Mafia Mask 251

Chapter 251: Wicked New Games

Gemma's POV

My fingers traced over the contents while my mind spun in circles. Dominic possessed this adorably romantic side beneath his dangerous mafia exterior, but lurking deeper was something deliciously wicked that reminded me why he commanded fear throughout Port Serenity's underworld. His gift caught me completely off guard. The whole thing amused me, though his nervous energy was palpable for a man who could order executions without blinking. I decided to torture him just a little.

I lifted each item slowly, studying them with deliberate care. The large black box contained an impressive collection, each piece arranged with the same meticulous attention Dominic brought to planning family operations. The longer I remained silent, the more his usual commanding composure cracked.

"Listen, goddess, if this crosses a line, we can forget this ever happened," Dominic stammered, words tumbling out in his rush. The sight of Port Serenity's most feared Capo reduced to nervous rambling made my heart flutter.

"I suppose we should begin with this." I selected a small plug from the collection, holding it up between us like I was examining contraband at one of his warehouses.

"Do you actually like it?" His voice carried equal parts relief and amazement, the same tone he used when risky family business went according to plan.

"Absolutely not!" I replied flatly, then reached for a tongue-shaped device. When I activated it, my face split into a wicked grin. "I absolutely adore it!"

"Isaac, Gemma! You nearly stopped my heart." Dominic dropped to his knees beside me, exhaling hard like he had just survived another attempt on his life.

"Really, Dominic, I am a woman of the twenty-first century living in your world now. I embrace pleasure and own toys. The fact that you want to share this experience together thrills me more than any

protection you could offer." I pressed my lips to his. "Though this tongue device is completely new territory for me."

"Gemma, you are absolutely incredible!" Dominic captured my mouth, settling between my thighs with the same confidence he used to claim territory.

"So where do we begin?" I asked, anticipation building like the rush I felt during our first dangerous encounter on his turf.

"First, those clothes disappear. Then I treat you to a proper massage with these oils, the way a Capo should worship his woman."

"God, that sounds perfect!" The thought of his hands, the same ones that had spilled blood to protect me, working over my skin made me shiver with want.

Dominic pulled me upright, carrying our treasure box to the bedside table with the efficiency of someone accustomed to handling dangerous cargo.

"Are we exploring everything tonight, or should I avoid certain items?" he asked, returning to stand before me with the predatory grace that made him deadly in Thorne family business.

"Everything," I assured him. "Use it all."

His smile promised an evening I would never forget, the same smile that preceded his most ruthless family operations.

Dominic moved closer, finding the hidden clasp of my dress and drawing the fabric over my head with practiced skill. Underneath, black straps created intricate patterns across my skin, forming the suggestion of coverage while revealing everything. The lingerie had been his gift some time ago, chosen with the same attention to detail he brought to planning family hits.

"Damn, Gemma, now I cannot decide whether to remove these or take you while you wear them." His appreciation made me laugh. "Better remove them before the oils stain this masterpiece."

His fingers worked each strap slowly, his mouth following the path of removal with soft kisses. The gentleness contrasted sharply with the violence these same hands dealt to family enemies. He gathered my hair loosely, guiding me to the bed while shedding his own clothes, revealing the tattoos that marked his rank in the Thorne organization. Climbing over me, he positioned my body between his legs and reached for the silk mask.

"Tonight you experience rather than observe, goddess." He secured the blindfold before selecting another item. "This amarula oil will taste incredible on your skin."

The warm liquid dripped onto my shoulders as Dominic began his massage. The expensive oil reminded me that his illegal empire afforded luxuries most could never dream of. The scent filled my senses while his skilled hands spread the oil across my body with the same precision he used to count dirty money. Soon his mouth followed where his hands had been, kissing and tasting the oil-slicked skin. He devoted considerable attention to my breasts, alternating between gentle caresses and demanding pulls that reminded me of his dual nature. Each touch sent pulses of heat straight to my core.

His massage continued downward, covering one leg completely before moving to the other, working upward this time with methodical thoroughness.

"Amarula was made for your skin," he murmured against my stomach. "But for this beautiful center, we need strawberry oil."

The new scent mingled with the first as Dominic coated my most sensitive areas. His fingers circled and teased, bringing me to the very edge before his mouth took over with the same intensity he brought to interrogating traitors. I shattered beneath his tongue, crying his name as waves of pleasure crashed through me.

"Delicious," he praised, placing one final kiss on my swollen flesh. "Now we explore new territory, goddess."

The handcuffs secured my wrists to the headboard, quality restraints that could have come from his interrogation supplies. Dominic returned his attention to my breasts, the vibrating clamps he attached sending intense sensations through my body as he continued his exploration.

The tongue-shaped device found its target, making me writhe against the restraints as pleasure built again.

"Please, Dominic, I need you inside me," I begged, desperate for connection with the man who had claimed my heart and soul.

"Whatever my goddess desires!"

Dominic positioned himself above me, and I heard him preparing something from our collection. As he entered me slowly, his mouth claiming mine, I felt his thickness stretching me. The gel he had applied created heat and heightened sensitivity that made every nerve ending sing.

When he seated himself fully, vibrations against my most sensitive spot intensified everything. The cock ring added another layer of sensation as he began moving. I matched his rhythm, desperate for more, until my body surrendered to another powerful climax.

Dominic released the clamps, soothing my sensitized skin with gentle touches and more oil. His tender care while I remained so responsive created exquisite contrast.

"The best awaits you still, goddess," he promised, withdrawing and repositioning me on my knees.

More oil warmed my back as his hands worked downward. When he reached my bottom, his massage became more focused, preparing me carefully with the patience he rarely showed anyone else.

"Since this is our first time exploring here," he whispered against my ear, applying pressure where he massaged, "this gel will maximize pleasure and minimize discomfort."

I nodded my agreement as he continued his preparation, his other hand and mouth maintaining contact with my back.

When ready, Dominic began teasing my entrance with his length while his fingers circled my center. My arousal built to desperate levels as he entered me again, moving slowly but deeply. I felt him position something at my other entrance and moaned in anticipation.

The plug entered slowly as Dominic increased his pace. The dual sensations created tightness and pressure unlike anything I had experienced. Everything felt connected, each movement creating waves of intensity.

"You drive me completely wild," Dominic groaned, his thrusts becoming urgent and demanding.

I could not hold back any longer. His thick length filled me completely as he moved with increasing desperation. The plug created pressure and fullness that sent me spinning toward another edge. When I reached it, my body clenched around him hungrily, drawing him deeper as I shattered completely. He followed me over, pressing deep as his own release claimed him.

Dominic collapsed against me, our bodies remaining connected. His weight felt perfect, surrounding me completely with the security only Port Serenity's most dangerous Capo could provide. After catching his breath, he carefully removed the plug and withdrew slowly. Exhaustion and euphoria battled within me.

"We have not used everything yet, goddess, but perhaps we need recovery time," Dominic said, pulling me against his chest marked with family tattoos. "Our evening has barely begun, Gemma."

I laughed at his promise, knowing the most feared man in Thorne territory always delivered. Kissing him softly, I settled against his warm, solid body, already anticipating what came next.

Chapter 252: Unwanted Family Reunion

Dominic's POV

I had spent an incredible night with my woman. Gemma was absolutely intoxicating, and this goddess had completely transformed my world. While I had been hesitant about some of her suggestions at first, her passionate response left us both exhausted when dawn finally broke through the windows of my penthouse.

I hated disturbing her rest, but we had committed to Sunday lunch at my sister's estate. Honestly, I had no desire to go. Something gnawed at me, an unease I couldn't shake about family gatherings. But I had given my word to Nadia, and backing out now would dishonor the promise I made to my sister.

When we arrived at the heavily guarded compound, Vincenzo bounded over with his usual enthusiasm, wrapping Gemma in a warm embrace and presenting her to everyone like his personal ambassador. That charming little soldier.

Gemma and Nadia connected instantly, diving into discussions about fashion trends while my niece Carmen listened with rapt attention, completely mesmerized by Gemma. My brother-in-law Gerard and I fell into our usual talk about legitimate business operations. He ran a successful supermarket chain that served as one of our family's most profitable fronts. The atmosphere was relaxed and enjoyable until Vincenzo's voice cut through our pleasant conversation.

"Oh come on. Not today." Vincenzo stared at the entrance with obvious displeasure.

"Always such a warm welcome from my beloved grandson." My father strolled through the security checkpoint as if he still had any right to enter Thorne family property.

I caught sight of Nadia's expression, and her guilty flush told me everything. She had orchestrated this ambush perfectly. Apparently, she had kept Gerard in the dark too, since he clearly shared my disgust for the exile who donated his DNA to create me.

"How wonderful to have my children and grandchildren all gathered together." My father spoke as though he were still some respected family patriarch instead of a disgraced rat who nearly destroyed our operations.

"I cannot believe you set me up like this, Nadia." I shot an accusatory look at my sister, who at least had the grace to appear ashamed.

"Dominic, your sister simply wanted to reunite the family. Stop acting like some temperamental soldier." My father's condescending tone made me want to put a bullet between his eyes.

"I am acting like a soldier, Marcus?" I asked with bitter amusement. "You are the one chasing after girls young enough to be your daughter, burning through money that I earn running legitimate businesses for this family. Because if I had left our operations in your incompetent hands, you would be begging for scraps in the gutter right now."

"You will show me respect, boy. I am still your father." My father's voice rose to a shout.

"Oh, you remembered that detail now?" I replied with cutting sarcasm. "We are leaving, Gemma."

"Dominic, please, think about your nephews. Stay for them." Nadia placed her hands on my shoulders pleadingly. "I want my children to spend time with family, with all their family. It is just one meal."

"Dominic, I understand your feelings better than anyone, but please make this sacrifice for your sister." Gemma spoke softly and squeezed my hand reassuringly.

"Fine. But we are definitely having words later, Nadia." I conceded, and my sister beamed before going to welcome the family disgrace.

"And who might this gorgeous young woman be?" My father approached Gemma with predatory interest, causing her to instinctively step backward.

"She is my woman, Marcus. Keep your distance." I growled protectively, my hand instinctively moving toward my concealed weapon.

"A girlfriend? How refreshingly unexpected." My father smiled and moved closer to Gemma, forcing me to position myself between them. "Worried she might find your father more appealing?" He spoke with deliberate provocation.

"Do not even think about it." I warned him through gritted teeth.

Nobody knew the complete truth, but I was the fool who had introduced my father to the woman who destroyed our family. Gisele was barely out of her teens when we met at a family gathering and began seeing each other. I was completely infatuated and stupidly told my father all about her. I was young and still naive about what kind of snake my father truly was. When he expressed interest in meeting her, I arranged lunch for us all. Almost immediately, Gisele ended our relationship, and soon after, my father had abandoned our family operations to run off with her, taking crucial family secrets and contacts with him.

The guilt over my parents' separation and the damage to family business consumed me. I felt like a complete fool for being manipulated by both Gisele and my father. She turned out to be nothing more than a calculating opportunist who recognized greater profit potential in my father's position than in mine.

To make everything worse, my father actually tried to justify his betrayal by claiming it was natural for men in our line of work to take what they wanted. He insisted it was normal and acceptable for soldiers to eventually seek new territory, that every man would inevitably need to find fresh conquests to avoid becoming weak. My father was absolutely despicable. But his words planted a seed of terror in me about becoming like him, a worthless traitor with no loyalty. That fear kept me from getting seriously involved with anyone until Gemma appeared and consumed every thought in my head.

However, seeing him there, confronting her and challenging me, awakened something dark inside me. I was terrified of reliving that nightmare. It felt like being that vulnerable young recruit all over again. My father was smirking at me with satisfaction.

"Dad, what can I get you to drink?" Nadia sensed the dangerous tension and quickly guided my father to sit beside her husband.

"That exceptional single malt whiskey that your husband so generously stocks for me. Is that not right, son-in-law?" My father deliberately needled Gerard, who visibly cringed.

"I always provide quality in my home, Marcus, even for the lowest vermin." Gerard replied without humor.

Their mutual hatred ran deep, dating back to my sister's wedding reception when Gerard discovered my father forcibly groping one of the bridesmaids in the bridal suite, nearly destroying the entire celebration. Gerard even helped us contain the scandal and accept my father's pathetic excuse about being drunk. After numerous similar incidents, their relationship became open warfare.

When lunch was served, my father dominated every conversation with cutting remarks. Everyone present became targets except Carmen. But poor Vincenzo received the worst treatment, cruel jokes and malicious comments about being too soft and needing to toughen up for family business.

After the meal, I felt like a caged animal and pulled my sister into private conversation.

"For God’s sake, Nadia, can you not see how much damage this man causes all of us? I cannot stand him, your husband cannot stand him, your children cannot stand him." I confronted my sister directly.

"Dominic, he remains our father." That was her only response.

"Sister, that biological fact does not give him permission to make our lives hell."

"Discussing me, my dear son?" My father approached with that insufferable smugness he used to torment us.

"Absolutely, old man." I matched his sarcastic tone.

"Dominic, have you still not recovered from Gisele choosing me over you?" He asked, and my sister looked bewildered.

"Congratulations on that victory. Actually, I should thank you." I replied and turned away, but he grabbed my shoulder forcefully.

"Hold on." He commanded as if he had any authority over me. "I need to discuss money and my travel arrangements."

"Marcus, there is no additional money and no trip. Wait until the first when your pathetic allowance hits your account. Then you can disappear." I responded flatly.

"Dominic, I need cash now. I am completely broke. What your sister gave me barely covers my hotel expenses." He whined pathetically.

"Then return to your house in Los Angeles." I replied simply. "By the way, I am curious. I send you a substantial amount every month. How do you manage to spend it all and still have nothing? Could it be that your latest little plaything cleaned out your accounts?"

"That is none of your damn business." He turned pale, confirming my suspicion was accurate. "Listen, Dominic, I need to travel for relaxation, to clear my mind, and I want to take my new girlfriend on a European tour. Just release the funds I requested, and I will disappear from your life."

"Relaxation? Please, do not insult my intelligence. You are nothing but a parasite who contributes absolutely nothing. I have told you before and my position remains unchanged. You will not receive one penny beyond your monthly allowance from me." I stated firmly.

"Then we will be spending lots of quality time together." My father gave a cynical smile, and I walked away. I knew he would do everything possible to make my existence hell.

When I returned to the living room, Gemma was nowhere to be found. Carmen informed me she had gone to the restroom.

"I have no idea how to make your sister understand that your father only brings destruction. He takes everything he can from her, creates chaos in our family, then vanishes. She suffers every time he leaves." My brother-in-law vented his frustration.

"I do not understand Nadia either. Thank God she has you." I was genuinely grateful that my sister had found such a good and honest man who supported her completely.

"My mother-in-law is smart to travel whenever this scumbag appears."

"I am actually envious of her this time." I smiled at my brother-in-law. "Gerard, I am going to find Gemma. Sorry, but I want to leave."

"Go ahead. Vincenzo wants to come with you again." My nephew was looking like an eager soldier awaiting orders.

"I have no problem with that. We had an amazing week and he was perfect company." I smiled at my nephew, whose eyes lit up with excitement. "If you all agree, the kid stays with me."

My brother-in-law laughed. "I think it is better for him to go with you if that works. I do not like how your father is treating him. I will handle things with your sister later. Go pack your stuff, son."

Vincenzo raced ahead of me. As I approached the powder room, I heard my father's voice. He had cornered Gemma against the wall. Her face was turned toward me, and he was standing far too close to her.

"I guarantee I am much better than him. Call me." He extended a card toward her.

"Honestly, you could not be better than him at anything." I heard Gemma respond as she pushed him away, walking toward me.

"Any problem here?" I asked with barely contained rage.

"Nothing I cannot handle." Gemma responded and took my hand. "Can we leave, please?"

"Yes, we just need to wait for Vincenzo." I replied.

"I am ready." Vincenzo appeared beside us carrying a bag and backpack.

"That was incredibly fast." I commented.

"I had already packed everything in case I needed to escape from this gentleman again." Vincenzo explained. "Look, uncle, I am not leaving your house until he is gone."

"Oh, I do not know, Vincenzo, maybe we will adopt you." Gemma joked with him, and they walked out arm in arm.

I approached my father and warned him coldly. "Stay away from her."

But naturally, he would want to test his power against me and would not leave town before causing me serious trouble.

Chapter 253: Her Own Destruction

Gemma’s POV

Dominic’s Bentley pulled up to the Thorne family’s legitimate front building Monday morning, the engine purring like a predator at rest. Our weekend had been intoxicating, filled with stolen moments and whispered promises, though the shadow of his father Marcus’s venom still poisoned our happiness. I could see the tension in Dominic’s jaw, the way his fingers drummed against the steering wheel when he thought I wasn’t looking.

The mysterious letter I’d received felt like a lead weight in my purse, but I refused to burden Dominic with another threat. His father’s schemes had already caused enough damage to our relationship.

"I’ll pick you up tonight," Dominic murmured against my ear as I gathered my things, his breath sending shivers down my spine despite the lingering dangers surrounding us.

Walking into Thorne Enterprises, I felt energized despite everything. Caleb had given me a mission that morning to gather the staff from our money laundering front operation. Ivy was making her triumphant return to the family, and we needed to control the narrative before loose tongues created problems for our operations.

"What fresh hell are you dragging us into now, bitch?" Monica’s voice dripped with her usual venom as I approached her desk. Our pet names for each other had become a twisted ritual of mutual hatred, though she had no idea how close she was dancing to real danger.

"Boss’s orders, whore. Just smile and pretend you’re useful for once," I shot back with saccharine sweetness, watching her face flush crimson. In the Thorne family’s world, disrespect could be lethal, but Monica was too stupid to understand the game she was playing.

Xavier’s arrival interrupted our verbal sparring match, his easy smile masking the deadly enforcer beneath. "Morning, ladies. Everything alright here?"

"Just peachy," I replied smoothly. "Xavier, Caleb wants everyone in the reception area. He's got an announcement about family business."

When Don Caleb walked through those glass doors with Ivy beside him, I watched Monica's face transform into a mask of barely contained fury. Her knuckles went white as she gripped her coffee mug, and I could practically see the wheels turning in her calculating mind. She had no idea that questioning the boss's woman was a death sentence in our world.

Ivy's warm greeting to me as an old friend was the final nail in Monica's coffin. The woman looked ready to combust on the spot, her professional facade cracking like cheap paint under pressure.

After the crowd dispersed, Monica cornered me near the reception desk, her eyes blazing with malice. "So the little bitch is friends with the boss's queen? How convenient for you."

"Jealousy really doesn't suit you, whore," I said, turning toward the break room with deliberate nonchalance.

That's when I heard it - the soft beep of her phone dialing an extension. I ducked behind the corner, listening as she whispered frantically into the receiver. Roman's extension, no doubt. My pulse quickened with anticipation as I realized she was about to make a fatal mistake.

"Well, well," I said, emerging from my hiding spot as she hung up. "Making unauthorized calls about family business?"

"Mind your own damn business," she hissed through clenched teeth.

"Tell me, do you always run to your boyfriend with confidential information?" I asked with mock concern. "What would Don Caleb think about his employees sharing intelligence with outside contacts?"

Her face went pale, then flushed red. "Don't threaten me, you little bitch. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Oh, I'm terrified," I said, pulling out my phone with theatrical flair. "But since we're sharing secrets, let me show you something interesting."

The blood drained from her face as I turned my screen toward her, showing the video I'd captured of her intimate encounter with Roman. I'd been careful to frame it so his face wasn't visible - couldn't have her figuring out that I knew exactly who her mystery man was or his connections to rival families.

"Delete that right now!" she shrieked, lunging for my phone like a desperate animal.

I pulled it back smoothly. "Sorry, already backed up to our secure servers. Amazing technology, right? Though I have to say, your technique needs work. The poor guy looked bored out of his mind. Maybe you should consider a career change - you're not even good at being a whore."

That did it. She launched herself at me like a rabid creature, her manicured nails raking across my arms as we crashed to the floor. I forced myself to stay defensive, letting her land her wild, ineffective slaps while I screamed for help. Every bruise would be worth it to watch her destroy herself in front of the family's inner circle.

Xavier and Jude came running, but Monica was in full hysteria mode, clawing and slapping like a woman possessed. Other employees gathered in the reception area, their shocked faces creating the perfect audience for her complete downfall.

Caleb's commanding voice cut through the chaos like a blade, but it took several men to finally pry the deranged woman off me. I stood up slowly, letting everyone see my disheveled appearance, the scratches on my arms, the cut on my lip - all evidence of her complete loss of control.

"She showed me some disgusting video," I said breathlessly, playing the victim perfectly. "I told her she shouldn't be making unauthorized calls about family matters, and she just snapped."

Caleb's face was granite as he delivered the killing blow. "Monica, you're finished here. Security will escort you out permanently."

Watching her stumble toward the elevator, mascara streaking down her cheeks, I felt a surge of pure satisfaction. We'd been planning her removal for weeks, and she'd handed us the perfect excuse on a silver platter.

Soon after, Dominic burst through the reception doors like an avenging angel, his face dark with the promise of violence. "Gemma, Christ, look at you. I'm going to destroy that woman."

"It's not as bad as it looks," I said, though I could feel the bruises forming along my ribs.

"Not as bad? You're bleeding, your face is swollen, and there are scratches all over your arms. Where is she? I'm calling in the cleaners right now."

"No, you're not," I said firmly, catching his wrist before he could reach for his phone. "We need her gone, not martyred. Dead bodies create investigations we don't need."

Dominic's jaw worked silently, his protective instincts warring with family pragmatism. "This is insane, Gemma. Look what she did to you."

"And look what it accomplished," I pointed out. "She's gone, and she made herself look completely unhinged in front of the entire operation. Sometimes the best revenge is letting people destroy themselves."

Caleb emerged from his office, taking in Dominic's thunderous expression with dark amusement. "Your woman is tougher than she looks, Dominic. Though I have to admit, she has a real talent for provoking the right reactions."

"This shouldn't have happened," Dominic said tightly. "Gemma shouldn't have to deal with unstable elements in our organization."

"Hey, at least buy me lunch before you two start planning my funeral," I interrupted, trying to lighten the murderous tension in the room.

Xavier appeared with his usual perfect timing. "Actually, that's not a bad idea. Let's take these ladies somewhere safe for lunch."

The rest of the week passed in a blur of moving boxes and nervous energy. Mom and I had finally relocated to our new apartment in Thorne territory, and while the change of scenery was refreshing, that mysterious letter still haunted my thoughts. I'd traced the return address to a generic post office box, which told me absolutely nothing useful but everything dangerous.

But as I looked around our new living room, boxes still stacked in corners and my mother humming happily in the kitchen, I felt a small spark of hope. Maybe we were finally moving toward something better. Maybe the shadows from our past would stay buried where they belonged.

The bruises from my fight with Monica were already fading to yellow, but the satisfaction of watching her self-destruct remained fresh and sweet.

Chapter 254: Tick Tock Time

Gemma's POV

I spent the entire day consumed with worry about Ivy. The news of Yara Rossi's pregnancy claim involving Don Caleb had shattered her completely. Between relocating Ivy's belongings from Jude's surveillance post to Xavier's secure office and establishing her new position within the family's inner circle, I barely had time to breathe. She would be working directly under Consigliere Xavier now, a strategic move that felt necessary given the volatile circumstances within Thorne territory.

Saturday evening brought a welcome distraction from the family's internal turmoil. My mother had arranged a dinner gathering, inviting her boyfriend Ryder and both Dominic and Vincenzo to our heavily secured apartment. She was practically glowing with excitement about hosting guests in our new safe house, though the other family women had declined to join us. Ivy claimed her heartbreak would dampen the celebration.

Ryder arrived first, his imposing frame filling our reinforced doorway as he shared family news. The man possessed a commanding presence that immediately put everyone at ease, and I understood why my mother had fallen for this high-ranking family associate.

"Gerard just called off his engagement," Ryder explained, settling into our bulletproof-windowed living room. "His fiancée discovered the true nature of our pharmaceutical operations and couldn't handle the family business."

"That must be devastating for him," I replied genuinely. "How is he managing the situation?"

Ryder worked alongside my mother in the family's legitimate pharmaceutical front company. As a widower with grown children, daughters who had married into allied families and Gerard, a family doctor who handled the more delicate medical situations for Thorne operations, he had apparently joined the ranks of the heartbroken. His devotion to my mother was evident in every protective gesture.

"Honestly, Gemma, I think he's handling it better than expected," Ryder admitted. "But he's throwing himself into family duties, pulling extra shifts at the underground clinic. I'm concerned about his mental state, but interfering isn't my place."

"You're handling it perfectly," I assured him. "Sometimes work within the family is the best medicine."

The apartment's security system chimed, interrupting our conversation. I checked the monitors before opening the door to find Dominic and Vincenzo, both radiating dangerous good humor. Vincenzo carried an enormous basket of imported delicacies while Dominic balanced bottles of expensive wine and a stunning bouquet that had clearly cost more than most people's monthly income.

"Auntie, gorgeous as always! I've been counting the hours since I last saw you," Vincenzo announced with theatrical charm.

"Vincenzo, you silver-tongued devil! I've missed you too," I laughed, pulling him into a tight embrace despite knowing he was likely armed. "Is this incredible basket really for me?"

"Absolutely not, auntie! This basket is reserved for Aunt Willow, who graciously extended a dinner invitation to a dangerous man like myself. Unlike certain people I know," Vincenzo shot me a mock accusatory look that had me doubled over with laughter.

"I see how it is. You have formed an alliance behind my back." I watched Vincenzo disappear into the apartment before turning to Dominic.

"Sorry, beautiful, but these aren't yours either," Dominic brushed past me with a predatory grin, heading straight for my mother with flowers that probably cost more than most people's cars.

"You're both shameless charmers!" I called after them, their laughter echoing through our fortified apartment.

The evening unfolded beautifully despite the underlying tension of family business. Dominic, Vincenzo, and Ryder bonded immediately over discussions of territorial expansion and family loyalty, with Vincenzo firing endless questions about the pharmaceutical operation's security protocols. His curiosity was infectious, and before long, we had accepted Dominic's invitation to spend Sunday on his private yacht. Vincenzo was practically vibrating with excitement at the prospect of bringing his girlfriend along for a heavily guarded family outing.

After dinner, I packed my things for the weekend at Dominic's secure compound. Ryder had something special planned for my mother, and I had helped him coordinate the security arrangements. Seeing my mother with someone who would kill to protect her filled my heart with warmth. She had waited long enough for this kind of dangerous devotion.

Sunday on the water exceeded all expectations. The yacht's crew maintained professional distance while Vincenzo's girlfriend proved to be a sweet, slightly nervous girl who quickly won over my mother despite clearly being intimidated by our family connections. When we returned her to her heavily protected family estate that evening, her parents couldn't stop praising Vincenzo, their gratitude obvious and slightly fearful.

"I felt so proud watching that," I confessed as we settled into Dominic's armored vehicle. "Our boy is becoming quite the family gentleman."

"We make an excellent parenting team for a future underboss," Dominic replied, both of us observing Vincenzo in the backseat through the bulletproof partition.

"Wait until my mom hears about this! She'll launch into her marathon labor speech while cleaning her guns," Vincenzo groaned.

"Marathon labor speech?" I asked, intrigued.

"Mom was in labor with me for hours during a family crisis, and she weaponizes that information whenever anyone compliments me, especially if Dad gets credit. She insists that since she carried me through months of family warfare and endured labor pains during a territory dispute, everything good about me stems from her sacrifice. According to her philosophy, I should worship her above all other earthly beings, including the family." Dominic's explanation had us all laughing for the remainder of the heavily escorted drive home.

Monday arrived with brutal intensity. By the time I dragged myself home from my shift managing family accounts, I was completely drained. The day had been vicious, with the Roman crime family continuing their harassment campaign against Ivy through intermediaries. The apartment felt unusually quiet as I stepped inside, almost eerily so given our usual security presence.

After a quick shower, I started preparing dinner while waiting for my mother's return from the pharmaceutical facility. Her tardiness struck me as odd since punctuality was crucial for family operations.

"Mom, there you are! You're running behind schedule," I called from the kitchen when she finally appeared.

"Sorry, sweetheart. I had to retrieve a package from our old safe house that our security contact signed for. There was also a letter waiting for you. I left it on the reinforced console table. I'm going to shower and check for surveillance devices."

She disappeared toward her bedroom, leaving me frozen in place. My legs felt unsteady as I approached the envelope, dread pooling in my stomach like acid. The familiar handwriting confirmed my worst fears. The same prison return address stared back mockingly. Would this nightmare ever end? I snatched the letter and concealed it before rushing back to the kitchen.

"Who's been sending you correspondence, honey?" my mother asked when she emerged, maternal suspicion activated.

"Just promotional material from some cosmetics company," I lied, forcing what I hoped appeared casual.

"Are you certain, Gemma?" Her protective instincts were clearly engaged.

"Completely certain, Mom!" I maintained false cheerfulness, knowing there was no point alarming her. Whoever was behind these letters couldn't possibly have breached our new security measures.

"If anything threatened our safety, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

"Always, Mom."

"Good." She exhaled slowly. "Actually, I wanted to discuss something important. I received an interesting proposition today."

"From family business?"

"No. Ryder asked me to move into his compound. I requested time to consider the security implications. He extended the invitation to include you naturally, but we just relocated and I'm uncertain about exposing you to additional family connections." My mother appeared genuinely conflicted about deeper family involvement.

"Mom, Ryder is absolutely wonderful! I believe you were meant to find each other and build a life together within family protection."

"Did you discuss this? Because those were almost his exact words."

"He requested my blessing," I admitted with a grin. "I know he included me in the invitation, but I think you deserve privacy to develop your relationship. I'm perfectly content staying here under family protection, or I could move in with Lila if needed."

"Are you attempting to distance yourself from me, sweetheart?"

"Never! I adore you and want your happiness above everything. I'm a grown woman now, and you don't need to worry about my safety constantly with family security watching. I think moving in with Ryder is exactly what you should do."

"I hate leaving you alone in this dangerous world."

"This could be valuable experience living independently within family territory."

"You're sure you'd be secure?"

"Absolutely! Plus, I'd visit constantly."

"Then I'll give it serious consideration." My mother's smile was radiant.

Later that night, I retrieved the letter that had been burning through my consciousness all evening. My hands trembled as I tore open the envelope, and tears immediately began flowing as I read the contents.

"Tick Tock. Time is running out, little Gemma! You still haven't come to see me. I won't be locked up much longer, and when I'm free, you'll regret every choice you made. You'll crawl back to me and spend every day begging for mercy! Your devoted Nick"

While the message wasn't drastically different from the first threatening letter demanding I visit him in prison, receiving this second communication filled me with genuine terror. The possibility that he might actually follow through on his threats suddenly felt very real. Tomorrow I would contact our family lawyer and request complete confidentiality from my mother. Perhaps he could offer some solution to end this nightmare before it escalated into family warfare.

Chapter 255: Shadows and Schemes

Marcus's POV

I stood in the shadows of the Social Union's VIP lounge, my burner phone pressed against my ear for what felt like countless times tonight. Robert Miller's voicemail mocked me once again. Multiple attempts at reconciliation, and the old bastard still refused to take my calls.

All because I'd made a move on his precious daughter without realizing she was under his protection. Instead of understanding it was business as usual, Robert delivered some righteous lecture about honoring the code regardless of family connections. Then he had the nerve to tell me our years of alliance in the underworld was finished.

My jaw clenched as rage burned through my veins. This was all Dominic's doing. My worthless son had recruited Miller's daughter into his operation without bothering to inform me, and now I'd lost a crucial ally because of his incompetence. But Dominic would learn the price of crossing his father.

I forced myself to breathe steadily. Tonight's gathering at the underground gambling den was about rebuilding connections with other powerful figures, and I needed to maintain my composure. As I moved toward the private dining area, movement near the entrance caught my attention.

A group of stunning women had just arrived, each one more captivating than the last. The Social Union certainly attracted quality companions for the family bosses these days. My eyes narrowed as I studied them carefully, recognizing two faces that made my pulse quicken with interest.

Zoe Miller stood among them, along with Gemma, Dominic's current obsession. The others were unfamiliar, but if they moved in these circles, they were worth investigating. Information was leverage, and I always collected both.

Inside the dining hall, I spotted Arnold Cross sharing a meal with his daughter Beatrix. Arnold controlled key shipping routes for several families - exactly the kind of connection I needed to cultivate tonight. His daughter, however, was unremarkable in every way. Plain features, forgettable presence. Yet I knew Dominic had kept her as his companion for months, and the poor girl was completely infatuated with my son.

She must be seething about his new fixation. Perhaps that wounded pride could prove useful.

I approached their table with my most disarming smile. "Arnold, what a pleasure seeing you here. And Miss Beatrix, radiant as always. Will you be joining us for the evening's entertainment?"

Beatrix’s cheeks flushed as she shook her head. "Thank you, Mr. Frost, but I’m meeting some associates. Perhaps another time?"

"Indeed, what a shame." I settled into conversation with Arnold, steering toward the topic weighing on my mind. "Tell me, how are your operations running these days?"

"Can’t complain about business. And Dominic? How’s that boy of yours managing his territory?"

I let my expression darken slightly. "Becoming more reckless by the day, I’m afraid. Sometimes I wonder where I failed in raising that kid."

Beatrix’s eyes lit up with sudden interest. "Oh Mr. Frost, I couldn’t help but notice Dominic’s been acting strangely lately. Ever since he started running with that crew over there." She gestured toward the women I’d spotted earlier.

"Really?" I kept my tone casual while my mind calculated possibilities. "And you know these women?"

"Unfortunately." Beatrix’s voice dripped with barely concealed venom. "They’re nothing but ambitious social climbers. That Zoe girl is absolutely vulgar - acts like some kind of enforcer. Gemma has somehow managed to completely bewitch Dominic. The brunette is Ivy, she was with Thorne until my friend Yara put an end to that arrangement. The redhead is with Black now, there’s another I don’t recognize, and the married one runs with Jude from Xavier’s crew."

"Troublemakers, then?"

"Completely toxic," Beatrix spat, her composure cracking. "They’re corrupting every decent man in the organization."

I leaned forward conspiratorially. "As his father, I’m genuinely worried about Dominic’s judgment. You know I’ve always believed you’d make an ideal match for him."

Beatrix’s smile could have powered the entire building. "I just need Dominic to see past that manipulative gold-digger and remember what we had together."

"Perhaps I could provide some assistance," I offered smoothly.

Arnold shot me a warning look. "Don’t fill my daughter’s head with schemes, Marcus."

I waved dismissively. "Relax, old friend. I’m simply looking out for Dominic’s future."

Beatrix practically vibrated with excitement. "Oh, here come my contacts now! Goodbye, Papa. Goodbye, Mr. Frost!" She hurried away, radiating anticipation.

I had to admit, Dominic’s taste had evolved considerably. Gemma was absolutely breathtaking, while Beatrix looked like a plain little sparrow. Still, sometimes the sparrow proved more useful than the prize.

Throughout dinner with my associates, I kept surveillance on the table of beautiful women. They were drawing appreciative glances from every connected man in the room, which only confirmed their potential value as assets.

When Gemma excused herself toward the powder room, opportunity presented itself. I made my own polite exit and caught Beatrix’s attention as I passed her table. The girl wasn’t completely dense - she understood my subtle signal and followed at a discreet distance.

"Stay sharp," I whispered to her near the corridor. "Gemma’s been sending me signals all evening. I’m certain she’s interested in making a connection. Make sure you capture whatever happens here."

Beatrix nodded eagerly and found a concealed position while I positioned myself strategically.

When Gemma emerged from the restroom, I moved swiftly, catching her wrist and pressing her against the wall. From Beatrix’s angle, it would appear like an intimate encounter, even though Gemma was clearly attempting to break free.

"We meet again," I said with practiced charm. "And this time, no witnesses."

"Witnesses to what? Release me." She pushed against my chest, but I maintained my grip.

"Come now, Gemma. No need for games. I know exactly what women in your position desire."

"Women in my position? You're delusional. Get away from me."

I leaned closer, attempting to claim her lips, but she jerked her head away. Suddenly, a firm hand seized my shoulder and yanked me backward.

"The lady requested you to stop," a deep voice commanded. I turned to face one of the den's security enforcers.

"She knows who I am," I said dismissively. "This is merely a misunderstanding."

"He's harassing me," Gemma informed the enforcer. "Could you please intervene?"

"Absolutely, miss." The enforcer maintained his grip while addressing her. "Would you like to file a formal complaint with management?"

"No, I just want him to leave me alone."

"We'll ensure that happens." The enforcer began escorting me away. "This way, sir."

The manager's office felt suffocating as I endured their lecture while they reviewed surveillance footage. They reprimanded me for inappropriate conduct and banned me for the evening, threatening permanent exclusion if similar incidents occurred. Only my family's historical standing saved me from immediate banishment.

Beatrix waited anxiously outside as I was escorted from the building.

"Mr. Frost, what happened? I saw security remove you."

"The little actress spotted the muscle and played victim," I replied, maintaining my cordial facade. "I trust you captured something worthwhile during this inconvenience."

Beatrix's face transformed with triumph. "Mr. Frost, you'll be very pleased. Look at this."

She displayed her phone screen, and I had to suppress my satisfaction. The photograph was flawless - taken at precisely the right angle to suggest a romantic encounter between two consenting adults. Anyone viewing this image would assume Gemma had been an eager participant.

"Exceptional work, my dear. Now act quickly, before she has opportunity to spin this narrative to Dominic."

"Leave everything to me!" Beatrix practically danced away, clutching her phone like precious contraband.

This evening at the Social Union had exceeded all expectations. Soon my arrogant son would discover that his father still wielded the real power in this family, and that defying me carried severe consequences.

As I walked to my vehicle, anticipation coursed through my veins. The next few hours would prove very entertaining indeed.

Chapter 256: Lies Unraveling

Gemma's POV

What a nightmare. I stepped out of the restroom and walked straight into Marcus Frost lurking in the hallway outside the private dining room of the club that served as neutral territory for family business meetings. His grip on my arm was firm and unwelcome, his fingers digging into my skin like a predator marking his prey. That disgusting exile made my flesh crawl, but I forced myself to maintain composure before heading back to our table. The last thing our group needed was more drama, especially with Ivy

already devastated after learning that Yara Rossi, daughter of a rival family, claimed to be carrying Caleb's heir.

"Everything alright, Gemma? You were gone forever," Lila questioned the moment I slid into the plush leather seat. That sharp-eyed girl never missed a detail, probably why she'd survived this long in our dangerous circle.

"Yeah, just fine. Mom called," I fabricated smoothly to explain my extended absence.

"Oh Gemma, I'm absolutely dying to meet your mother. Frost won't stop raving about her cooking," Zoe chimed in with enthusiasm, swirling her martini. As Dominic's lieutenant and information broker, she had access to details about everyone in our orbit.

"We should definitely arrange something at my place," I suggested, forcing brightness into my voice despite the lingering dread from my encounter with Marcus. The girls immediately warmed to the idea, their chatter providing a welcome distraction from the cold fear settling in my chest.

After countless cocktails and endless conversation about territory disputes and family politics, we finally called it a night. I had already planned to crash at Lila's fortified apartment since I desperately needed someone to confide in about everything spiraling beyond my control. Lila's place was one of the few locations in the city where we could speak freely without worrying about surveillance or family ears. The second we walked through her reinforced door, she launched into interrogation mode.

"Gemma, what's really going on with you?"

"Lila, I'm absolutely terrified."

"What do you mean?"

"I've gotten more letters from Nick."

"Hold on, is that street rat even permitted to contact you from inside?"

"I met with the family's attorney recently. He confirmed that those letters couldn't have been sent through official prison channels. Someone on the outside had to smuggle them out and mail them on Nick's behalf. Someone with connections."

"Any clue who might have done it?"

"None whatsoever. The lawyer's informing the judge though. We'll see what the family decides to do next."

"What exactly did he write, Gemma?"

"Pure threats. The first letter demanded I visit him in prison. The other letters promised he wouldn't leave me alone and swore he'd make me pay for putting him behind bars. He knows things about my daily routine, Lila. Things only someone watching me could know."

"That's incredibly serious, Gemma. Have you discussed this with Dominic or your mother?"

"My mom's considering moving in with her boyfriend outside the family's territory. If I tell her about this, she'll abandon those plans, and that wouldn't be fair to her. As for Dominic, he's drowning in his own problems right now with the money laundering operations under federal scrutiny. I refuse to add to his burden."

I explained to Lila about Marcus's return to the city and how tense Dominic became whenever his exiled father surfaced. I described the uncomfortable dinner at Nadia's place and today's incident at the club.

"I knew something had happened when you came back to the table," Lila observed. "Why didn't you mention it at the club? Why keep it from the other girls?"

"You saw Ivy's condition after that scene with Yara. I won't dump my problems on her when she's already suffering from all the family politics. She needs our support right now."

"Gemma, that's what this circle is for - we protect each other's backs."

"I understand, but Ivy needs our solidarity right now. Besides, I can count on you, can't I?"

"Always, absolutely. But you need to tell Dominic that his father cornered you."

"No way, Lila. Dominic would put a bullet in Marcus's head without a second thought, exiled father or not. Marcus may be a vile excuse for a human being, but I won't be the reason Dominic has blood on his hands from family business."

"Gemma, that's his father we're talking about. You're his woman. In this world, he has every right to know when someone threatens what's his."

"I realize that, but I refuse to make his situation with the family more complicated. He's already walking a tightrope with the federal attention."

"Gemma, you're considering everyone except yourself. You're shutting out the people who love you most. Do you honestly believe that's the right approach in our world?"

"Lila, I simply don't want to burden anyone with my problems. These are mine to handle."

"You don't have to face them alone though. I'll respect whatever you decide, but consider whether you should let the people who care about you choose if they want to help rather than forcing them to watch you struggle in isolation," Lila said with complete seriousness, her words cutting through my defenses. "Just remember that while you're protecting everyone else, I'm here for you no matter what. In this life, loyalty is everything."

"Thank you, Lila." I squeezed her hand with genuine affection.

Opening up to Lila felt incredibly liberating. Beyond just listening and offering support, she provided the kind of street-smart perspective that came from surviving in the family's world. Having a true ally's backing made all the difference when navigating the dangerous waters of mafia politics.

The days blurred together, and Dominic and I could barely manage brief conversations. My schedule was packed with work at the boutique and supporting the girls since Ivy remained in terrible shape and

needed constant attention while the family sorted out the Yara situation. Dominic was juggling his money laundering operations while dealing with increased federal surveillance, plus managing whatever threat Marcus represented to family security. According to Zoe's intelligence network, Marcus continued making Dominic's life miserable with his presence in the city. Our conversations had become painfully short, usually just me talking while he listened with the distracted air of a man calculating risks and body counts. Something about Dominic's behavior was making me increasingly anxious. Things felt different, but I couldn't identify exactly what had changed in the family dynamics.

When Ivy began seeing Parker, a soldier from a neutral family, her mood improved significantly, and our after-work gatherings at secure locations returned to occasional instead of daily crisis management sessions. My evenings and weekends were finally free again.

However, Dominic seemed busier than ever with family business.

I'd call his encrypted cell phone, but he never answered, always responding with a text saying "I'll call you back" and never following through. When I called Zenith Systems, his legitimate business front, his secretary would claim he couldn't come to the phone, always in meetings or handling sensitive calls, promising to "pass along your message." Weekends were supposedly consumed by emergency family operations. I knew something was seriously wrong but didn't want to involve others in my suspicions about what might be happening in the family's inner circle. Then Vincenzo called me.

"Hey there, gorgeous Auntie," he said with forced cheerfulness when I answered.

"Sweetheart, how are you doing?"

"Completely stressed, Auntie. It's finals week and I'm drowning in textbooks. Just taking a quick break for food and to call you because I miss you terribly. You've completely vanished from family dinners. Seems like you only have time for your girlfriends these days."

"Things were chaotic for a while with all the territorial issues, but they've settled down recently. Why haven't you and your uncle visited?"

"What do you mean? I was going to ask why you skipped Sunday dinner at the compound. Uncle Dominic said you were busy with your friends and family obligations."

"I think your uncle might be confused about his schedule."

"Auntie, are you having problems? The family's been asking questions."

"Not that I'm aware of. Your uncle's been incredibly busy with the federal heat lately, maybe that explains the miscommunication."

"Is something wrong, Auntie? Because if someone's threatening you, the family needs to know."

"No sweetie, we've both just been working constantly. You know how it is when the feds start sniffing around our operations."

"Should we plan something for this weekend? Maybe a family dinner where we can all talk?"

"Just let me know when works best for everyone."

We chatted a bit longer about his studies and family gossip, and when I hung up, devastation washed over me like ice water. If I had suspicions before, now I was certain something was terribly wrong, and Dominic was actively deceiving me about his whereabouts and activities.

I attempted calling Dominic again, but he didn't answer his encrypted line, sending the usual "I'll call you back" message. I called Zenith Systems and received the standard "I'll pass along your message" from his secretary. So I called Zoe, who answered with her typical sharp efficiency.

"Hey beautiful, how's everything going in your corner of paradise?"

"Everything's fine, Zoe. Caleb and Ivy are still navigating the Yara drama, but she's doing much better since she started seeing Parker."

"Yeah, that alliance has been really beneficial for everyone involved. But what about you? Why are you calling me during business hours? You know I'm usually coordinating surveillance operations right now."

Now I needed a convincing cover story because Zoe wasn't gullible. Her survival in the family depended on reading between the lines. But how could I get the information I needed without her realizing something was wrong between Dominic and me?

"Nothing major, Zoe. I'm just thinking about planning a surprise for Dominic and wanted to check which day would work best, since I know you usually coordinate late-night operations."

"Thank goodness we haven't been running late operations recently. Things have been so quiet on the federal front that Dominic even left early today to spend the afternoon shopping with Vincenzo at the mall. So you can pick whatever day you want for your surprise."

I was completely baffled. What did she mean he was at the mall with Vincenzo? I had just spoken with Vincenzo, and he was studying for exams. The secretary told me he was in sensitive meetings. Something was definitely very wrong with this picture.

"Gemma?" I heard Zoe's voice calling from the other end.

"Sorry Zoe, I just got an urgent message from the boutique and need to handle it. Don't mention to Dominic that I called since it's meant to be a surprise."

"Don't worry, beautiful. If you need anything else, just let me know. You know the family takes care of its own."

I said goodbye to Zoe and felt my heart sink into my stomach. I made one final call.

"Lila, if you're near Ruby, step away without mentioning it's me calling," I spoke rapidly when Lila answered.

"Okay, you can talk freely now, friend. What's wrong? Your voice sounds like you've seen a ghost."

"It's Dominic, Lila. Can I come over tonight so we can talk without any surveillance?"

"I’m going to destroy that manipulative bastard. Of course you can come, Gemma. I’ll make sure we have complete privacy."

"Lila, don’t say anything to the other girls yet."

"Don’t worry about it. But Gemma, if he’s playing games while you’re dealing with threats, there’s going to be consequences."

I felt absolutely sick to my stomach. I needed a moment and escaped to the boutique’s back room. A thousand thoughts were racing through my mind about family politics, federal pressure, and dangerous games. Had Dominic grown tired of the complications I brought to his operations and decided to just disappear from my life? That would be unforgivably low, even by mafia standards. But I was determined to get to the bottom of this situation, though I had no idea how dangerous the truth might be.

Chapter 257: Behind the Door

Gemma’s POV

Lila’s words from last night echoed in my mind like a persistent drumbeat. "Gemma, you need to confront him directly." She was absolutely right. Our conversation had been exactly what I needed - she listened without judgment, offered solid advice, dried my tears, and reminded me of my own strength. Despite being younger than me, that petite powerhouse possessed wisdom beyond her years and a maturity that constantly amazed me, especially considering the dangerous world we now navigated.

My original plan had been to drive straight to Dominic’s secured compound today, but my mother’s urgent text message derailed those intentions. She needed me home immediately for something important. When I walked through the front door, I found her and Ryder waiting with an elaborate dinner spread across our dining table.

"Hey, what’s the special occasion?" I asked, taking in the carefully arranged place settings and flickering candles.

"Very special, Gemma," Ryder said, pulling me into one of his warm, protective embraces. As one of Thorne family’s trusted associates, Ryder had always treated our small family with the utmost respect.

"Mind if I grab a quick shower first?" I gestured toward my work clothes, catching my mother's mysterious smile.

"Of course, sweetheart," she replied, making final adjustments to the silverware placement.

The hot water felt incredible against my skin, washing away the day's tension and the constant undercurrent of danger that had become part of my daily existence. I slipped into comfortable clothes and padded back to the living room, only to discover them locked in a tender kiss. The sight filled my chest with warmth. Seeing my mother genuinely happy with someone who treasured her felt like a miracle. My father had terrorized her for years, even after their relationship ended when I was just a baby. He never missed an opportunity to make her life miserable until I came of age and finally had the courage to banish him from our lives. Then Ryder appeared like a blessing, transforming everything for the better with his connections and protection.

"Ahem," I cleared my throat dramatically, drawing their attention with exaggerated playfulness. They both laughed, and Ryder gestured for me to join them.

"Come here, daughter, have a seat." The word 'daughter' caught me off guard - he had never used it before, despite being a constant presence in our lives and providing security through his family affiliations.

"Okay," I settled into my chair, studying their faces. "Come on, spill it. This suspense is killing me!"

"Gemma, I've decided to accept Ryder's marriage proposal and move into his estate with him," my mother announced with her characteristic directness.

"Mom! That's incredible news!" I jumped up to embrace her tightly. "I'm so happy for you both. This man is absolutely worth it!" My mother's smile could have lit up the entire room. Ryder's position meant she would finally have the protection and luxury she deserved.

"Thank you! I knew I could count on this wonderful girl!" Ryder beamed. "But I need to tell you something else." I sat back down, giving him my full attention. "You're an exceptional young woman. I care about you deeply, as if you were my own flesh and blood. My estate has plenty of space, and I would be thrilled if you decided to come live with us. The security there is impeccable."

"Oh, Ryder! Thank you so much! But would you be disappointed if I said no? It’s just that you two deserve complete privacy, and I really want to experience true independence for the first time!" I explained, though I knew his offer came from genuine concern for my safety.

"As a father figure, I’ll definitely miss you, but I completely understand your need for independence. However, I want you to know that our home will always be your home too. You’ll have your own wing there if you change your mind, want to stay for a few days, or need anything at all. I love your mother, Gemma, and you’re an inseparable part of her. I never want to come between you two. Besides, like I said, you’re like a daughter to me, and I want you to be absolutely certain that you can count on both of us. You’ll always have a place with us whenever you want or need it, especially given the current circumstances." Ryder’s heartfelt words brought tears to my eyes, and I had to hug him again. His subtle reference to the ongoing threats didn’t escape me.

"Thank you, Ryder. This means everything to me! I promise I’ll visit regularly," I said, still holding him tight.

"Well, that’s something," he chuckled warmly. "And remember, my security team is always available if you need anything."

"When’s the big move happening?" I asked eagerly.

"Saturday," my mother answered. "Since you’re staying put, you can keep the apartment. The building’s security has been upgraded, and it’s legally yours anyway. You could ask Lila to move in if you want - safety in numbers."

"Thanks, Mom." I was absolutely thrilled and already planning to invite Lila immediately.

Dinner was delicious, and all three of us buzzed with excitement, making endless plans for the future. They were planning a celebratory trip to Ryder’s private island and would be gone for an entire week, though he insisted the destination would remain a surprise for security reasons.

After hours of animated conversation, I hugged them goodbye. Exhaustion was setting in, and I had serious thinking to do about Dominic. But before I could escape to my room, my mother handed me another envelope.

"This company sends tons of junk mail. I got this today - the building's security screened it first, but they said it was addressed to you."

"Thanks, Mom." I fought to keep my expression neutral and headed straight to my room. I tore open the envelope and found another threatening message:

"Tell your fancy lawyer that keeping me isolated and cutting my privileges will only make everything worse. When I get out, little Gemma, you'll be with me, and I'll make you regret crossing the wrong people. I have friends now who know how to handle uppity bitches. Your devoted, Nick."

Tears streamed down my face immediately. This situation was driving me toward complete desperation. The threats were escalating, and his mention of "friends" sent chills down my spine. I hid the letter carefully - tomorrow I would take it directly to the lawyer. And that's exactly what I did. I scheduled a lunch meeting with him, and Lila accompanied me for moral support.

"Gemma, his visitation privileges are completely suspended, so whoever is smuggling these letters out must be connected to other inmates or corrupt guards," the lawyer explained, and I tasted bile in my mouth. "Given the nature of some facilities, he's likely aligned himself with organized crime elements inside."

"What does that mean exactly, sir?" I asked, though I already knew the terrifying answer.

"He's made alliances, let's put it that way," the lawyer concluded grimly. "And being where he is, those connections extend beyond prison walls. I want you to be extremely careful. He doesn't know about your mother's relocation yet, which works in our favor, but stay hypervigilant. Consider professional security."

"Understood, counselor," I replied shakily, knowing Ryder's offer suddenly seemed more appealing.

"What are you going to do about it, sir?" Lila asked firmly.

"I'll petition the judge immediately for his transfer to maximum security, and I'm recommending witness protection protocols for you."

That news calmed my nerves slightly. "At least these letters serve as evidence against any early release."

After the lawyer left, I took the opportunity to tell Lila about my mother's upcoming move.

"That's wonderful, Gemma! They're absolutely adorable together, and Aunt Willow deserves every bit of happiness," Lila said, genuinely happy for my mother. "And Ryder's connections mean she'll finally be safe."

"She really does deserve it. And I'll have that enormous apartment completely to myself, with upgraded security. So, I want to invite you to live with me," I said, smiling at my best friend.

"Are you serious, Gemma?" Lila asked, her huge eyes widening impossibly.

"Dead serious! Come on, say yes!" I insisted eagerly.

"Well, I might just accept," she laughed. "I accept, but I need to check my current lease situation. Can you keep the invitation open?"

"Lila, whenever you're ready, your room will be waiting," I assured her. "Plus, we'd both be safer together."

"Thank you! I'm going to absolutely love living with you." She was as excited as I was.

"Lila, I'm going to Dominic's compound after work today. I need to sort this mess out once and for all. And I'm going without warning since he hasn't been answering my calls or responding through proper channels."

"Gemma, Dominic's being such a complete ass! But promise me if things don't work out with him, you'll come straight to my place. Don't go home alone, especially with these new threats."

"That's exactly what I wanted to ask you. I don't want my mom worrying about me right now, especially before her big move."

"Oh Gemma, you're always thinking about everyone else first." Lila opened her purse and removed a key from her keychain. "Here, a spare key to my place. Come in whenever you need to, doesn't matter what time. My building has decent security too."

"You're my guardian angel!"

After work, I took a taxi directly to Dominic's compound. The familiar guards recognized me but seemed surprised by my unannounced arrival. I pressed the doorbell at his private entrance and waited, my heart hammering against my ribs. I was incredibly nervous, but nothing could have prepared me for what I was about to see when that door opened.

Chapter 258: Threshold of Ruin

Destruction

Dominic's POV

That cursed photograph had branded itself into my consciousness. Days had passed since Beatrix delivered her poison, yet the image remained crystal clear behind my closed eyelids. My father Marcus pressing Gemma against the brick wall of the Social Union, his mouth claiming territory on her throat, her body melting into his embrace. The note that came with it was surgical in its simplicity: "Your father's newest conquest."

Every fiber of my being burned with betrayal.

All those nights Gemma had fed me carefully constructed lies. Perfect explanations rolling off her tongue like practiced lines. Supporting Ivy through her emotional breakdown. Girls' evenings to boost morale among the women. Each story different when I questioned her whereabouts. Meanwhile, she was allowing that bastard to put his filthy hands all over her flesh.

The evening after Beatrix's revelation, fury took complete control of my actions. I drove like a madman to the Social Union, located Beatrix sipping her usual martini at the bar, and hauled her outside to the parking structure. We coupled against her vehicle with the same raw desperation we'd shared before Gemma entered my world and turned everything upside down. Even as Beatrix cried out beneath me, all

I could visualize was that damning image of my father staking his claim on what I believed belonged to me.

Torturous days crawled past at an excruciating pace. Vincenzo had resumed his normal routine after the recent family crisis, but Marcus continued circling our territory like a predator waiting to strike. When Nadia organized another family gathering, I manufactured another flimsy excuse for Gemma's conspicuous absence. The moment Marcus crossed the threshold, his mere presence contaminated the atmosphere. I couldn't stomach sharing the same space with him.

"Departing already, boy?" His voice carried that familiar mockery as I made my escape.

I whipped around, pure hatred coursing through my veins. "Never address me like that again. I am nothing to you."

"Quite the contrary." His smile turned razor-sharp. "We have so many preferences in common, you and I. Identical appetites, one might say."

The veiled reference in his tone shattered my final restraint. I launched myself forward, wrapping both hands around his windpipe. "Keep your filthy mouth sealed. You understand me? I will never be your son!"

His mocking laughter echoed even as Nadia physically separated us. "I've always exceeded your capabilities, boy. Women invariably select me when given the choice."

I bolted to my car, hands trembling with murderous rage. Minutes later, Beatrix slid into my passenger seat. We burned through the hours at some seedy roadside establishment, her flesh serving as temporary relief from the inferno consuming my chest. But nothing could penetrate the expanding void where my heart used to beat.

Days passed with me deliberately ignoring Gemma's attempts at contact. My phone would vibrate, her name illuminating the display, and I'd allow it to transfer to voicemail. Mia kept questioning why I refused her calls, bewilderment etched across her features. Even my closest associates seemed mystified by the sudden communication blackout, though none pressed too aggressively for explanations.

Beatrix had become my preferred numbing agent. The previous afternoon, I'd abandoned work early and transported her to that same decrepit motel. I informed Zoe I was meeting with Vincenzo, knowing she harbored intense dislike for Beatrix due to her alliance with Yara Rossi. Perceptive woman, my lieutenant.

Today carried a different energy. Gemma hadn't attempted contact even once. No calls to my cellular device, no messages to the office, not even communication through Mia. Had she finally surrendered the fight? Part of me should have experienced relief. This outcome aligned with my desires, didn't it? For her to vanish from my existence entirely. Then why did her silence feel like another knife twisting in my gut?

I headed straight home after concluding business, craving nothing beyond scalding water, aged whiskey, and oblivion.

The doorbell disrupted those intentions.

Beatrix posed in my entrance, radiating predatory satisfaction and artificial brightness. "Hello, beautiful. You disappeared for days straight."

"I'm drained, Beatrix. Find someone else tonight." I stepped aside reluctantly, already cursing my weakness.

"Excellent." She coiled her arms around my neck possessively. "Allow me to restore your energy."

Before I could voice objection, her mouth captured mine. The alcohol already flowing through my system blurred the edges of reality. Somehow we relocated to my bedroom, the identical space where Gemma and I had constructed our private sanctuary. I squeezed my eyes shut and permitted Beatrix's body to obliterate those memories, even as Gemma's face materialized behind every movement.

"Should we arrange for food delivery?" Beatrix emerged from my bathroom later, wearing nothing but smugness.

"Fine." I ordered pizza and retreated to the shower.

The scorching spray couldn’t cleanse the self-loathing coating my skin. When I finally emerged, I’d resolved to enjoy whatever this arrangement was before dismissing Beatrix permanently. The doorbell chimed as I was pulling on underwear.

"Is that our meal, gorgeous?" I called out, moving toward the main living area.

The tableau awaiting me stopped my blood circulation entirely.

Beatrix positioned herself at my opened door wearing exclusively my dress shirt, her posture deliberately seductive. Beyond the threshold, Gemma stared back at both of us. Her expression cycled through shock, comprehension, and soul-crushing anguish within heartbeats. Moisture gathered in her eyes as she absorbed Beatrix’s state of undress, my half-clothed appearance, the unmistakable conclusion.

"No, darling." Beatrix’s voice dripped with malicious triumph. "Simply an uninvited disruption."

I watched Gemma’s spirit fracture before she turned away. Every instinct demanded I pursue her, but Beatrix slammed the barrier shut and pressed her spine against it.

"What was that performance?" Rage replaced my paralysis.

"Calm yourself, sweetheart. That insignificant nobody isn’t worth your concern. Return to bed with me."

Her hands reached for my flesh and I recoiled violently. "Get dressed. Leave immediately. Now."

"Don’t allow that pathetic creature to destroy our evening." Beatrix advanced closer and something lethal flashed through my consciousness at her terminology.

"Exit my residence before I physically remove you myself."

My tone carried sufficient frost to freeze the underworld. Beatrix recognized the genuine threat and clothed herself rapidly, her departure punctuated by multiple slammed doors and squealing rubber.

When the pizza arrived, I compensated the delivery driver and instructed him to keep everything. Then I consumed alcohol until consciousness mercifully abandoned me.

Dawn brought Lila’s condemnation in the elevator.

"What a catastrophe, Dominic." Her disappointment cut more deeply than fury would have. "I’m the sole person who knows the truth, so remain silent. Gemma doesn’t want this information public yet. She claims Caleb and Ivy have sufficient problems without adding your chaos to their burden." She examined me with revulsion. "I believed you possessed more character than this."

The elevator announced her floor’s arrival. "Stay away from her completely. And terminate my employment if you wish. I’ve stopped caring."

Her words left me completely hollow. Did Lila understand the complete story? Or did she only witness what appeared to be my betrayal of an innocent woman?

My phone buzzed with a message from Nadia: "Dominic, what have you done? Beatrix is broadcasting to everyone that you’re romantically involved again."

Perfect. Absolutely perfect.

Chapter 259: Webs of Deception

Beatrix’s POV

Ever since Dominic got involved with that nobody Gemma, he vanished from my life completely. No calls, no texts, nothing. Then he had the audacity to actually start parading her around the territories like she was some kind of mafia princess. The whole situation was beyond ridiculous.

I had been there for him whenever he needed me. We had been sleeping together for months, and I did everything possible to make him see me as more than just another conquest. But every time I brought up taking things further, he would shut me down cold. Always the same excuse about keeping things casual and never wanting commitment with anyone in this life.

Then this random girl appears out of thin air and suddenly he is escorting her through Thorne family establishments like she is some kind of prized asset. I refused to let this happen. Dominic belonged to me, and I would fight for what was mine. If that pathetic Yara could trap Don Caleb with a fake pregnancy, surely I could find a way to secure Dominic permanently.

Getting pregnant would have been ideal, but Dominic was annoyingly cautious about protection. Even when he was completely wasted after territory raids, he never slipped up on that front. I needed a different strategy.

Meeting his father at the Social Union had been pure luck. Marcus Frost was absolutely disgusting - still the same sleazy womanizer he had always been, even after his exile from the family. His relationship with Dominic remained as toxic as ever, but that made him the perfect ally. Dominic's mother and sister treated me like garbage whenever our paths crossed at family gatherings, making their feelings crystal clear.

When Marcus claimed that Gemma had been flirting with him, I knew he was lying through his teeth. I understood exactly what kind of predator he was and how he operated. He would pursue women relentlessly until they either gave in or he forced the issue. His approach was crude and aggressive, more about physical dominance than actual seduction. The man was a complete pig playing alpha male games even in exile.

But I could work with his depravity.

I knew he would eventually corner her somewhere in the underground establishments, and when he did, I would be ready. The photograph I captured was absolutely perfect. Anyone with functioning eyes could see what was really happening - Gemma pressed against the wall, fists clenched in resistance, face turned away in disgust while Marcus forced himself on her neck.

However, Dominic was blinded by his hatred for his exiled father. With the right spin and his explosive Capo temper, he would see exactly what I wanted him to see. He would be devastated and furious, and I would be right there to pick up the pieces. I planned to become indispensable, never giving him a moment alone to think clearly about family business or personal matters.

The plan worked flawlessly.

Dominic believed every word of my carefully crafted story. Every time I showed up at his door, he pulled me into his arms like a drowning man grabbing a life preserver. He even started calling me first, which had never happened before. Yesterday had been the ultimate victory - he had never brought me to his private safe house before, but when I appeared unexpectedly, his resistance crumbled completely.

The cherry on top was when Gemma walked in and found me wearing nothing but his shirt. She even heard him call me sexy right to my face. He asked me to leave afterward, but that was just for show. It was only a matter of time before he came crawling back for more comfort.

Game over. I was absolutely certain that Gemma would be ancient history within days, and Dominic would finally be mine completely.

I was enjoying a leisurely breakfast and savoring my inevitable triumph when Marcus called. He wanted to meet for lunch at his hotel to discuss something important about the family situation, so I agreed immediately.

"Beatrix, sweetheart! Thank you for making time to see me." Marcus stood and kissed both my cheeks in greeting, the gesture feeling oddly formal for an exiled family member.

"Mr. Frost, the pleasure is entirely mine." I settled into my chair, practically vibrating with excitement about our successful manipulation.

"Darling, I wanted to check on your progress with my son." His interest in helping me seemed genuine enough, though I suspected he had his own agenda regarding the Thorne family.

"Everything is going perfectly, Mr. Frost. Dominic is completely falling for me. We have been spending tons of time together at his territory operations."

"Wonderful news, Beatrix. Actually, I saw Dominic yesterday and gave him another gentle push in your direction." His smile made me giddy with anticipation. "But you need to maintain constant pressure. Do not give him any breathing room to think about other women or family loyalty."

"Absolutely, but honestly I think we can start celebrating. Yesterday I was at his safe house when that Gemma girl showed up and caught us in a very compromising position." I could not hide my smugness.

"Seriously? That is fantastic! So they have definitely broken up then." Marcus raised his wine glass in a toast. "But do not get complacent, Beatrix. Keep making yourself irresistible to him. Now, can you get me Gemma's phone number?"

"How exactly am I supposed to do that?"

"That is your problem to solve, but remember that I have been very helpful to your cause against the Thorne family interests."

"I will see what I can manage, but I cannot make any promises."

I left the hotel wondering how I would get that damn phone number. What really irritated me was trying to figure out what made this woman so universally appealing to men in our circles. She had been turning heads left and right at the Social Union. The only reason half the men there had not approached her was because everyone knew she was under Dominic's protection. That entire group of friends had caused quite a sensation when they first appeared at family establishments, drawing way too much attention. Even my own father had been caught staring at them and commenting on how stunning they all were. Please.

Whatever. I was heading to the spa to pamper myself and look absolutely irresistible for my Capo. Tonight I would be making my next move.

"Girl, finally! You actually found time for your friends." Yara whined when we met at the spa entrance. She had always craved being the center of attention, but her pregnancy with Don Caleb was making her increasingly insufferable.

"Honey, I have my own territory to manage. You already locked down your guy, so now I need to secure mine."

"Did Dominic really dump that weird girl?" Elza jumped in immediately.

"Obviously he did, especially after what went down. Now he is right here in the palm of my hand." My confidence was absolutely unshakeable.

"Wait, what happened? I am completely out of the loop." Jade looked confused.

"Of course you are, all you care about now is Don Caleb!" I rolled my eyes dramatically. "You know Dominic's father is in town, right?"

"Daddy mentioned that," Jade nodded.

"So a few days ago, I bumped into him at the Social Union. He told me I was his ideal daughter-in-law and offered to help me win Dominic over." I launched into my story with obvious pride. "Those losers were all there together. When Gemma went to the restroom, he followed her and signaled me. I hid nearby while he cornered her, and I got the perfect shot." I showed them the photo along with the message I had sent to Dominic.

"Um, girl, anyone can see he is forcing himself on her," Yara tried to rain on my parade.

"But Dominic did not see it that way!" I replied triumphantly. "And ever since then, we have been hooking up constantly."

"So he dumped her and now you two are officially together?" Elza pressed for details.

"If they have not broken up yet, she will definitely end things after catching me at his safe house yesterday." I told them every delicious detail while we all laughed about how clueless that pathetic group of friends was.

"Now you just need to snag Xavier, Elza. Ditch that loser already," Yara encouraged.

"Oh honey, that one is proving difficult. He is not giving me any openings at all. But I will come up with something brilliant like you two did," Elza replied, making us all giggle.

I was leaving the spa when I ran straight into Dominic’s sister. I despised her, but I had to play nice for obvious family reasons.

"Hey Nadia! How have you been?"

"It is Nadia, Beatrix," she corrected icily and stepped away from me. Such a miserable woman, even for mafia royalty.

"Come on, Nadia, we are practically family now. We should be closer." I grabbed her arm, but she yanked it away and glared at me with that signature Thorne family coldness.

"Beatrix, we are barely acquaintances, unfortunately, and that will never change," Nadia said with her usual condescending tone. "But since I am older and wiser about family business, let me give you some free advice - give up on my brother. He is actually serious about someone, and thank God it is not you."

"Oh Nadia, I think you have been misinformed. Dominic is with me now. Feel free to ask him yourself."

"Beatrix, I am running late and have better things to do than listen to your fantasies." That insufferable woman turned her back on me and walked away. I shrugged it off since she had always been a complete pain.

Time to find my man! Like Marcus suggested, I would not give Gemma any opportunity to fight back. My plan worked perfectly - I found Dominic at his usual underground bar where he conducted business with his crew. He was drinking alone and ended up taking me to a nearby motel. Unfortunately, our time together was cut short when someone texted him about urgent territory business and he said he had to leave. He got distracted and forgot to lock his phone screen. While he was in the bathroom, I quickly grabbed that boring Gemma’s number to give to Marcus later.

"God, I am on such an incredible winning streak!" I said to myself with pure satisfaction.

Chapter 260: Deadly Pink Orchids

Betrayal and Danger

Gemma’s POV

I was completely destroyed. The entire night was spent sobbing into Lila’s shoulder until my eyes were swollen and bloodshot. This morning required layers of concealer and multiple rounds of eye drops just to appear remotely human. I had prepared myself for anything from Dominic, but discovering that dangerous Capo with his former lover cut deeper than any blade I could imagine. The image of that half-dressed woman in his secure apartment replayed in my mind like a nightmare I couldn’t escape.

Walking into the legitimate front office felt like moving through concrete. Ivy sat at her desk looking equally devastated, and I knew facing a conversation with the Don’s wife right now would shatter my remaining composure. Instead, I escaped to the break room where Katelyn was organizing supplies for the family’s operations.

"Gemma, good morning sunshine!" Katelyn’s cheerful greeting felt like glass against my fragile nerves. I managed the weakest smile possible.

"What’s destroying you, sweetheart?" Her maternal instincts activated immediately.

"Just a brutal night of reckoning, that’s all," I lied, hoping she’d drop the subject.

Katelyn’s knowing eyes narrowed dangerously. "I’m not accepting that story. Did that Capo bastard pull something unforgivable?"

My shock must have shown clearly. "What makes you suspect that?"

"Because you’re wearing the same devastated expression as Ivy when she discovered Caleb’s supposed betrayal." She crossed her arms, studying me like a protective family matriarch.

"Katelyn, please, he committed something beyond forgiveness, but you cannot breathe a word to the family. The organization tension is already suffocating with Ivy and Caleb’s territorial situation," I pleaded desperately.

"Your secret's protected with my life, honey. But those two are your blood family here. They deserve to know their Capo crossed the line." She pulled me into one of her warm embraces that somehow made the violence surrounding us feel slightly less hopeless.

"Could you work some of that medicinal magic? But please don't knock me unconscious like you did to Ivy during her crisis."

"This blend will just calm that anxiety that's consuming you alive." Katelyn busied herself with her mysterious preparations. I swear she was part street doctor, because her concoctions always delivered exactly the healing she promised.

After Katelyn's powerful remedy worked its wonders, I returned to my desk feeling marginally functional again. I managed to focus on laundering operations and support Ivy without anyone detecting my internal warfare. But lunchtime brought an unexpected family visitor.

"Auntie Gemma, looking gorgeous as always!" Vincenzo's voice rang out as he stepped off the elevator, heading directly toward me.

"Vincenzo, you little charmer! What brings you to our legitimate establishment?" I asked, embracing this kid who had become precious to our dangerous world.

"I'm here to escort a stunning lady to coffee!" His confidence was both adorable and inherited from his bloodline.

"Someone's been learning from his uncle's playbook!" Xavier emerged from his office, grinning with typical consigliere amusement.

"I'm not a complete disaster like my uncle." Something in Vincenzo's tone told me he possessed more intelligence than he was revealing. I gave him a subtle head shake, and thankfully he caught my warning signal. "Hey Uncle Xavier, how's business treating you?"

"Can't complain about family operations, kid." Xavier's warm greeting carried genuine affection. "Mind if I join your coffee meeting?"

Vincenzo glanced at me before addressing Xavier with surprising maturity. "Sorry Xavier, but I'm not interested in sharing this beautiful lady's attention today!"

"This kid's got serious family attitude!" Xavier's laughter was infectious and deadly.

Caleb appeared in his doorway like the commanding Don he was. "Well, well, looks like mini Dominic decided to grace our establishment with his presence!"

"Don't you dare compare me to that betraying bastard!" Vincenzo's fury was unmistakable and dangerous. "How are you surviving, Uncle Caleb?"

"Barely keeping control of family operations, Vincenzo. You seem pretty fired up about your uncle's business. What's his latest catastrophic mistake?" Caleb's Don instincts were razor-sharp.

"Something along those treacherous lines." Vincenzo kept his response strategically vague. "That's exactly why I need my gorgeous Auntie Gemma's wisdom over coffee."

"The family could provide guidance too," Xavier offered hopefully.

"Not today! I prefer this stunning lady's company exclusively!" Vincenzo's charm carried inherited family magnetism.

"You're absolutely shameless like a true family member!" Caleb chuckled with dark amusement. "Enjoy your coffee adventure."

Coffee with Vincenzo was exactly what my wounded soul required. His infectious energy and dark humor provided temporary relief from my heartbreak. But his curiosity was relentless and inherited. He explained that his mother was furious with Dominic because some dangerous woman named Beatrix had introduced herself as Dominic's woman to family connections. I didn't know how to respond, so I simply told him Dominic and I were finished.

Like any determined family blood, Vincenzo refused to accept my vague explanation. "Gemma, talk to me. I'm not a child anymore in this world!"

"Vincenzo, your uncle started disappearing from my existence. No calls, no messages, just occasional communications claiming he was handling family business. Then I caught him in lies. Remember that day you called me? He said he was conducting operations with you, but that was complete fiction. So I decided to surprise him at his secure apartment, and there was Beatrix."

"What was that dangerous woman doing there? She's been stalking my uncle like a predator forever."

"She was wearing nothing but his shirt, Vincenzo." The words tasted like poison in my mouth.

"What a complete betraying bastard!" Vincenzo's fury was immediate and violent.

"Language, young man!" I scolded, though his family indignation was oddly comforting.

"Sorry, Auntie Gemma. How are you surviving this betrayal?"

"I'm drowning honestly. I feel like the most foolish woman alive. But Vincenzo, this stays between us. Caleb's dealing with serious family problems, and I won't add our friends' worry about your uncle's mess to that burden."

"Yeah, I know about Uncle Caleb's current nightmare." Vincenzo shook his head sadly. "But what's wrong with these men who can't control their dangerous impulses?" His outrage made me laugh despite everything.

"Learn from their stupidity and become better than them!"

"You can count on that promise. But I'm telling my mother. She's already planning my uncle's punishment."

"Fine, just ask her to keep it classified."

Vincenzo walked me back to the building entrance. Our coffee meeting had been therapeutic, and his promise that I'd always be family and that our relationship wouldn't change because of Dominic's betrayal brought some comfort to my shattered heart.

Later that afternoon, a delivery arrived at my desk. A delicate pink orchid arranged in an elegant crystal vase. My stomach dropped immediately, knowing Dominic always sent blood-red roses. My hands trembled as I reached for the card, and reading it sent ice through my veins. Marcus Frost's signature accompanied a simple message: "A delicate flower for an unforgettable woman."

Katelyn was passing by, and I called her over, my voice shaking with rage and disgust.

"Katelyn, please dispose of these flowers immediately."

Her confusion was obvious. "Gemma, since when do you reject beautiful arrangements?"

Jude emerged from his office, witnessing my request with sharp attention. "Turning down admirers now, Gemma?"

"Turning down the dangerous sender, Jude." The words escaped before I could think.

"Who's the mystery threat? I know it wasn't Dominic, he's obsessed with blood-red roses." Jude's casual smile faded when he spotted the card on my desk.

"That perverted piece of garbage is hunting you, Gemma?" Jude's tone turned deadly serious.

"He's absolutely vile and dangerous, Jude." That was all I could manage.

"Complete agreement here," Katelyn added grimly after reading the threatening card. "I'll handle this trash."

Katelyn grabbed the offensive arrangement just as my phone rang. The unknown number made my hands shake, so I put it on speaker.

"Good afternoon, Gemma! Marcus here." My stomach churned violently.

"How did you get this number?" I demanded, feeling Jude and Katelyn's protective attention.

"I have excellent dangerous connections, sweetheart!" His cheerful tone made my skin crawl with fear.

"Don't call me sweetheart. Actually, don't call me at all." I moved to hang up, but his next words paralyzed me.

"Now that my useless son tossed you aside, perhaps you'd appreciate a man with real power and experience." The phone froze in my hand as Jude snatched it away.

"Marcus, Wright here, and you know exactly who I am and what I control. Stop playing innocent games. Leave Gemma alone, or I'll systematically destroy everything that makes your miserable existence possible. I have that power, and you're well aware of my reach." Jude's threat was ice-cold before he slammed the phone down. "Break room. Now. That's not a suggestion."

Damn it. What could I possibly tell him? I followed Jude while Katelyn disposed of the threatening orchids and joined our impromptu family meeting.

"I'm part of this conversation," Katelyn declared, pouring coffee with deadly precision.

"Start talking, Gemma. What's happening between you and our Capo?" Jude's demand was gentle but carried absolute authority.

The dam burst completely. All the pain and terror I'd been suppressing exploded out of me in ugly sobs. I told him everything about Dominic's recent behavior, catching him with another woman, and begged him not to tell anyone in the family.

"What a spectacular disaster!" Jude sighed heavily with dangerous undertones. "The irony is I'm becoming the vault for everyone's family secrets. There's Ivy's pregnancy that's classified information,

and now Dominic’s betrayal." He studied me carefully with predator eyes. "How long has Marcus been stalking you?"

I explained every horrifying encounter with Dominic’s dangerous father, including the club incident.

"He terrifies me, Jude. Something about him feels genuinely lethal."

"Your instincts are absolutely correct. He’s more toxic than anyone in this family realizes." Jude spoke like he possessed damaging information he wasn’t sharing. "What has Dominic done to protect you from his father’s threat?"

"Jude, Dominic has no idea his father’s been harassing me." I explained my reasoning for keeping it secret from the Capo.

"Gemma, I won’t betray your confidence, but if Marcus contacts you again, I want to know immediately. I genuinely have ways to obliterate his existence completely. I just haven’t acted out of respect for Nadia, who inexplicably adores that monster."

"And you won’t explain what dangerous information you possess."

"Better kept buried for family safety, my friend!" Jude squeezed my hand reassuringly. "But here’s some advice: don’t hide your pain from your family here. You don’t have to survive this alone, and you won’t burden anyone in this organization."

"Thanks, Jude, but let’s keep things as they are for now."