camera lens. Dominic's groan echoed through the encrypted connection, a sound of pure need from a man who commanded absolute obedience from dozens of armed soldiers.

"You're the most stunning woman I've ever laid eyes on, Gemma." Dominic stared at the screen without blinking, his usual calculating expression replaced by raw hunger. "I'm completely obsessed with you."

"Is that so, Dominic? Then prove it to me," I said with a sultry smile, knowing I was playing with fire by challenging him.

Dominic was completely hard and stroking himself with the same confident control he used when handling weapons or intimidating rivals. He angled the camera down, and I could witness his impressive arousal in full detail.

"Just from watching me like this?" I taunted, and he nodded eagerly, his usual composure completely shattered. "Then picture me straddling you in your penthouse, taking you deep inside me while your security team guards the door." Dominic released a primal sound and quickened his pace.

"You're absolutely wicked," he grinned, his dangerous charm on full display. "Show me how ready you are for me. I know you're aching and desperate for what only I can give you."

His words rang true. I could feel the moisture gathering between my thighs and the fire spreading through my core. I was dying to have this powerful, lethal man fill me completely. I reclined on my bed, positioning myself perfectly for his hungry gaze, opening myself to him. I began caressing myself, sliding my fingers along my most sensitive areas while imagining his scarred hands replacing mine.

"You're destroying me," Dominic groaned, his voice rougher than when he issued commands to his crew. "You're absolutely perfect. So incredibly hot."

I laughed watching his reaction intensify as I continued pleasuring myself with growing fervor, knowing I had complete power over this man who controlled an empire built on fear and respect.

"You're absolutely right, I'm soaked and burning, desperate to feel you right here inside me," I moaned. The pleasure was building rapidly, and I knew my release was approaching fast.

"My beautiful goddess, you'll have everything you crave when I get back from this arms deal. But right now I need to watch you come apart for me, pretend I'm there touching you, worshipping those perfect breasts."

Dominic's voice had dropped to a rough whisper that sent waves of heat through my body. His dirty talk combined with that underlying edge of danger was driving me to the edge faster than I expected.

"I'm going to worship you completely, Gemma. Picture my mouth on your breast while my fingers tease your other nipple, then I'll switch and give you a gentle bite before moving to lavish attention on the other one. Your breasts are incredible, I'm going to devour them when I return from this territory meeting."

"While I'm worshipping these amazing breasts, I'll be buried deep inside your gorgeous pussy, so smooth and perfectly bare, absolutely delicious," Dominic continued his verbal assault on my senses. "Feel my thick cock sliding in and out of your tight wetness, my body slapping against yours, you crying out for more despite knowing how dangerous I am. My length pulsing inside you, hitting that perfect spot that makes you scream my name."

"Yes, Dominic, don't stop," I pleaded, feeling my climax building to a crescendo.

"You're so close now, my gorgeous girl. I can picture your pussy gripping my cock, taking every inch and getting impossibly tight around me. I'm going to pound you relentlessly when I get home." I felt the first waves of my orgasm crash over me and he recognized the signs immediately. "That's it, sexy, let go completely for me, feel my hard throbbing cock driving into you frantically." I shattered completely, pressing my hand against my mouth to muffle my cries.

"Beautiful, Gemma, that's so perfect. Your pussy is glistening and I'm desperate to taste every drop of your sweetness."

My body continued shaking and writhing from the intense orgasm he had given me without a single touch, but this powerful man wasn't finished.

"Grab your phone, my goddess. See what you do to the most dangerous man in this city."

Dominic aimed his camera at his rigid length as he stroked himself frantically, his expensive watch catching the light as his hand moved.

"Imagine when you climax around my cock and your pussy is pulsing around it, milking me perfectly, hungry for my release."

Dominic's words came between heavy breaths and watching this gorgeous, lethal man pleasure himself while thinking of me was intoxicating. I slipped my hand between my legs again, because witnessing him lose control like that made me crave another release. I stared at the screen intensely as vivid images formed in my mind from his explicit descriptions.

"God baby, I need you so desperately," he groaned with raw desire. "You're absolutely incredible, Gemma." His breathing became more ragged as he continued with increasingly passionate declarations.

Dominic reached his peak with a deep, guttural sound that reminded me of his dangerous nature, and I followed immediately after, imagining the ecstasy of our bodies joined together.

When he turned the camera back to his handsome face, I saw a devastatingly attractive man struggling to catch his breath, looking completely satisfied and temporarily tamed.

"You're a goddess, Gemma. I need you in my bed the moment I finish handling this family business."

"You're quite the smooth talker for a killer, Dominic. You know exactly how to affect a woman," I smiled back at him.

"I'm thrilled you appreciate my talents beyond intimidation and violence." He flashed that devilish grin that made him so dangerously attractive. "How are you feeling right now?"

"Fine."

"Fine? Just fine? Come on, woman, you climaxed twice and gave me an earth-shattering release, and you're just fine? Hell, I'm absolutely euphoric. If you can affect me this powerfully through an encrypted video call, when I'm actually inside you, you might just stop my heart completely."

I burst into laughter at his dramatic response. Dominic was articulate and charming when he wasn't being terrifying, not to mention devastatingly attractive and skilled at igniting a woman's deepest fantasies. We continued talking, and he remained focused and patient, freely expressing how beautiful and desirable he found me, and how intensely he wanted me despite the complications his lifestyle brought.

"My goddess, tomorrow Zoe has another intelligence briefing scheduled during our usual coffee time. But I'll come get you after I finish my rounds," Dominic said before ending our call, and I found myself smiling at all the dangerous attention he was showering on me.

Chapter 233: Sweet Torture

Dominic's POV

After spending several days convincing Gemma to give me a chance, she finally agreed to have lunch with me and handed over her phone number. My heart soared with the kind of satisfaction that came from claiming territory. But naturally Zoe had to ruin my usual coffee meetup with Gemma by scheduling some pointless meeting with the family's money laundering contacts.

I promised to video call her that evening. The moment I walked through the reinforced steel doors of my penthouse, anticipation coursed through my veins like adrenaline before a hit. I took a quick shower and deliberately threw on nothing but my boxers, planning to drive her wild. But the joke was on me when she appeared on screen wearing what could barely be called sleepwear. The sheer fabric clung to every dangerous curve of her incredible body, leaving absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Seeing her like that broke something inside me. Raw desire consumed every rational thought, the same way bloodlust took over during family business. If she wanted to play games with a Capo, she would have to deal with what she unleashed. But Gemma surprised me yet again. She was magnetic, responsive, completely uninhibited. Watching her through that screen was pure torture and ecstasy combined. I had never experienced anything so intensely erotic, not even with the high-end escorts who frequented our underground clubs.

After we ended the call, I had to take care of myself again before jumping into an ice cold shower. My body refused to calm down like it did after eliminating a threat. I could have stayed on that video call until sunrise, but I did not want to overwhelm her. Plus she looked exhausted from those brutal shifts at the store in our protected territory.

She had mentioned graduating with a business degree, so I offered her a position at Zenith Systems, my money laundering front. She shot me down immediately. Always worried about keeping things separate, maintaining boundaries. But I would find another way to pull her deeper into my world.

We made plans for me to pick her up after work the next day. I arrived early in my armored car and waited outside the store, watching for her to emerge while scanning for any rival family surveillance. When I drove her home, we got into a small fight about the designer dress and imported Italian heels I had purchased for her. Eventually she accepted them, but not without reminding me that I would not be the one removing them later. Just friends with benefits, she insisted. She leaned over and kissed my cheek so innocently before getting out. My entire body burned for her with the same intensity I felt before executing family justice, but I forced myself to stay in control. Getting her to accept the dress had been difficult enough.

The following evening we were finally going out with my crew, meeting somewhere other than that damn mall in our territory. Anxiety twisted in my stomach as I parked outside her house, the same feeling I got before a major operation. I sent a quick text announcing my arrival, then got out and leaned against the bulletproof car.

When she walked through that gate, my jaw practically hit the pavement. Gemma was the most breathtaking woman who had ever existed. The golden fabric made her dark skin glow like she was lit from within by something divine. Her hair fell in perfect waves down her back. Those endless legs looked even more incredible in those sky high heels. She was not just beautiful, she was absolutely flawless.

"You look incredible," I managed to say before greeting her with kisses on both cheeks, the traditional way we showed respect in the family.

"Thank you, Dominic. You clean up pretty well yourself."

I noticed her smile disappear as she glanced across the street. Following her gaze, I spotted a black sedan parked in the shadows, but could not make out who was inside. The change in her demeanor was immediate and concerning. My hand instinctively moved toward the gun tucked under my jacket.

"What is it, Gemma? Do you recognize that car?"

"Dominic, we should go." She slid into my car quickly, immediately pulling out her phone to type a message.

"Everything alright?" I asked while starting the engine, my eyes still fixed on the suspicious vehicle. In my line of work, parked cars meant surveillance or worse.

"Just texting my mom about a suspicious car near the house. She is going to call the police."

"We can go back if you want. Stay with your mom until this gets sorted out." My voice carried the edge it got when I was preparing for violence.

"No need. Her boyfriend is there tonight, and she will handle it."

"Alright. Call her later to check in, and let us go have some fun." I smiled at her when we stopped at a red light, though my mind was already calculating which of my soldiers I would assign to watch her house.

"Thanks, Dominic." She gave me a small smile in return.

The upscale bar the girls had chosen was perfect. Stylish, energetic, the kind of place where legitimate businessmen mixed with family associates. After introductions, Zoe immediately dragged all the women onto the dance floor. I stayed with the guys, unable to take my eyes off Gemma as she moved her perfect body to the music like a goddess among mortals.

When they returned to our table, Xavier and Caleb had arrived, and Xavier was already completely mesmerized by Ruby. The band transitioned to a slower song, so I asked my goddess to dance. On the

floor, I pulled her against me by the waist, feeling her soft curves pressed against my body like she belonged there.

"You are absolutely stunning, Gemma. I mean, you always are, but this dress was designed for you," I whispered against her ear.

"Thank you, Dominic. I really do love the dress and shoes."

"So do I." I sighed contentedly.

"If you want them so badly, maybe I should lend them to you," Gemma teased with that mischievous laugh that made my blood sing.

"Absolutely. Let us go to my place so you can take everything off for me." She laughed at my boldness. "What? You offered to lend them to me."

"I did not say you would get to see me naked again."

"Do not be cruel. Do you have any idea how hard I am fighting not to carry you out of here right now? Though I might not be able to stop myself from claiming you completely."

"I already told you that you are not taking off my dress tonight."

"We will see about that." Gemma laughed. "Please tell me you are wearing proper underwear because this dress barely covers anything."

"Why would you assume I am not wearing underwear?" Gemma asked, looking confused.

"Because after our video call, I got the impression you prefer not to wear panties," I teased, making her remember our video call.

"Those shorts were basically underwear," she whispered in my ear, sending chills down my spine.

"They covered absolutely nothing. And you know it." I grumbled. "You definitely wanted to torture me."

"Oh, you did not enjoy it." Gemma put on a fake disappointed expression. "Next time I will wear one of those ridiculous animal pajama suits that only shows your face. Would you prefer that?"

"I would prefer you completely naked."

"You are terrible," Gemma giggled.

"You have no idea how terrible I can be."

When the song ended, we returned to find Ivy and Caleb getting very cozy. Things were definitely progressing well for my boss. The entire night was perfect. I took advantage of every slow song to have her body pressed against mine. That tiny dress was driving me absolutely insane with the same madness that came before a kill. As we prepared to leave, I pulled her close before we got in the car.

"Are you absolutely certain you will not let me take off this little dress tonight?" I asked, running my fingers along the thin strap.

"Completely certain. You are going to be good and drive me home."

"How will I know if you are actually wearing underwear?"

"You will not," Gemma laughed and got into the car.

"You are evil." I closed her door and walked around, settling into my seat with a heavy sigh. "You are sure?"

"Yes, take me home, Dominic. I have the early shift tomorrow at the mall."

"You really need a different job." Something safer, away from the streets where rival families operated. Gemma just laughed.

When I parked outside her house, Gemma turned to me with a wicked gleam in her eyes and took my hand, guiding it to her thigh. I looked into her eyes and sighed, letting her lead.

"You wanted to know if I am wearing panties," she said seductively, moving my hand under her dress.

I smiled slowly and let her guide my hand between her legs until I felt thin fabric, then pressed my palm against her, caressing her warm center. I felt dampness through the material and groaned while staring into her eyes.

"Damn it, Gemma. How am I supposed to leave you here now?" I breathed heavily as she pulled me into a hot, passionate kiss.

I caressed her through the thin material, my palm pressed against her, fingers moving up and down. Gemma moaned into my mouth, and my cock throbbed painfully in my pants. I was burning with need for this incredible, sexy woman who had no idea she was playing with a killer. She teased me relentlessly but kept me on a tight leash. She gave me just enough to drive me wild but never enough to satisfy me. My control was slipping fast.

While we kissed, she placed her hand on my erection and began massaging me through my pants. My cock was rock hard and desperate to be where my fingers were touching. It was a long kiss filled with sweet torture. When she pulled away, I wanted so much more.

She moved my hand from between her legs to her ass, and I realized she was wearing a thong. With my other hand, I lifted the hem of her dress and saw the tiny, transparent black material.

"This barely qualifies as underwear, Gemma." I groaned with appreciation, looking at her as she let me lift her dress, showing me her incredible body. "It covers absolutely nothing it is supposed to."

"Really? Maybe I should return it then." She put on an innocent expression. "But since it covers nothing anyway," Gemma said, pushing my hand away from her body. She quickly slipped off the thong and tossed it into my lap. "I guess I do not need it."

"Jesus Christ, Gemma." I was completely speechless. She leaned across me, gave my lips a quick kiss while smoothing down her dress, then got out of the car.

"Sweet dreams, Dominic. I had an amazing time tonight," she said, batting her eyelashes while leaning against the car window, then turned and walked inside.

Chapter 234: Playing with Fire

Gemma's POV

I bolted through my apartment door in the Thorne family's protected territory, desperate to escape before Dominic could convince me to come back to his private compound with him. My body was still humming with need, every nerve ending alive from his touch. He was everything that made my pulse race - devastatingly handsome with those dangerous green eyes, charming beyond reason, and lethally sexy in the way only a high-ranking Capo could be. The scent of his expensive cologne still clung to my skin, mixed with the faint metallic smell of gunpowder that always seemed to follow him, making it impossible to think straight. But despite every instinct screaming at me to give in to the most powerful man in Port Serenity's underground, I had to resist. My manager had switched my schedule last minute, and I needed to be at the boutique early tomorrow morning to help with a shipment that couldn't draw unwanted attention.

I headed straight for the bathroom, hoping a cold shower would extinguish the fire burning through my veins. The icy water did little to cool my heated thoughts of Dominic's calloused hands on my body, his lips against my neck as he whispered dangerous promises about what he'd do to anyone who tried to hurt me. I was toweling off when my phone buzzed against the nightstand. Dominic's name lit up the screen, and I could practically feel his presence through the device.

Dominic: "You smell incredible. Even better than I dreamed when I'm counting money in my office."

My lips curved into a ridiculous smile as I stared at the message. Sleep was clearly not happening anytime soon with a mafia Capo texting me, so I decided to play with fire a little longer. I settled back against my pillows and typed back innocently, knowing full well that Dominic Frost was not a man who appreciated being teased.

Gemma: "I have no idea what you mean."

Dominic: "The little present you left behind in my armored car."

Gemma: "What present?"

Dominic: "That delicate piece of fabric you conveniently forgot on my leather seat."

Gemma: "Oh, that tiny thing that barely counts as underwear."

Dominic: "That's exactly what I'm talking about. Do you realize what you've done to me, Gemma? I had a meeting with the underbosses and couldn't focus."

Gemma: "Made you tired from all that criminal enterprise management?"

Dominic: "Adorable guess, but not even close. Try again, beautiful."

Gemma: "Confused about your next territory expansion?"

Dominic: "Getting warmer. I'm aching for you, Gemma. I want you naked in my bed at the compound where I can keep you safe. And I know you want the same thing. When are you going to stop playing these dangerous games with a man like me?"

Gemma: "I'm not playing games. I have an early shift tomorrow and actually need some rest before dealing with customers who might be running surveillance."

Dominic: "You could rest here with me. My security team would make sure no one disturbs us."

Gemma: "Would you actually let me sleep, Dominic? Be honest with me."

Dominic: "You got me there. I definitely wouldn't let you sleep. Not when you're finally where you belong. You need a new job, and I can make that happen with one phone call."

Gemma: "I already explained why I won't let you mix your business with my life."

Dominic: "But I want to mix everything with you. My empire, my bed, my future."

Gemma: "For now, you'll have to settle for your imagination and whatever illegal activities keep you busy."

Dominic: "You think I can sleep in this condition when I should be planning tomorrow's collections?"

Gemma: "What condition exactly?"

Dominic: "Rock hard and throbbing. Even an ice-cold shower in my marble bathroom didn't help."

Gemma: "Maybe try counting the family's profits instead of thinking about me."

Dominic: "Very funny. I'd rather use that smart mouth of yours for something much more satisfying."

Gemma: "I'd love to take you between my lips and drive the big bad Capo crazy."

Dominic: "Christ, Gemma. You're killing me here. I feel like a horny teenager instead of a man who controls half the city."

Gemma: "I wish I could watch the dangerous Dominic Frost lose control."

My phone immediately started ringing with a video call. Dominic's face appeared on screen for just a moment, his green eyes dark with desire, before the camera shifted downward. My breath caught in my

throat as I took in the sight of him - hard and magnificent, my panties wrapped around his impressive length as his hand moved in deliberate strokes. Even in this intimate moment, he looked like the powerful predator he was, and I felt my mouth water with the need to taste him.

Two could play this dangerous game. I angled my phone to capture myself as I settled back against my pillows, letting the most feared man in Port Serenity see exactly what his little show was doing to me. My fingers found their destination, and I heard him groan deeply when he realized what I was doing. The sound sent electricity shooting through me, and I couldn't hold back my own moans as I watched him pleasure himself.

The sight of Dominic losing control was intoxicating. His breathing grew ragged, his movements more urgent, and I could see the tension in his powerful shoulders. I felt myself climbing higher, my vision blurring as the pressure built. When I whispered that I was close, he cursed in a way that would make his enemies tremble and picked up his pace. The wave crashed over me suddenly, stealing my breath and making me cry out his name like a prayer.

Through my haze, I heard Dominic's voice rough with need, telling me he couldn't last much longer. I focused on the screen, watching him come apart with a groan that made me want him all over again. His chest heaved as he caught his breath, muscles flexing with each inhale like the predator he was even in vulnerability.

He lifted the phone to his face, his eyes dark with satisfaction and hunger. "Gemma, I need you to understand how badly I want you. When you're finally in my bed at the compound, it's going to be explosive."

"I want you just as much, Dominic. We need to figure out when we can make this happen safely." I smiled, still feeling the aftershocks of my release. "But right now, I really do need sleep."

"I'm getting you out of that boutique job where you're exposed," he said with the determination of a man accustomed to getting his way.

"I'm actively looking for something else, but until then, I'm stuck there."

"Work for me instead. I'll keep you safe."

"I already gave you my answer about mixing with family business. Don't push it." He looked frustrated but didn't argue further, probably remembering that his usual intimidation tactics wouldn't work on me.

"Can I see you tomorrow?"

"Call me when I finish my shift."

"Perfect. Sweet dreams, gorgeous."

"You too, handsome."

I ended the call and felt sleep tugging at me immediately, my body finally relaxed. My dreams were filled with images of Dominic - his hands exploring my body, his mouth claiming mine while he whispered promises about protecting me from every threat in this dangerous city. I knew he had a reputation with women, Zoe had made that crystal clear during her warnings about getting involved with the Thorne family's inner circle. A serious relationship wasn't in the cards for us, not when his world was filled with violence and betrayal. But we could definitely have some incredible fun together. I drifted off planning exactly how to make that happen.

I was folding clothes at work when Zoe's text came through. Ivy needed her friends, and we were meeting at some upscale establishment near the mall. The Social Union was notorious in Port Serenity - officially a private club, but everyone knew it was where the city's most dangerous men conducted business and entertained themselves. I'd never been to a place that exclusive before, so curiosity won out. I texted back that I'd head over after my shift and let my mom know I'd be out with the girls.

Nora and Ruby had already claimed a table when I arrived. The Social Union was even more impressive than I'd imagined - all sleek lines and ambient lighting, with an undercurrent of danger that made my skin prickle. We caught up while waiting for Zoe and Ivy. When they finally showed up, Ivy looked better than she had in days since her troubles with Caleb. She'd decided to forgive him, completely smitten despite everything that came with loving a mafia don.

Zoe suggested we check out the game room, and the moment we walked in, Nora spotted the guys at a corner table. They were surrounded by a flock of women vying for their attention, including several I recognized as daughters of rival families trying to form alliances. My blood boiled when I saw some platinum blonde pressing her chest practically into Dominic's face. After everything we'd shared not

long ago, here he was letting some random woman throw herself at him like he wasn't the same man who'd just told me I belonged in his bed.

I wanted to march over there and stake my claim, but Ruby had a better idea. She'd spotted her brother at another table with his friends and suggested we make those idiots jealous instead. It was brilliant, and potentially dangerous given the territorial nature of these men. Ruby assured us her brother and his crew would be more than happy to help with our little scheme.

Parker introduced us to his group - five gorgeous men who were charming, funny, and clearly interested. They immediately invited us to join them, showering us with compliments and attention while carefully avoiding any behavior that might start a war with the Thorne family. Ruby's plan worked like magic. Within minutes, I could feel eyes burning into me from across the room. When I glanced over, Dominic was staring at me with an expression that could melt steel and probably had in literal situations. Game on.

Chapter 235: High Stakes Showdown

Blood Money Games

Dominic's POV

I gathered with my crew at the Thorne family's exclusive establishment within the Social Union, ready to back Caleb through his latest catastrophe with Ivy. Sure, she had every right to demand blood after what went down, but loyalty in our world meant standing by your Don even when he'd royally screwed the famiglia. What had me on edge was Jude and Finn's intelligence that our women were coordinating some kind of calculated retaliation campaign, all thanks to Caleb's spectacular mess.

Finn dropped the bombshell that Zoe had assembled all the girls under Ivy's direct orders, and my mind raced wondering where they could be plotting our systematic destruction. In our line of work, when the women started conspiring, bodies usually followed.

"Anyone have intel on their current location?" I pressed, hoping to extract Gemma before whatever feminine warfare they were orchestrating escalated into something that required cleanup crews. We had plans tonight, and maybe I could pull her from their war council before things got messy.

"Zoe shut me down hard and made it crystal clear it's none of our goddamn business," Finn muttered, visibly shaken. Sometimes I suspected he was genuinely terrified of his girlfriend, and honestly, I couldn't blame him. Zoe had personally disappeared men who'd crossed her, and that was just recently.

"We could track them down through our network if we really tried," Xavier suggested with that reckless gleam in his eye. "Jude, you've got surveillance access on Nora's movements, right?"

"Absolutely not, Xavier. The last time I pulled that surveillance stunt, she nearly slit my throat in my sleep, and I swore on my mother's grave never to cross that line again. And that disaster was helping you out..." Jude's voice carried genuine terror.

"I'll reach out to Gemma directly. We had concrete arrangements for today," I said, pulling out my encrypted phone and crafting what I hoped was an irresistible message.

"Hey gorgeous, did you sleep well? Are you home? What time should I come collect you?"

Her response arrived within seconds, which somehow made my chest tighten with dangerous anticipation.

"Hey handsome, slept like an angel. How about you? Unfortunately, I can't see you today, I'm with the girls."

Exactly what I'd suspected. They were definitely coordinating something, and in our world, coordination usually meant someone was about to pay in blood. I decided to push harder.

"I spent the entire night fantasizing about seeing you again. Tell me where you are, and I'll just stop by for a minute."

"Smooth operator, Dominic!" Xavier leaned over my shoulder, reading the exchange with obvious excitement.

My phone buzzed again, but when I opened the message, it wasn't from Gemma. It was from Zoe, and my blood ran cold like ice water.

"Frost, I’m confident Finn already relayed my message, since my prince follows orders so beautifully. But in case you missed it, let me be crystal clear: WHERE WE ARE IS ABSOLUTELY NONE OF YOUR BUSINESS! Stop harassing Gemma immediately, she’ll contact you when she gets home. Oh, and don’t you dare stumble into the office tomorrow with a hangover."

I passed the phone around, and the guys erupted in nervous laughter while Finn just shook his head in complete defeat.

"What choice do I have? She controls every aspect of my existence. The worst part is how incredibly arousing I find her dominance!" Finn’s admission triggered another round of uncomfortable laughter.

"She terrorizes me too, Finn, but I’m genuinely afraid she’ll have me whacked," I admitted, which only made everyone laugh harder.

"Well, at least we’ve identified the supreme commander of the girlfriends’ alliance," Caleb observed grimly.

"You know what, let’s reclaim some dignity. A serious poker game will restore our masculine pride," Xavier suggested, and we all agreed it was exactly what we needed as we headed to the Union’s high-stakes casino floor.

The moment we entered the private gaming area, Beatrix materialized with her usual pack of social climbing parasites and immediately attached herself to us like a blood-sucking leech.

"Darling! What a delicious surprise finding you here!" Beatrix draped herself across my shoulders, deliberately pressing her silicon enhancements against my face.

"Beatrix, back the hell off. I’m here for a private game with my family," I responded coldly, trying to create distance before I had to get physical.

"Don’t be such a killjoy, sweetheart. We’ll provide excellent entertainment," Beatrix persisted with predatory determination. "And I’m calling Yara right now, Caleb. You absolutely must apologize to that princess."

"For Christ's sake, Beatrix, leave that spoiled mafia princess alone. I have nothing to apologize for, and you need to stay out of family business before you get hurt," Caleb's voice carried genuine menace that would have sent most people running.

"Don't worry about Yara, I'll take excellent care of Caleb," Mina purred, pressing herself against him while he looked ready to commit actual violence.

"This gorgeous mystery man is new. Won't you introduce us properly?" Rick was practically molesting Finn with her aggressive advances.

"Keep your hands off him, Rick. This one belongs to someone who will literally bury you alive," I warned, watching Finn turn crimson from Rick's unwanted attention.

"What about a private walk, sugar?" Elza whispered so close to Xavier's mouth she was practically kissing him.

"Get lost, Elza. We've already had this conversation multiple times," Xavier tried escaping, but these women had more hands than octopuses, touching and grabbing at everything like they owned it.

I struggled to extract my face from Beatrix's aggressive assault when something across the casino floor made my blood boil to dangerous temperatures. This was absolutely unacceptable, and heads were going to roll. But first, we needed to eliminate these pests swarming us like hungry vultures.

"Listen carefully, you pack of whores masquerading as high society ladies. Turn around and disappear before I lose my temper and have security physically remove you from this establishment," Caleb spoke with barely contained fury. I suspected he'd spotted the same infuriating scene that had my trigger finger itching.

"Wow, Caleb, you've really exceeded your rudeness quota today!" Rick hissed through clenched teeth.

"Go to hell, Rick! You're all pathetically clueless! Find someone else to harass and leave us alone before this gets messy," I added, exchanging meaningful looks with Caleb that promised violence.

"Come on, girls, they’re having emotional breakdowns today, and I refuse to be their punching bag," Mina announced before stalking away with her followers, finally allowing me to breathe without suffocating in cheap perfume.

"Now look to my right," I instructed the guys once those insufferable parasites had retreated.

"Jesus Christ, Nora is completely out of line!" Jude snarled.

"Out of line doesn’t begin to cover this disrespect," Xavier added grimly.

We exchanged looks and stood simultaneously, understanding without words that this nonsense ended immediately. We marched toward the table where our women sat like they owned the place, and Jude struck first.

"Having the time of your life, wife?" Jude asked, leaning possessively over Nora with dangerous intent.

"Absolutely, Jude. It appears our women are enjoying themselves tremendously," I confirmed in a voice low enough to promise retribution while positioning myself directly behind Gemma like a territorial predator.

One by one, we approached our respective women, each claiming his territory with the subtle menace that came naturally to men in our position. The men sitting with our girls looked at us like they were issuing direct challenges to our authority. One of them, whom Ruby had introduced as her brother during last night’s family gathering, had the absolute audacity to invite us to join them, which felt like a calculated insult to our status.

Caleb reacted first, pulling Ivy possessively against him with movements that brooked no argument.

Zoe immediately showed her razor-sharp claws, dismissing us and declaring they were staying put like she was giving orders to subordinates. I was prepared to teach my assistant a serious lesson about hierarchy and respect. I was genuinely shocked when Finn contradicted her firmly, insisting they were coming with us regardless of her preferences.

I seized the opportunity, thanking them coldly for their invitation while making it absolutely clear we had existing obligations with our women. But these guys seemed determined to humiliate us publicly in our own territory, and then someone suggested the brilliant idea of betting on who would escort the ladies to dinner.

Xavier, with his usual big mouth and pathetic desperation for Ruby's attention, agreed to the wager before any of us could stop him, leaving us no choice but to participate. We sat at that table knowing our suffering was far from over, and the stakes were dangerously high in ways that went beyond money.

I wanted to put a bullet through Xavier's skull and gouge Hunter's eyes out as he threw himself at Gemma with disgusting obviousness throughout the entire game. Worst of all, Gemma was encouraging his attention, flirting shamelessly with the bastard like she was deliberately trying to drive me to murder. If this torture didn't end quickly, there would be bloodshed right there on the casino floor.

The game began with serious money on the table, and Silas was first to fold after practically molesting Nora with his wandering hands. When Hunter finally left the game, I immediately abandoned it too. I couldn't care less about the substantial sum I'd wagered, but I absolutely would not allow that predator to put his hands on my goddess.

Gradually everyone dropped out until only Caleb and Parker remained in what had become a high-stakes showdown. When Caleb shoved all his considerable chips to the center, I exhaled with relief. If he was making that move, he wouldn't lose. I knew my Don's playing style intimately; his hand was unbeatable. There was an obscene amount of money on the table, enough to buy several legitimate businesses outright.

When Parker threw his cards down and folded, I finally felt my shoulders relax for the first time all evening.

We took the girls to an intimate bistro under family protection with incredible food and spent a genuinely pleasant evening together. After dinner, I drove Gemma home through our secured territory.

"My goddess, let's go to my place. We have some very unfinished business to handle," I said seductively once we were safely in the car.

"We absolutely do, Dominic, but I’m completely exhausted, and I have to work tomorrow," Gemma sighed, and I could see the genuine fatigue in her beautiful eyes.

"I need to get you out of that damn mall and somewhere safer," I grumbled, making her smile despite everything.

"I’m off Wednesday. You could invite me over Tuesday night. Besides, my mom is traveling for work, and I’ll be completely alone all week," Gemma smiled and spoke in that voice that made my blood run hot with dangerous intent. "And I absolutely hate being alone."

"Now that’s the best news I’ve heard all day," I smiled and gave her a quick but promising kiss that tasted like victory. "Let me get you home safely."

I walked my goddess to her door with my hand resting on my concealed weapon, constantly scanning for threats, and arranged to collect her from work the following day.

Chapter 236: Floral Offensive Launch

Dominic’s POV

Monday morning found me meeting my brothers at a small café in our territory, wondering what scheme our Don had orchestrated this time. The early hour made me question agreeing to this gathering when I could have been planning my next move with Gemma.

"Alright Caleb, what operation pulled me from my surveillance reports at dawn?" I asked, settling into the corner booth with espresso strong enough to wake the dead.

Our Don’s eyes gleamed with calculated mischief. "We’re launching a floral offensive, gentlemen. Nothing demonstrates serious territorial claims like an overwhelming display of power."

Finn nodded with military precision. "Perfect timing. Zoe’s been freezing me out since the warehouse incident, and I need every advantage available."

"What caliber of arrangements are we discussing?" Jude inquired, ever the strategist.

Xavier leaned forward conspiratorially. "Each man selects his weapon of choice, but it must be spectacular enough to show these women we've claimed them completely."

After finishing our coffee, we headed to the twenty-four-hour florist operating under family protection. The shop owner pulled up various elegant arrangements on her tablet, but Xavier's attention wandered to a colossal display commanding the corner.

"Gentlemen, witness perfection itself!" Xavier announced, gesturing dramatically at the massive creation.

The arrangement towered before us, a breathtaking collection of pink blooms nested in an enormous crystal vase. The thing measured three feet across, absolutely magnificent in scale.

The florist cleared her throat diplomatically. "That particular arrangement is designed for Don weddings, sir."

Xavier's grin widened dangerously. "Even more appropriate! These women will understand our intentions when they witness something this commanding."

I shook my head. "Xavier, that monument could dominate an entire safe house. Don't you think it's excessive?"

"Excessive like our devotion to them!" Xavier practically vibrated with enthusiasm. "Total dominance or nothing, my brothers!"

Something about his ruthless romanticism infected us all, and before I knew it, we were nodding agreement to his audacious strategy.

Caleb surrendered first. "Fine, that's our template. Mine will be red and white tulips in that exact configuration."

The decision felt surreal, but I found myself caught up in the madness. "Long-stemmed Colombian roses for me, in the deepest crimson available."

Xavier scoffed playfully. "Blood-red roses, Dominic? Could you be more predictable? That's intimidation tactics one-oh-one right there."

I clapped him on the shoulder with dark amusement. "My friend, everything about claiming this woman follows the classic conquest playbook, and I make no apologies."

Grabbing one of the small cards, I wrote my message carefully: "I envy everyone who gets to see you daily." The shop owner accepted it with barely concealed nervousness at our group dynamics.

"If traditional intimidation works for you, then pink peonies are calling my name," Xavier declared, completely obsessed with his Ruby.

Jude stepped forward decisively. "Purple hyacinths will serve my purposes."

Finn surprised us all with his sophisticated choice. "Pink alstroemerias paired with lisianthus, please."

We stared at him like he'd just decoded enemy intelligence. The exotic flower names rolled off his tongue effortlessly.

"Alstroemerias and what now?" we chorused in confusion.

Finn shrugged casually. "They're Zoe's absolute favorites. Essential reconnaissance, gentlemen."

I groaned dramatically. "Show-off! I'm memorizing those names for future operations when I inevitably miscalculate with my complicated target."

The florist promised delivery by morning, and I headed straight to our headquarters afterward. Arriving early gave me time to reorganize my afternoon surveillance schedule, specifically carving out time for

coffee with Gemma. I also sent an encrypted message to my nephew, arranging for him to join us since he'd been instrumental in my romantic intelligence gathering.

When Zoe walked into the command center and discovered me calmly reviewing territory reports, her jaw dropped.

"Well, well, Dominic. Color me impressed!" She applauded slowly. "I didn't expect domesticating you would be this straightforward."

"Don't get cocky, Zo!" I laughed, feeling surprisingly satisfied with the morning. "And keep your hands off my operational schedule. I'm meeting my target for coffee this afternoon."

"Oh really?" Zoe settled into the chair across from me, predatory curiosity sparkling in her eyes. "How are things developing with your acquisition?"

"Stop pretending you don't already monitor every detail," I replied knowingly.

"You're missing the point, slowpoke," she complained with exaggerated patience. "I want to know if you're as pathetically whipped as Xavier is with Ruby."

I groaned at the reminder. "Don't mention Xavier's lapdog behavior. A Consigliere acting like that is painful to witness."

"I think it's endearing to observe."

"Endearing, Zoe? Come on. We're feared enforcers with international reputations, and Xavier's behaving like a lovesick civilian with his first crush," I protested.

"Better than acting like a player who only wants to get her into your bed!" Zoe shot back with a pointed glare.

Her accusation hit its mark, and I felt compelled to defend myself. "Listen, Zo, I absolutely want to possess Gemma completely, desperately so, but that's not my only objective. She captivates me entirely. She's conquered my thoughts, made me restructure my entire operation just to spend time with her, eliminated my interest in other targets completely. Since claiming Gemma, I haven't touched another woman, and it's been quite some time! I haven't even gotten her into my safe house yet, as you well know."

"Sounds like someone's been thoroughly conquered, wouldn't you say, Dominic?" Zoe's observation struck me like sniper fire.

"I honestly don't know, Zo. But I know I want to possess her, and not just physically. Gemma is extraordinary, brilliant, witty, entertaining, dangerously sexy. She's just everything, absolutely everything!"

"Wow! You're just as conquered as Xavier!"

"Oh please, Xavier is embarrassing!" We both started laughing because Xavier really was completely under Ruby's control.

We settled into operational mode, and right on schedule, I heard Zoe's delighted gasp as her delivery arrived. I wandered to her office where she stood nearly in tears.

"Look at this, Dominic, and take notes! This is how a real soldier behaves! My prince is absolutely perfect. He remembered my favorite flowers flawlessly."

"Yeah, Finn really is something special!" I smiled while examining the arrangement closely. The massive size made me wonder if we'd gone completely overboard with our territorial display. My encrypted phone rang, sending me back to my office.

"Good morning, my beautiful target!"

"Good morning, handsome!" Gemma's sultry voice made my pulse quicken. "I just returned from my workout and walked into a botanical paradise in my apartment."

"Did it meet with your approval, my goddess?" I asked, grinning stupidly.

"I absolutely loved it! They’re gorgeous. Though perhaps slightly overwhelming in presentation?" I could hear her smile through the phone.

"I might have gotten carried away with the power display."

"I loved every petal! Thank you so much!"

"My pleasure entirely. Listen, I cleared my afternoon surveillance for coffee with you. I want you to meet someone important, so wait for my signal."

"Absolutely! But who is this mysterious person you want me to meet?"

"You’ll discover that this afternoon."

"Alright then. I need to shower now. See you later."

"I’ll make a video call so you can take me into that shower with you."

"Absolutely not, you have operations to manage. Kisses, handsome."

Gemma disconnected, leaving me grinning like a complete fool. That’s when Hurricane Zoe stormed into my office with thunder in her expression.

"Did you soldiers decide to corner the entire city’s flower market or something?" Zoe’s cheerful mood had completely evaporated.

"What’s wrong, Zo?"

"Don’t play innocent with me, Dominic!" Zoe was practically snarling. "When exactly did you men coordinate this floral assault?"

"You didn’t appreciate the gesture?"

"I adore alstroemerias and lisianthus, what I despise is being manipulated, and you’re corrupting my prince!"

"Oh, Zo. Our intentions were purely honorable. We just wanted to claim our women properly."

"You met this morning, didn’t you? I know you did because my prince left our safe house at dawn."

"Yes, we met and organized the flower operation. But everything was done with honorable intentions."

"The road to hell," Zoe made quotation marks with her fingers, "is paved with good intentions! And red roses, Dominic, seriously?"

"I’ll tell you exactly what I told Xavier, my conquest of my target follows every classic intimidation rule in the book." I felt pleased with my choice. "And they weren’t ordinary roses, they were long-stemmed Colombian roses."

"Long is going to be your suffering if you hurt Gemma, consider yourself officially warned!" Zoe threatened before storming back to her intelligence station. This woman was absolutely lethal when protecting her assets!

Chapter 237: Outsmarted by Family

Dominic’s POV

At the usual time, I waited outside the high-end boutique where Gemma worked, watching for her to finish her shift so we could grab our afternoon coffee at the safe house cafe. When she emerged from behind the glass doors, my breath caught in my throat. She wore perfectly fitted lilac slacks that hugged her curves, paired with a crisp white silk blouse that seemed to glow against her dark skin. Her high

heels clicked rhythmically on the pavement, and she had swept her dark hair into an elegant low bun with delicate strands framing her face.

"Well, well, Dominic! Getting clever with your tactics now? Has your mother stopped lighting candles for your hopeless romantic soul?" Gemma's eyes sparkled with mischief the moment she stepped outside.

"What exactly are you referring to, my beautiful goddess?" I knew perfectly well she meant the coordinated rare orchid delivery from my private greenhouse, but feigning ignorance seemed like the safer play when dealing with a woman who'd seen me execute several men recently.

Gemma leaned in and brushed a soft kiss against my cheek, sending electricity through my entire body despite the weight of my concealed weapon. We began our familiar walk toward the corner establishment that doubled as our family's intelligence hub, her perfume making my head spin even as I automatically scanned for potential threats.

"Oh, you know exactly what I mean. Do you and Zoe only make moves as a coordinated strike team now? If one doesn't act, the other won't either?"

"Gemma, didn't the orchids make you happy?"

"The orchids were absolutely gorgeous, Dominic, but they came with your family's signature calling card. Zoe's right, it feels like you two are running some kind of psychological operation on us."

"That's not what this is about, my goddess." I stopped walking and turned to face her, my hands finding her waist while keeping one eye on the rooftop sniper positions. "We just want to touch your hearts, make you smile. Nothing more complicated than that."

"We'll see about that, you dangerous man. We'll see."

When we reached the cafe that served as our secure meeting location, Vincenzo was already settled at our usual table in the back corner with perfect sightlines to all exits, and he jumped up to greet Gemma with surprising familiarity.

"Aunt Gemma! How have you been?" Vincenzo's casual greeting sent alarm bells ringing in my head, especially since he was supposed to be maintaining operational security protocols.

"I'm wonderful, Vincenzo. How are things with you? And how's Brenda doing?" Gemma asked about my nephew's girlfriend with genuine interest, though she kept her voice low in the soundproofed space.

"Hold on just a minute! What the hell is happening here?" I demanded, my voice sharp with suspicion as I instinctively checked the security cameras. Neither of them had mentioned knowing each other this well, which violated every intelligence protocol we had.

They both erupted in laughter at my confused expression, which only increased my paranoia.

"No way! Kid, did you orchestrate this whole intelligence operation?"

"Oh uncle, I'm sorry, but your approach was completely amateur hour. I had Aunt Gemma's secure phone number from the beginning of delivering those coded messages, while you spent quite a while trying to get it through official channels," Vincenzo explained, grinning like he'd just pulled off a successful heist.

"And he only got my number because he convinced me to let Vincenzo keep delivering your encrypted love notes during his advanced tactical training," Gemma added, her smile making my heart race despite my growing irritation at the security breach.

"Are you telling me you've known it was me this entire time?" I asked, and she nodded with that devastating smile that could make me forget I was a killer.

"And you, you little traitor, you've had her secure line this whole time and never gave me access?" I turned to Vincenzo, who nodded without a trace of guilt, clearly proud of his counter-surveillance skills.

"Oh uncle, you're operating at street level while we're playing chess. We've shared intelligence briefings over lunch several times, she helped me select surveillance equipment for Brenda, and Brenda has actually been cleared for direct contact," Vincenzo said, settling back into his chair and signaling our waitress who doubled as a family informant.

"Kid, did it ever occur to you to file a report about this operation?" Fury was building in my chest at this massive intelligence failure.

"It crossed my mind, but watching you suffer over basic reconnaissance was incredibly entertaining for someone trained in psychological warfare," Vincenzo looked at me with pure amusement dancing in his eyes.

"So who's running psychological operations on whom now, Miss Gemma?" I fixed her with an intense stare as she laughed, noting how comfortable she'd become in our world of secrets.

"Alright, we're even." She raised her hands in surrender. "You should see the massive rose arrangement your uncle sent me today from his private conservatory. Look at this." Gemma pulled out her encrypted phone to show Vincenzo the photograph, completely comfortable with our surveillance protocols.

She proceeded to tell him about the flowers, making him laugh and mock me far more than any soldier under my command would dare.

"Is there anything else I should know about this operation?" I asked after we had placed our orders with coded phrases, my patience wearing thin as I realized how thoroughly I'd been outmaneuvered.

"Oh, just that Vincenzo briefed me completely when he delivered the first encrypted message and showed me your surveillance photograph," Gemma said casually, like she was discussing routine family business.

"Damn kid, and I thought I could actually trust you with classified information," I complained, glaring at him while mentally noting his excellent operational security with everyone except me.

"You can trust me, uncle. She only gave you her contact information because I vouched for you. If it had depended on your pathetic coded messages, this incredible woman would already be under someone else's protection," Vincenzo said smugly. "By the way, Aunt Gemma, what exactly did you see in him?" Vincenzo pointed his thumb at me and squinted at Gemma.

"Oh nephew, he has his own special deadly charm," Gemma was clearly enjoying every moment of this situation, and from what I could observe, they had developed quite a close friendship. Despite my frustration, I found myself impressed by their discretion.

"Charm? Women are impossible to understand, even in our line of work. I thought you just felt sorry for him," Vincenzo said, biting into the sandwich that had been delivered by our secure catering service.

"Kid, you're pushing your luck with a made man, don't you think?" I protested, but I was clearly outnumbered in this intelligence coup.

When it was time for Gemma to return to the boutique, we escorted her back with proper security protocols, and I mentioned I would drive Vincenzo home and visit my sister at the family compound. Gemma exchanged a meaningful glance with Vincenzo, and I sensed they were concealing additional classified information from me, but neither offered any further intelligence.

"Well, well, what miracle brought the feared Capo of Thorne family to visit his humble subjects?" My sister Nadia had always been fond of sarcasm, even when discussing family hierarchy.

"You're hardly humble, Nadia." I smiled and kissed her cheek, noting the concealed weapons stationed throughout her secure apartment.

"So, little brother, how have you been? It's been quite a while since you've graced us with your deadly presence, although you've been spending considerable time conducting operations with your nephew."

"Sorry, sis, but my new intelligence coordinator keeps me on a very tight operational schedule and makes me work incredibly hard on family business," I attempted to explain.

"Right! It's purely because of territorial control. It has absolutely nothing to do with you conducting surveillance around the shopping district stalking Gemma?" My sister studied my reaction with trained interrogation skills.

"Big-mouthed operative!" I shot a deadly glare at my nephew.

"Uncle, what did you expect me to do? Mom runs counter-intelligence! She demanded to know the nature of your classified operations with me," Vincenzo defended himself with perfect logic.

"When do we get to meet her?" Nadia smiled at me knowingly. "We're all eager to clear her for family access. She's absolutely professional on our secure communications."

I looked at Vincenzo, seriously contemplating whether murder would solve this security breach.

"When exactly have you been conducting classified communications with Gemma?" I asked, my voice dangerously quiet.

"We've spoken several times recently on encrypted channels," my sister replied as if it were completely normal operational procedure. "I really like her intelligence profile, don't mess this up!"

"My God, you're all running unauthorized intelligence operations! Shouldn't I be the one who likes her?" I said, running my hand through my hair in frustration.

"Ha! You're completely compromised by her, aren't you, uncle! Following her around like a lovesick amateur begging for attention instead of a professional killer." Vincenzo mocked me and gave me two light pats on the shoulders before collapsing onto the reinforced couch.

"We also want security clearance to meet Zoe, mother received glowing intelligence reports about her," my sister pulled me down to sit beside her on furniture designed to stop bullets. "But I need to know what possessed you to send those adult recreational items to mom's secure location. Have you completely lost your operational mind, Dominic?"

"Adult items?" Vincenzo's interest was immediately piqued, his training kicking in.

"It's classified, Vincenzo. Don't you have weapons training to complete?" My sister cut her son off with military precision.

"Well, I do, but I want to spend quality time gathering family intelligence." Vincenzo tried to appear innocent.

"Vincenzo, report to your quarters. I need to debrief your uncle privately on sensitive matters." My sister's tone carried the authority of someone who'd survived multiple assassination attempts.

"Oh, mom! I have clearance for everything about his operations. You can debrief in front of me." Vincenzo was being particularly bratty for a trained operative.

"Vincenzo!" My sister's tone left no room for argument, and he left the room grumbling under his breath about operational security protocols.

"So, Dominic, why did you send those items to our mother's secure compound? That showed a complete lack of tactical judgment." My sister questioned me with the intensity of a professional interrogator.

"According to my intelligence advisor and my operations coordinator, our mom has every right to recreational stress relief equipment." I said, remembering the tactical briefing I received from Zoe and Mia.

"She does, but you're her son and a made man. It's inappropriate, like you're violating operational boundaries."

"It wasn't exactly like that, Nadia. It was a massive operational failure." I explained to my sister how the shipment of specialized equipment ended up at our mother's compound instead of its intended destination, and she laughed until tears streamed down her face.

"So you're telling me Zoe neutralized that snake Kira with psychological warfare?" Nadia despised Kira because at a family gathering I had brought her to, Kira had shamelessly attempted to seduce my brother-in-law, violating every protocol of respect.

"Yeah, Zoe is lethal, but she's become absolutely essential to our operations. You two will work together perfectly."

"Oh, I really want to meet her. Mom was thoroughly impressed by her security profile. Now tell me about Gemma."

"First, you tell me how your intelligence-gathering son informed you about Gemma."

"You know Vincenzo can’t maintain operational silence under family interrogation, you don’t even need enhanced techniques, just keep asking and he’ll reveal everything. He told me what classified operations he was conducting at the shopping district with you. And later that he had become friends with Gemma."

"Interesting, he never filed reports with me that he’d become her unofficial protection detail." I complained about the intelligence gap.

"She’s been providing him significant tactical support, especially with advanced mathematics and encryption. She’s brilliant with numerical codes."

"And how was I not briefed about this asset development?"

"If you conducted family intelligence briefings more frequently, perhaps you would be properly informed." My sister seized the opportunity to complain about my operational absence.

"I’ll make an effort to attend more family councils, sis." I said, squeezing my sister’s hand while mentally cataloging how thoroughly I’d been outmaneuvered by my own family.

I ended up staying at my sister’s secure compound until it was time to collect Gemma from the boutique. She called our mother using encrypted communications, who came over with her security detail as well, and we enjoyed a pleasant family dinner in the bulletproof dining room. But I was anxious to see my goddess, desperate to be with her in whatever secure location we could find. So when it was time to pick her up, I felt like a teenager preparing for his first date instead of a professional killer planning an extraction.

Chapter 238: Making It Official

Official Commitments

Dominic’s POV

I positioned myself across from the boutique in Thorne family territory, watching through the storefront windows as Gemma finished her shift. Rather than entering the shop directly, I maintained my distance near the black SUV, scanning the street for potential threats. The territory had been relatively quiet since we'd dealt with the last wave of rival family encroachments, but I never let my guard down. Another figure stood closer to the shop entrance, and I assumed he was waiting for one of Gemma's coworkers.

When Gemma emerged from the boutique, that radiant smile that could disarm even the most hardened soldier lit up her face. But I watched that beautiful expression crumble as the stranger grabbed her arm and began speaking in harsh, aggressive tones. The fear that flickered across her features had me moving before conscious thought kicked in, my hand instinctively reaching for the Glock concealed beneath my jacket.

"We have an issue here?" I asked, positioning myself directly beside Gemma, letting my presence announce exactly what kind of firepower backed her up.

"Back off, pretty boy. This is between me and my woman," the punk snarled, and I caught the terror in Gemma's dark eyes.

"Get your hands off me, Nick. We're finished," Gemma tried yanking her arm free, but his grip only tightened with the desperation of a cornered rat.

"Actually, Nick, you need to listen to MY GIRLFRIEND," I made sure to project the word loud enough for anyone in Thorne territory to hear. "Release her immediately, or we're going to have a serious problem that involves more than just conversation."

"So the rumors are true? You're spreading your legs for this rich mafia bastard now, Gemma? Turned into some high-end escort for the Thorne family?" The piece of street trash looked me up and down with disgust. I stepped between him and Gemma, applying pressure to his wrist with techniques learned from years of extracting information from uncooperative subjects until he was forced to let go.

Every instinct screamed at me to snap his neck right here on family territory, but Thorne security appeared from their patrol positions and dragged him away while he shouted threats about unfinished business. When I turned back, tears were streaming down Gemma's cheeks. I gathered her against my chest, stroking her hair while scanning the area for any other potential threats.

"Come on, beautiful, let’s get out of here," I murmured, keeping my arm around her as we headed toward the armored vehicle. I had a pretty good idea who this street punk was, but once we were secure in my bulletproof car, I needed confirmation. "So who’s this loser who clearly never learned how to respect women in Thorne territory?"

"My ex," she exhaled shakily. "He’s become obsessed with reconciling."

"He’s violent, Gemma. In my line of work, that makes him extremely dangerous," I warned, already mentally cataloging ways to permanently eliminate this threat.

"I know. He’s been following me around the territory, demanding we get back together."

"During your relationship, did he ever strike you?" The question made my blood pressure spike, even though I already wanted to tear that bastard apart with my bare hands.

"Not exactly. He was possessive though, and we had constant arguments. He’d scream at me, call me terrible names, and grab me hard enough to leave marks, but he never actually hit me," Gemma seemed uncertain about her own words.

"Gemma, that IS violence. Maybe he didn’t use his fists, but he was absolutely abusive," I cupped her face gently, fighting every killer instinct that demanded I hunt down Nick tonight.

"The thing is, he cheated with Vanessa from the register. They got together right after we split up, not too long ago. Now suddenly he’s pursuing me again, following me everywhere in family territory." She let out a bitter laugh. "Vanessa actually blamed me when he dumped her for pursuing me again."

"How long has he been stalking you in Thorne territory?" My breathing became labored as I considered the security implications.

"For a while now. Apparently he and Vanessa are over," Gemma’s laugh held no humor. "She actually accused me of causing their breakup."

"Gemma, this is extremely serious. We need Thorne family resources to keep this psycho away from you," rage was building inside me like a volcanic eruption.

"I'm already handling it. My attorney obtained a restraining order. I hoped that would frighten him into backing off, but obviously legal paperwork doesn't intimidate street thugs. He vanished for some time, but when he showed up today, something in his expression really unsettled me."

"Me too. That look suggested escalation."

"I should have mentioned this sooner, Dominic. I'm sorry." She sounded like she was apologizing for being terrorized by a lunatic. "I'd understand if you wanted to distance yourself from all this street-level drama."

"If you think this situation would make me walk away, you're completely mistaken." I used a red light as an opportunity to meet her gaze. "This asshole cheated on you, ran off with someone else, and still believes he owns you somehow. I won't allow him to touch you again, not in my territory."

"I don't know how to make him stop. I'm genuinely frightened now." Gemma stared down at her hands folded in her lap.

"Gemma, I'm seriously concerned about your safety. You can't continue working those late shifts in exposed positions, and there's no reason to. I could arrange a secure position for you within Thorne family operations."

"Absolutely not, Dominic. I refuse to complicate our relationship that way. It would be inappropriate. Besides, family security is monitoring the situation."

"Fine, I'll respect your decision, but if I determine the danger is escalating, I'm removing you from that position immediately," I stated with the authority of someone accustomed to being obeyed.

"By whose authority?" She studied me with complete seriousness.

"By the authority of being your boyfriend," I grinned at her, and she burst into laughter. "You have quite the ego."

"Well, you're pretty fond of my ego too," I teased, trying to ease the tension while my mind calculated elimination strategies.

"Maybe a little," she smiled.

"Admit it, you think I'm incredible." Her laughter grew louder, and I treasured that sound. "Stay with me tonight?"

"I can't, Dominic. I need to update my mother about what happened today. She's already worried, and I want to keep her informed about everything so she stays vigilant. I'm concerned Nick might start harassing her to get to me."

"That makes sense. You're absolutely right. Isn't she leaving town tomorrow?"

"Yes, returning Friday."

"Then you're staying with me until she gets back."

"Don't you think you're being a bit controlling?"

"No, Gemma, I don't think I'm being controlling at all. I'm your boyfriend and I care about your wellbeing. There's absolutely no way I'm leaving you alone in that house with some deranged ex stalking you. Either you come to my place or I'm staying at yours, but you're not going to be alone." When I finished speaking, she was looking at me with an amused expression.

"Just one question. When exactly did we begin this relationship?" Her inquiry made me smile. Even I wasn't entirely sure. I'd never been the relationship type, but Gemma had somehow completely filled my life, leaving no space for anyone else.

"We started dating the moment I saw you in that religious supply shop," I said matter-of-factly, making her laugh again.

"I think you forgot to inform me. Actually, I think you forgot to ask if I wanted to date you."

"Do I really need to ask? Your body tells me it wants me constantly." I traced my finger along her arm and watched her skin respond with goosebumps. "See?" I smiled triumphantly. "Besides, my nephew already refers to you as his aunt, and my sister adores you. There's really no escaping it now, we're definitely dating."

"My God, you're so arrogant," Gemma grinned. "Vincenzo definitely inherited that from you."

"That kid talks too much, but he's got a good heart." I smiled because I genuinely adored my nephew. "I heard you've been helping him with mathematics?"

"Yes, he's incredibly bright, he just needed someone to explain things differently." Gemma's smile was warm. "I've become quite attached to him. He's so considerate and polite."

"Wait until you meet his sister. She's a perfect little princess." I smiled thinking about my niece, who was absolutely precious.

"When will I meet her?"

"Whenever you'd like. My sister wants to meet you too. I'll arrange something with her." I looked at her and couldn't resist asking, "So are we officially together now?"

Gemma laughed loudly.

"I thought you said you didn't need to ask." She laughed and placed her hand on my cheek as I parked outside her house. "We started dating the day we met in that religious supply shop."

I pulled her into an intense, passionate kiss. Gemma’s lips drove me absolutely wild; they were soft, responsive, skilled, intoxicating. I pulled her onto my lap right there in the armored car, parked on the street in front of her house. I didn’t care who might see, I just needed to kiss my girlfriend.

Her phone rang and I reluctantly released her. She glanced at the screen and answered.

"Hi, Mom. I’m right outside." Gemma listened and I watched her eyes widen as all color drained from her face. I immediately knew something was terribly wrong.

Chapter 239: Knife at Her Throat

Gemma’s POV

"What is it, Gemma?" Dominic’s voice cut through my frozen silence as I stared at my phone screen, the blood draining from my face.

"Nick..." The name barely escaped my lips as tremors ran through my entire body. In the Thorne family’s world, even the lowest street thugs could become deadly when cornered.

Dominic’s jaw tightened immediately, his green eyes turning ice cold. "That piece of street trash from the mall? What about him?"

"He’s inside my mother’s house with her." The tears came without warning, hot and desperate. "Dominic, I need to get in there now."

Recognition flashed across Dominic’s face, his expression shifting to the dangerous calm I’d seen him use before eliminating threats to the family. "The psychotic stalker who’s been sending death threats? Your mother actually let that bastard into her house?"

"No, absolutely not. My mother would never let him inside willingly, but somehow he managed to get in anyway." My voice cracked with helplessness. In this world of territorial wars and family vendettas, the unknown terrified me more than anything else.

Dominic’s hands found my shoulders, his touch both comforting and lethal. "Gemma, tell me exactly what your mother said on that call."

"She just said Nick was here waiting for me. That was it. Dominic, I have no idea how he broke in or what he’s doing to her right now. She’s completely alone with him." Panic was building in my chest like a rising tide. Even with Dominic’s protection, Nick had found ways to reach me through street contacts.

"Take a deep breath." Dominic pulled me closer while I remained perched on his lap in the backseat of his armored Mercedes, his arms becoming my anchor. "We’re calling the police immediately. Since you have that court order and the Thorne family has influence with law enforcement, they’ll respond fast."

I slid off his lap as Dominic speed-dialed the precinct, contacting one of the family’s assets in the police department. When we approached the front gate of my mother’s modest house, I turned to face him, fear coursing through every nerve ending.

"Dominic, you don’t have to do this. I have no clue what Nick has planned with his street connections, but you shouldn’t have to get dragged into my nightmare."

"Like hell I’m staying out here!" Dominic’s voice carried the authority of a man who controlled millions in laundered money and commanded respect from killers. "Listen to me, Gemma. You’re under Thorne family protection now. That means you’re not facing this shit alone anymore. Period."

Part of me felt overwhelming relief at having someone with Dominic’s resources and ruthlessness stand beside me, while another part dreaded pulling him deeper into this dangerous chaos. But I pushed open the gate and we stepped forward together, Dominic’s hand instinctively checking the Glock concealed beneath his jacket. As we entered the living room, my worst fears materialized before us. Nick sat casually beside my mother, a gleaming switchblade held loosely in his grip—the kind of weapon common among street thugs in rival territories.

"Well, well, future mother-in-law. Look who finally decided to come home," Nick drawled with that familiar twisted smile. But when his gaze landed on Dominic behind me, his expression turned murderous. Even bottom-feeders like him recognized the dangerous aura of a Thorne family Capo.

"How exactly did you get inside this house, Nick? Because I know damn well my mother didn’t invite you in," I said, forcing my voice to remain steady while setting my purse down on the nearest armchair.

"You're absolutely right. She wouldn't dare open the door for me." His voice dripped with venom as he glared at my mother. "See how she constantly interferes with us? I had to scale that pathetic little fence and climb through the back window. Lucky for me, your security is shit compared to those fancy mafia safe houses."

"This insanity ends right now!" Dominic stepped forward, his eyes locked on Nick with the cold calculation of someone who'd eliminated threats before. "Release Gemma's mother and crawl back to whatever gutter you came from."

Nick's attention snapped back to me with laser focus, his street instincts recognizing the power dynamic but refusing to back down. "What the fuck is this rich boy doing here?"

"Nick, he just gave me a ride home, nothing more. Please, just let my mother go," I begged, fighting to maintain composure while my heart hammered against my ribs.

"You know what, darling Gemma? After I got that ridiculous court document and heard the Thorne family was sniffing around my business, I figured I'd give you some space to cool down. I'm sure your meddling mother was behind that whole charade." Nick's voice took on a conversational tone that made my skin crawl. "So I decided to wait patiently until you came to your senses. But then Vanessa kept calling me, telling me you were whoring around with some mafia pretty boy. And that, my dear, is completely unacceptable. I WILL NOT BE MADE A FUCKING FOOL!" His last words exploded from him.

"Nick, we ended things because you were screwing Vanessa behind my back," I shot back, knowing it was pointless but needing to buy time.

"WE NEVER BROKE UP!" he roared, spittle flying from his lips. "I simply gave you time to think clearly and realize you belong with me, not with some fucking gangster!" That sick smile returned. "But today I had Vanessa scope out that fancy mall and she found this pathetic excuse for a capo waiting for you, claiming to be your boyfriend. HAVE YOU COMPLETELY LOST YOUR GODDAMN MIND, GEMMA? YOU ALREADY HAVE A BOYFRIEND AND THAT'S ME!"

I summoned every ounce of strength I possessed to keep my voice level. "What exactly do you want from me, Nick?"

"Isn't it obvious, sweet Gemma? I want you back where you belong—with me, not with these mafia scumbags." He spoke as if explaining something to a child. "Now tell this worthless piece of shit to leave us alone."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Dominic's response was immediate and carried the weight of family authority.

"I wonder if Gemma actually wants her fancy boyfriend here." Nick pressed the knife blade against my mother's throat, drawing a thin line of blood that made my stomach turn.

"Nick, please let my mother go. If you want to talk, fine, I'll listen to every word. But release her first." My mother's safety was the only thing that mattered now.

"Mother-in-law and I are getting along just fine here. Send your little mafia prince away, Gemma. My patience with you people is wearing thin," he said with deadly emphasis.

My pulse was racing out of control. "Dominic, please. You need to go."

"Absolutely not!" Dominic's voice was defiant, but I grabbed his hand firmly.

"Dominic, look at my mother..." I directed his attention to the knife at her throat.

Dominic's eyes met mine, and I could see him calculating angles and response times like the trained killer he was. He looked directly into my gaze and I whispered urgently, "Trust me. I know how to handle street trash."

Dominic cursed under his breath in Italian but finally left the house, though I knew he wasn't going far. Once he was gone, I moved slowly toward the sofa where Nick waited with his twisted smile.

"There we go, Nick. He's gone and I'm here with you. Now move that knife away from my mother's neck." I kept my tone as calm as possible.

"I’m not so sure about that, little Gemma. Mother-in-law has never been a fan of mine, and now she’s got mafia connections. I think she’s the reason you’ve been playing these stupid games with me." Nick dragged the knife tip along my mother’s neck, leaving a shallow scratch that made her wince.

"Nick, I understand now. I’ll do anything you want. Let her leave so we can have privacy." The words tasted like poison, but I forced myself to sound seductive.

"You want to be alone with me, little Gemma? Finally missing your real man instead of those mafia killers?" My stomach churned violently. The last thing I wanted was to be alone with this monster or feel his hands on me, but I had to get my mother to safety.

"Yes, Nick. Come on, let’s go to my bedroom." I extended my hand toward him. His face lit up with that sickening grin as he lowered the knife and yanked me onto his lap.

His hands gripped my waist possessively, reeking of stale cigarettes and desperation. I looked at my mother through tears, silently mouthing for her to run while Nick pressed his disgusting lips against my neck.

My mother seized the moment of distraction. In one swift motion, she grabbed the knife from his loosened grip and pulled me away from him. Nick whirled toward her with pure hatred blazing in his eyes. At that exact moment, the police tactical unit burst through the front door, weapons drawn, and tackled him to the ground with professional efficiency.

Dominic rushed in behind them, immediately pulling me into his arms and checking me for injuries with the desperate intensity of a man who’d almost lost everything. Nick was handcuffed and dragged away while the lead officer informed us that we needed to come to the precinct to file official statements—a formality that would ensure this street-level threat never surfaced again.

Chapter 240: Cold Familiar Eyes

Gemma’s POV

After spending hours at the Thorne family compound, we were finally released into the night. Dominic drove us home through the empty streets, his hands gripping the steering wheel with visible tension. Nick was still being held in the family’s underground detention facility, but one of the guards had pulled me aside with news that made my stomach drop.

"Street punk, no real connections, and his crew's too weak to retaliate," he'd said with a shrug. "Boss will probably just break his legs and dump him outside city limits with a warning."

The thought of Nick back on the streets made my skin crawl.

"Willow, I wish we could have met under better circumstances," Dominic said as we reached our front gate, his voice carrying genuine regret.

"So do I, but thank you for being there for Gemma tonight," my mother replied, her voice still shaky from everything that had happened. "Would you like to come inside for some coffee?"

"That's kind of you, but you both need rest. How about we plan that dinner when you get back from your business trip? I'd like to properly introduce myself when we're not dealing with family enforcement and interrogations." Dominic's smile was warm despite the exhaustion etched around his eyes.

"I'd like that very much," my mother said, shaking his hand before heading toward the house.

"How are you holding up?" Dominic asked, his fingers gently tracing the line of my jaw as he studied my face in the porch light.

"I'm trying to stay strong. At least I can breathe a little easier knowing he's locked up in the compound, even if it won't be for long." The words came out more bitter than I intended.

"Get some sleep. I'll pick you up tomorrow after I handle some family business." His thumb brushed across my cheekbone before he leaned down to press a gentle kiss to my lips.

After Dominic left, I hugged my mother tightly and took the longest, hottest shower of my life, trying to wash away the memory of Nick's hands on me. But when I finally collapsed into bed, sleep brought no peace. My dreams were filled with flashing knives and cold eyes, and I woke up several times in a cold sweat.

The smell of fresh coffee drew me to the kitchen the next morning, where my mother was already dressed and ready for her day.

"You look terrible, sweetheart," she said, pouring coffee into my favorite mug. "Bad night?"

"The worst. I kept seeing his face every time I closed my eyes." I wrapped my hands around the warm mug, seeking comfort in its heat.

"I didn't sleep much either. Listen, I'm leaving for Portland this afternoon and won't be back until Saturday. You're staying at Dominic's penthouse, and he seems like a good man, but promise me something."

"What?"

"If you feel uncomfortable there for any reason, call Lila. She'd take you in without question, you know that."

"I promise, Mom. If I need to leave Dominic's, I'll go to Lila's."

"Good. And Dorian will have his people checking on the house while I'm gone, so don't come here alone. I don't want you anywhere near this place by yourself."

I nodded, understanding her fear because I felt it too.

"There's something else I need to tell you," she continued, her voice taking on a serious tone.

"What now?"

"As soon as I get back from this trip, I'm putting the house on the market. We're going to find a secure apartment building with proper security and surveillance systems."

My heart sank. "Mom, I love this house. It’s been our home for so long. Do you really think an apartment will be better?"

"Gemma, that psychopath climbed over our fence and put a knife to my throat in our own kitchen. We need security systems, locked entrances, people watching who comes and goes. We’re two women living alone in territory where rival crews might try to get to Dominic through us."

The logic was sound, even if it broke my heart. "If that’s what you think is best, then okay."

"Thank you for understanding. Now go pack your things, and let’s have lunch at the mall before I drop you at the boutique."

I gathered my belongings and texted Dominic about my lunch plans. His response was immediate, assuring me he’d send one of his soldiers to watch over me during my break.

When I arrived at the boutique for my evening shift, I barely had time to put my purse away before Vanessa cornered me in the stockroom. Her eyes were red and wild, her usual composure completely shattered.

"What did you do to Nick, you manipulative bitch?" she snarled, blocking my path to the door.

I tried to walk around her, but she stepped in front of me again. "Move, Vanessa. I’m not in the mood for your drama today."

"Tell me what you did to get him taken by the Thorne family! I know you set him up somehow. Nick would never hurt anyone!" Her voice was getting higher, more frantic.

"Listen carefully, you pathetic wannabe," I said, my voice deadly calm. "Your precious Nick is being held in a family compound where he belongs. If you want to visit him, good luck getting past their security. But stay the hell away from me."

"Don’t talk to me like that!" She jabbed her finger toward my face, and something inside me snapped.

"Get that finger out of my face before I break it," I warned. "You want to know what happened? Fine. You filled that psychopath's head with so much poison about me that he came to my house and held a knife to my mother's throat. My mother, Vanessa. An innocent woman who never did anything to anyone."

"You're lying! Nick wouldn't do that. You must have provoked him somehow." Tears were streaming down her face, but I felt no sympathy.

"I provoked him? Dominic's family has protection orders that require him to stay away from their territory. Did you know that when you kept calling him, feeding him stories about my love life? He told me everything, Vanessa. How you kept pushing him, telling him he needed to fight for me."

"He deserved to know what kind of whore you really are!" she screamed.

"Don't you dare!" My control finally snapped. "You want Nick so badly? He's all yours. Go find him when the family dumps him outside the city limits - assuming he can still walk."

I pushed past her and walked into the main store, my hands shaking with rage. The afternoon shipment had arrived, and beautiful new dresses and shoes were waiting to be displayed. I called my regular clients, the college girls who always brightened my day, and told them to come see the new pieces.

They arrived just as the store was getting busy, and I watched with satisfaction as they immediately put Vanessa in her place when she tried to steal my customers. I was pulling out shoes to match the dresses they were trying on when I bent down behind the counter.

When I stood up, my blood turned to ice.

Standing in the store entrance, staring directly at me with those cold, familiar eyes, was Nick.