Mafia Mask 261

Chapter 261: Burning Every Bridge

Dominic's POV

The crushing weight of family betrayal was suffocating me. My exiled father Marcus's relentless demands for tribute money and his threats about exposing family secrets were eating me alive. I had foolishly believed that once I transferred his monthly blood money, he would vanish into whatever hole he'd crawled out of. Instead, the bastard seemed hell-bent on destroying both my sister Nadia and me completely. My mother had fled from one safe house to another, swearing she wouldn't return to Thorne territory until "that monster is eliminated permanently." The bitter truth was she had every right to feel that way. Since his return from exile, my entire empire had become a nightmare.

The situation spiraled further when Nadia sent me an encrypted message demanding to know why Beatrix was spreading rumors about us being involved. I had no clue where my sister had heard such poison. I needed to call her immediately and get to the bottom of this mess before it reached Caleb's ears.

"Dominic," Nadia answered on the first ring, her voice sharp as a blade.

"You better have one hell of an explanation for me," she continued, fury blazing through the secure line.

"Nadia, Beatrix and I aren't involved. I've just been using her occasionally these past few days." I couldn't even finish my sentence before she cut me off.

"What the hell did you just say, Dominic? Taking lessons from our bastard father now, are we? And you still think you have any right to judge his betrayals." Her voice was pure venom.

"Nadia, Gemma and I are finished," I said bluntly, which finally silenced her. "So please, just back off."

"No, Dominic, I won't back off. What did you do to Gemma? She's an incredible woman who deserves better than Thorne family poison." Nadia immediately defended Gemma, and I found myself speechless. I couldn't bear to hurt my sister more by revealing that Gemma had walked in on Marcus's carefully orchestrated trap with Beatrix.

"Nadia, we just weren't compatible in this life. Look, I'll come by the safe house later so we can discuss this face to face," I said, desperate to end this conversation before it attracted unwanted attention.

"You damn well better come, Dominic, because I'm not buying any of this garbage. Vincenzo won't even speak your name."

I slammed the encrypted phone down and swept it across my mahogany desk. What a complete disaster. What the hell was I supposed to do now? My sister wouldn't let this slide, and if word reached the upper ranks about family instability, it could undermine my position as Capo. I was done for the day. Sitting here was pointless when I couldn't concentrate on laundering operations or territorial disputes.

I grabbed my leather jacket and phone, telling my lieutenant Zoe I had urgent family business to handle. She nodded curtly, understanding that in our world, family emergencies often meant life or death situations.

I found myself at Romano's, an underground bar that Xavier, Caleb, and I used to frequent regularly before the weight of leadership consumed us. I claimed a spot at the reinforced steel counter and ordered a double whiskey. Within minutes, I heard that familiar sultry voice behind me.

"Well, well, if it isn't the infamous Dominic Frost drinking alone."

"Beatrix," I replied coldly, downing my next shot while signaling for another. "What do you want from me? Port't you caused enough chaos?"

"You know exactly what I want. I want you back where you belong," Beatrix purred, wrapping her arms around me from behind like a serpent. "I've been dying to see you since our little encounter."

I threw back another shot in one swift motion and stood up. I slapped cash on the counter and turned to face her, noting how her designer dress couldn't quite hide the calculating gleam in her eyes.

"You want to fuck me, Beatrix? Fine, let's go." I grabbed her wrist and pulled her toward the exit while she grinned like she'd won some twisted victory.

I drove to the first discrete motel I spotted, one where no questions were asked and surveillance cameras mysteriously malfunctioned. Once we were in the room, I didn't waste time with romance or foreplay. This wasn't about pleasure – it was about drowning out the memory of Gemma's devastated face when she'd caught us. I slammed Beatrix against the wall, hiked up her dress, and took what she was offering with mechanical precision. But there was no satisfaction, no real release in any of it.

I shut my eyes tight and let my mind drift to Gemma, the only woman who could make my blood ignite and my stone heart actually feel something. I climaxed quickly and pulled away from Beatrix. I knew she hadn't finished, but I couldn't care less about her satisfaction.

However, my secure phone buzzed with an incoming priority message, and I quickly checked it when I saw the sender:

"Come to my office immediately. We have a major crisis brewing. Jude."

What could possibly be wrong now? Jude never sent emergency codes without good reason, and in our business, emergencies usually meant federal raids, rival family wars, or internal betrayals. I tossed my phone onto the bed, my mind racing through dangerous possibilities as I ran my fingers through my hair. I glanced at Beatrix still leaning against the wall, adjusting her dress.

"Well, looks like business calls. I need to leave. Get dressed and I'll drop you at a taxi stand." I told her, watching her triumphant smile disappear instantly.

I stepped into the bathroom to clean up, and when I returned, she was sitting on the bed looking defeated. She handed me my phone and followed me out of the room without her usual protests.

"Come on, baby, can't you cancel whatever this is? I'm right here, ready for you, and you're just walking away like I mean nothing," Beatrix whined as we walked to my car.

"Sorry, Beatrix, but family business comes first." Honestly, I was relieved to have an excuse to leave. I wasn't in the mood for more meaningless encounters with her anyway.

After leaving the motel, I dropped her at a taxi stand across the street. I watched her climb into the cab and drive away before heading to Jude's secure location. He was already waiting for me in his fortified office, and the moment I walked through his reinforced door, he launched into his interrogation.

"What the hell were you thinking? Beatrix, Dominic? Really? Do you have any idea what kind of fire you're playing with?" Jude confronted me furiously.

"How did you find out?" I sighed heavily, knowing our information networks missed nothing.

"Because I found Gemma crying in Ivy's arms and demanded answers," Jude stated matter-of-factly. "She's under Caleb's protection now, by the way."

"Yeah, Gemma walked in on Beatrix and me in my safe house." I exhaled sharply and collapsed into a reinforced chair. "It was Marcus's trap, but I was too fucking stupid to see it coming."

Everyone only knew Gemma's side of the story, painting me as the complete villain. But you know what? In this world, explanations were often seen as weakness, and I wasn't going to waste energy trying to defend decisions made in moments of rage.

"Explain to me how you ended up compromising everything for that poisonous woman," Jude demanded, sitting across from me with the intensity of a military strategist.

"She's everywhere, Jude. Always available, constantly pursuing me, working every angle. I just gave in to the pressure and my own stupidity." I said wearily.

"You fell for the same trap that nearly destroyed Caleb. Xavier better watch his back with Elza." Jude shook his head grimly.

"Now that parasite won't leave me alone, and Marcus thinks he has leverage over me." I complained.

"So what's your strategy to win back Gemma's trust?" Jude pressed.

"There is no strategy. It’s finished. She’s safer away from me anyway. Now be a good friend and have a drink with me while we discuss whatever crisis brought me here." I shut down the conversation.

"Actually, you should head home before my wife gets here. Gemma doesn’t want this getting out because she’s worried about Caleb and Ivy’s stability. And you need to stop drowning your problems in alcohol." Jude advised me seriously.

I left his compound and went home to my empty penthouse. Jude was absolutely right – alcohol wouldn’t solve the mess I’d created. Maybe I should ask Vincenzo to stay with me for a while. That kid always managed to lift my spirits, even in the darkest times.

After arriving home and taking a long, scalding shower to wash away Beatrix’s perfume, I called Vincenzo’s secure line, but my calls went straight to voicemail. That was unusual and concerning. So I called Nadia instead.

"Where’s Vincenzo?" I asked after our coded greeting.

"He’s in his room and refuses to speak with you," Nadia said bluntly, her disappointment cutting deep.

"And why won’t he talk to me?"

"Because you’re behaving exactly like Marcus did before his exile. He’s smart enough to see the pattern, Dominic."

"For fuck’s sake, Nadia!" I snapped, already exhausted by this endless family drama.

"Listen, Dominic, when you’re ready to tell me the truth about what’s happening with Gemma and why you’re making the same mistakes that destroyed our father, come over so we can talk properly. Right now, my son doesn’t want to speak with you. He’s hurt, and I completely understand why."

"Tell him to come to Zenith Systems soon so we can talk," I said, ending the call before she could lecture me further.

Now even my nephew was disgusted with me. I ended up going to bed early in my heavily fortified penthouse, but spent the night tossing and turning, plagued by vivid dreams about Gemma's tear-stained face and the sound of her heart breaking.

The next morning, I was in my office reviewing money laundering reports when my secure phone rang. I looked at the screen and saw it was Ryder Conway, general manager of the Social Union calling. The underground casino rarely contacted family leadership directly, so I found it strange but answered anyway.

"Mr. Frost, good morning. This is Ryder Conway from the Social Union."

"Good morning, Ryder. How can I help you?"

"Mr. Frost, I need to request that you visit the Union today. We're experiencing a serious situation with your family's membership privileges, and since you're listed as the primary account holder, we need you to come during business hours as soon as possible."

"Can you tell me what this concerns?" I asked, my instincts immediately on high alert.

"Unfortunately, I cannot discuss it over unsecured lines. It's quite a sensitive matter involving surveillance footage and potential security breaches."

Surveillance footage. My blood ran cold. Had they captured something related to Marcus's schemes or Gemma?

"Alright. Would lunch time work?"

"Perfect. I'll be expecting you in my private office. Thank you very much, Mr. Frost."

I hung up feeling deeply unsettled. What could have possibly happened at the Union? Ryder's tone suggested something very serious had occurred, and they wouldn't have called unless it directly threatened our operations or revealed compromising information. In our world, surveillance footage could mean the difference between maintaining power and facing a bloody war.

Well, I would find out during lunch. And hopefully, whatever they'd discovered wouldn't add another catastrophe to the growing pile of destruction surrounding my life.

Chapter 262: Confronting the Parasite

Zoe's POV

Something gnawed at me that afternoon, an unease I couldn't shake. The Thorne family's front operations felt like a powder keg since Caleb and Ivy's brutal separation had sent shockwaves through our inner circle. We'd all been walking on razor's edge, desperate to help our blood brothers navigate this disaster without triggering a war within the family.

Ivy had finally decided to fight for her place beside the Don after days of exile, which should have brought me relief. Caleb seemed willing to hear her out too. Yet peace eluded me in this world where betrayal meant death.

Dominic had become a ghost recently. Jumpy, distracted, barely present during family meetings. I'd attributed his behavior to his exiled father's recent harassment campaigns, giving him the space I thought he needed. But my instincts screamed that something deeper was eating at him, something that could compromise our operations.

Gemma worried me too. Despite her claims of adjusting well to life under our protection and her excitement about the safe house Caleb had secured for her, shadows lingered beneath her brave facade. She'd been Ivy's anchor during the separation, caring for her with unwavering devotion, but exhaustion showed in the tight lines around her eyes. That surprise she'd mentioned planning for Dominic had disappeared from conversation entirely.

My patience finally snapped. I marched to Dominic's office in the back of our legitimate shipping company and knocked firmly on the reinforced door.

"Dominic, we need to talk."

"Of course, Zo. Come in." His response was automatic, his attention glued to his encrypted phone like it held family secrets.

"What's got you so twisted up?" I settled into the chair across from his mahogany desk, noting the tension in his shoulders.

"Twisted up about what?" The deflection was weak, his voice hollow.

"That expression you've been wearing for days." I gestured at his face. "Like you're expecting a hit order with your name on it."

"Nothing serious. Just strange getting summoned to the Social Union. Their manager wants to see me immediately about my father's gambling debts."

"Uh-oh." I couldn't suppress a grin. "What rules did the old bastard break this time? The Union only calls when members step way out of line or owe serious money."

"Always assuming the worst, aren't you, Zoe?"

"Your reputation precedes you both!" I shot back, but his smile never touched his eyes.

"What did you really come here for?" he asked, attempting to redirect.

"The truth about whatever's eating you alive." I watched color drain from his face like blood from a fresh wound.

"I don't know what you mean." His stammer betrayed him completely.

"There it is!" I pointed accusingly. "That panic in your eyes. What family business are you hiding?"

"Zoe, I..." He looked ready to collapse, words failing him entirely.

Mia’s dramatic entrance saved him from confession. She burst through the door, breathless and flustered, her usual composure shattered.

"Dominic, your father is causing chaos in the lobby," she announced. "Our security team is struggling to contain him without making a scene."

Dominic’s face transformed with murderous fury. He rubbed his temples like they might explode from the pressure of containing his rage.

"This pathetic excuse for a man won’t leave our family in peace!" His voice cracked with barely controlled violence. He grabbed his secure phone, punching numbers with lethal precision. "Send two armed guards to escort Marcus Frost to my office. Directly here, and make sure he doesn’t touch anything."

After slamming the phone down, he turned to us with exhausted eyes that had seen too much bloodshed.

"You don’t have to witness this circus. Feel free to leave before he arrives and starts running his mouth."

"Not a chance." I squeezed his hand firmly. "I’m staying to help you handle this parasite."

Soon, our security arrived with Marcus Frost, who was ranting like a desperate addict. Dominic met them at reception, keeping the guards close with hands on their concealed weapons.

"What do you want now, Marcus?" Dominic’s voice carried the forced calm of a predator.

"You know exactly what I want, you ungrateful brat!" Marcus’s words dripped with the entitlement of a man who’d forgotten his place. "My rightful cut of the family business!"

"And I’ve told you repeatedly that exiled members get nothing." Dominic’s response was steel-cold. "You lost those privileges when you betrayed blood."

"I'll destroy you, you arrogant child. Always acting like the heir, but you're nothing without the Thorne name!" Marcus's desperation was breathtaking. "I'll strip everything from you, and I've already begun." His smile was pure malice.

"What's he talking about, Dominic?" Alarm bells rang in my head.

"Nothing worth discussing." Dominic dismissed it quickly. "Leave now before I have you disappeared permanently."

"I'm not going anywhere! I'll seize control of your operations!" Marcus's voice rose to a shriek. "Think you can match my connections? You're delusional. I'll manipulate your sister, convince her to sign over her inheritance rights. She's so desperate for daddy's approval, the pathetic fool. With her backing, I'll claim a place at the family table and turn the other Capos against you. When you least expect it, I'll have you cast out like the bastard you are."

The elevator chimed softly. Nadia stepped out just as her father's cruel words hit the air. Tears streamed down her face as the truth shattered her world. I felt murderous rage toward this disgusting waste of oxygen. Dominic's eyes locked on his sister, measuring his words carefully, so I took charge.

"You're absolutely despicable," I said, my voice cutting like a blade. "Calling you a man insults actual soldiers everywhere. You're nothing but a parasitic leech. Thank God Dominic and Nadia have an incredible mother who raised them with honor, ensuring they're nothing like you."

"Who do you think you are, you little whore?" Marcus turned his venom on me. "Rich family or not, you're just another Capo's plaything!"

"Keep barking, you pathetic creature! Your threats bounce off me because your word is worthless!" I stepped closer, invading his space with predatory confidence. "Listen carefully to what happens next. Security will dump you in the harbor, and you'll never approach our territory again. You'll stop harassing your children and grandchildren immediately, because one more stunt from you and that protection money we've been paying to keep you breathing disappears forever. You'll be begging for scraps in back alleys. Don't test me - the Morgan family has the power to make it happen! UNDERSTOOD?" I shouted the last word directly in his face.

"Who do you think you are?" He glared with impotent rage.

"Zoe Miller. I’m sure you’ve heard the name in your gambling circles." My confidence was absolute. "My family can make you disappear completely. Want to find out how?"

"You’re insane!" Marcus shrank back.

"Completely! Just ask anyone who’s crossed our interests. Another reason not to test me. The Morgans will crush you like the cockroach you are." I knew my family’s reach in both legitimate and underground circles.

Nadia walked over, tears still falling, looking at her father with complete horror and heartbreak.

"I never wanted to believe the terrible things the family said about you. I defended you because you’re my blood." Her voice broke with genuine pain. "But what I witnessed here proves you’re worse than anyone imagined. Never contact me or my family again. My father died the day you betrayed us - you’re just someone I despise now."

She turned toward Dominic’s office, but the monster couldn’t resist one final cruelty.

I grabbed his collar and slammed him against the wall, my hand around his throat with practiced precision.

"Don’t you dare!" I hissed through clenched teeth. "Dominic, can I have this garbage removed?"

"Please do, Zoe. Thank you for protecting our family." Dominic walked after his sister.

"Throw this piece of trash in the river," I told security. "If he returns, eliminate the problem quietly. Spread the word - he’s banned from all Thorne territory permanently."

The guards dragged Marcus away as Mia appeared with premium whiskey and glasses.

"Coffee won’t calm anyone’s nerves after that kind of family drama," she said wisely.

We found the siblings embracing on Dominic’s office couch. Mia poured four shots, and we toasted before downing the burning liquid. The second round helped ease the tension further.

Nadia’s nervous laughter was infectious, and soon we were all releasing the stress through shared relief.

"Thank you, Zoe. You were magnificent," Nadia said, grasping my hand.

"I’m sorry you both endured that horror show," I replied sincerely.

"It’s better this way. Now I see his true nature before I could make a terrible mistake with family loyalty." Nadia looked at Dominic apologetically. "Cut off his protection money if you want."

"Don’t apologize, Nadia. But I won’t cut the payments yet. We’re not like him, as Zoe said." Dominic squeezed her hand gently.

"What brought you here today?" Dominic asked.

"I needed to discuss something with you about Gemma, but not now. I can’t handle anything else today."

"Of course. The Social Union called me in - do you know why?"

Nadia shook her head. "I should go. My driver’s waiting downstairs with the armored car."

After they left together, Mia and I sat in the sudden quiet.

"This day has been absolutely insane," I said, and Mia’s laughter filled the room.

Chapter 263: Cameras Don’t Lie

Dominic’s POV

I helped Nadia settle into the passenger seat, my concern for her weighing heavily on my mind. The confrontation with our father had shattered something inside her today. Despite all his cruelty and exile from the Thorne family, she still harbored feelings for that worthless traitor, and I could see how deeply his latest betrayal had wounded her.

As I walked toward my own car, I pulled out my phone and dialed Gerard. He answered almost immediately, and I quickly explained everything that had transpired. His voice immediately shifted to one of protective urgency as he promised to head home right away to be with her. That eased some of the tension in my chest. I assured him I would check on them both later tonight.

Sliding behind the wheel, I started the engine and headed toward the Social Union. Something dark twisted in my gut as I drove through the city streets. Whatever Ryder needed to discuss with me, I had a feeling it was going to make this already hellish day even worse.

The familiar sight of the establishment’s discreet entrance did nothing to calm my nerves. I parked in my designated spot behind the reinforced steel barriers where family members conducted business away from prying eyes. The exhaustion from dealing with family drama weighed on my shoulders as I walked through the security checkpoint. Maybe after handling whatever crisis awaited me, I could find some temporary escape at the private bar.

Ryder was already waiting in the management office when I arrived. His usually confident demeanor seemed strained as he rose to greet me with the formal respect due to a Capo.

"Mr. Frost, thank you for coming so quickly. Can I get you anything? Whiskey, perhaps, or something stronger from the private reserves?"

"I’m fine, Ryder. Just tell me what this is about." I settled into the chair across from his desk, bracing myself for bad news.

His expression grew uncomfortable as he cleared his throat. "I’m afraid it concerns your father, Marcus Frost. Since you oversee family disciplinary matters for this territory and he’s been operating under your former protection, we’re required to notify you of any serious incidents."

A familiar surge of anger rose in my chest. "What has that piece of trash done now?"

"Your father has been engaging in predatory behavior toward several young women here at the establishment. We have documented five formal complaints and one additional incident that wasn't officially reported but required our security team's intervention."

Each word made my stomach turn with disgust. "Six incidents total. Why wasn't the one incident reported? And why should I be aware of it specifically?"

Ryder's discomfort became more obvious as he fidgeted with some documents on his desk. I pressed him harder. "Mr. Conway, I need the complete story."

"This won't be easy to hear," he said with a heavy sigh. "We have surveillance footage of all incidents. Let me show you the unreported case first, and then you can decide if you want to review the others."

He turned his computer screen toward me and loaded the video file. The timestamp showed multiple camera angles, all in crystal-clear high definition with audio. My hands clenched into fists as I watched the scene unfold.

The footage showed Gemma emerging from the ladies' lounge when Marcus appeared and cornered her against the wall. She was clearly trying to escape his grasp, telling him to back off, but he persisted in his assault. If our security team hadn't intervened when they did, I couldn't imagine how far he might have gone. In the background of the shot, I could make out Beatrix holding up her phone.

The date and time stamp matched exactly with when Beatrix had sent me that damning photograph. My vision blurred as rage and shame crashed over me in equal measure. The blood roared in my ears as the full scope of what had happened became clear.

Ryder quietly placed a glass of aged bourbon in front of me. I downed the amber liquid in one burning gulp, trying to steady my nerves enough to speak.

"Do you have footage showing what happened before this? Who they were with?"

"I anticipated you'd ask for that." He pulled up another video file from the dining area.

The new footage revealed Gemma sitting at a table with her friends near the entrance, her back turned to the rest of the dining room. Marcus sat with a group of associates further back, including Roman and Beatrix's father. Beatrix occupied a table in the center with other women from connected families. When Gemma excused herself to use the restroom, Marcus approached Beatrix's table and spoke with her briefly before following Gemma out.

"There's one more segment you need to see," Ryder said grimly. The next clip showed Marcus attacking Gemma in the background while Beatrix deliberately photographed the scene. "After our security removed your father from the establishment that evening, he had a conversation with Miss Cross on his way out."

The final video showed Beatrix and Marcus sharing satisfied smiles as she showed him something on her phone screen.

They had orchestrated the entire setup, and I had fallen for it completely. The betrayal felt like a physical blow to my chest. My throat constricted as I realized what I had done to Gemma based on their lies. How could she ever forgive me for being such a fool?

"Would you like to review the other incidents?" Ryder asked quietly.

I couldn't lift my head to look at him. "Are they similar to this one?"

"There are variations in severity. One victim was forcibly kissed, another was groped, and in the most serious case, he lifted a girl's dress and touched her intimately."

"I assume they want to press charges through our channels," I said, my voice thick with disgust.

"Yes, sir. The most recent victim is a teenage girl and the daughter of a judge. The others range from eighteen to twenty and have agreed not to involve outside authorities."

"Let them report it," I said without hesitation. "This man is a predator who's been attacking women in our establishment. Why did you wait until six cases to contact me?"

"We were trying to handle it discretely because of your family connection."

"There's no discretion when it comes to sexual assault. This man is despicable," I said firmly. "What action is the establishment taking?"

"We're levying a substantial penalty."

"That's it?" I couldn't hide my disbelief. "Fine, I'll pay the penalty, but I also want him permanently banned from these premises and blacklisted from all family-affiliated establishments."

"Well, sir, you could revoke his access privileges..."

"You're not understanding me," I interrupted. "I want him expelled completely. Banned for life. He should never be allowed to set foot in any Thorne family territory again under any circumstances."

"Are you certain about this decision, sir?"

"Absolutely. And I want copies of all the surveillance footage."

I spent some time working through the arrangements with Ryder and the establishment's legal counsel. I paid the penalty in full and signed documentation ensuring Marcus Frost would be permanently banned from all family territories and that they would support any victims who chose to pursue justice through our internal channels. The document also confirmed that I would receive copies of all relevant surveillance videos.

When I finally left that office, I had no desire to remain at the establishment. I walked through the secured parking area in a daze, my mind reeling with everything I had learned. I needed to find Gemma and somehow make this right.

As I approached my car, I spotted the last person I wanted to see leaning against it with a satisfied grin plastered across her face.

"Baby! I've missed you so much!" Beatrix launched herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

I immediately pried her arms away and stepped back, revulsion coursing through me. She looked genuinely confused by my reaction.

"That was low, even for you, Beatrix." My voice carried pure ice.

"What are you talking about, baby?" She still had the audacity to play innocent.

"Did you forget your little conspiracy with my father to destroy my relationship with Gemma?"

"Baby, I didn't do anything wrong."

"Oh, Beatrix, you both forgot that we upgraded our entire surveillance system recently. There are cameras everywhere now. I saw very interesting footage of you and my father planning the whole thing."

"Dominic, your father convinced me to help him..." she started to explain.

"Save your breath, Beatrix." I turned to walk away, then decided she needed one final warning. "Just so you know, I'm going to tell your father exactly what you've been up to."

"Dominic, no... Dominic, please don't do that." She hurried after me desperately.

I got into my car and rolled down the window to deliver my final words to her.

"Stay away from me. Don't speak to me. Pretend I don't exist, and if you see me coming, leave before I notice you, or I'll ensure your family pays the price for your betrayal."

I started the engine and peeled out of the parking area. I was heading to Caleb’s office when my phone rang. Jude’s name appeared on the screen.

"Dominic, emergency at Xavier’s house." Jude sounded agitated.

"What now, Jude? I’m not in the mood for more complications."

"You need to hear this! Scott figured out who Caleb’s mystery woman is. Xavier wants everyone over there immediately."

"Are you serious?" My exhaustion momentarily forgotten, I felt a surge of interest.

"Dead serious. Get over here now."

I made a sharp U-turn at the next intersection and headed toward Xavier’s house. After everything that had happened today, at least Caleb might finally get some answers about the woman who had been haunting him.

Chapter 264: One Last Chance

Gemma’s POV

The Thorne family operations center buzzed with unusual chaos before everyone suddenly rushed out for the day. Only Ivy and I remained in the secure headquarters, settling into an unexpected pocket of silence. I was about to suggest we grab coffee when my phone cut through the quiet with Xavier’s ringtone.

"Gemma, I need you here fast," Xavier’s voice carried an edge I rarely heard from the family’s consigliere.

"What’s happening, boss?"

"Bring Ivy and get to the Don’s compound immediately. Tell her it’s family business related if necessary. My driver is already waiting in the garage. Gemma, I mean right now."

Something in his tone made my stomach clench. In the Thorne organization, when the consigliere sounded this urgent, it meant serious family matters were at stake. "Xavier, is everything alright?"

"God, I hope so." His heavy exhale told me everything I needed to know.

After instructing the security team to handle any communications and lock down the operations floor, I grabbed my purse and headed straight for Ivy’s office. Within minutes we were speeding through Brooklyn traffic toward Don Caleb’s heavily fortified compound.

"Gemma, what do you think is going on?" Ivy’s voice carried worry as she gripped the door handle, her wedding ring catching the streetlight. Even as the Don’s wife, she still felt anxiety when family emergencies arose.

"No clue, but I was just thinking things had been too peaceful in our territory lately."

"Are you seriously complaining about peace, woman?"

"Honey, working in that crime family gives us many experiences, but peace definitely isn’t one of them," I replied with dry humor, earning a nervous laugh from her.

The moment we stepped into Caleb’s compound, my eyes locked with Dominic’s across the crowded room. Everyone was there, including the other family wives, but before I could process the situation fully, Ivy collapsed right in the doorway.

Dominic kept trying to catch my attention, hovering nearby with that predatory grace all made men possessed, but I maintained my distance and focused on appearing professional. Whatever was happening here, I wouldn’t let our personal drama become the center of attention during family business.

What followed was an emotional whirlwind that shook the very foundations of the Thorne organization. The revelation that Caleb was Max's biological father hit everyone like a thunderbolt. In our world, bloodlines determined everything - succession, loyalty, and power. Ivy's confession about her pregnancy, their tearful reconciliation, watching the Don and his queen finally forgive each other after so much pain and family betrayal. It was impossible not to cry watching two people who belonged together, whose union strengthened the entire organization, finally finding their way back.

Just when we thought the drama was over, that hurricane named Veronica stormed through Caleb's front door. The Don's manipulative ex-girlfriend had spent the entire week terrorizing our legitimate business fronts, and now she was bringing her chaos into the family compound. The screaming match between her and Zoe, our intelligence coordinator, was so intense that everyone ended up shouting at that manipulative woman. It would have been entertaining if it weren't potentially dangerous to family security.

But the most beautiful moment came when they told Max the truth about Caleb being his father. In mafia families, discovering your true parentage, especially when it connected you to the Don himself, was life-changing. Watching them embrace, seeing the pure joy and recognition in both their faces as Max realized he was legitimate family heir, was deeply moving. The tears came again, and I escaped to the kitchen to make chamomile tea for everyone since emotions were running so high.

That's where Dominic cornered me.

"Gemma, we need to talk." His voice was soft as he approached, but I could see the dangerous intensity that marked him as one of the family's most ruthless capos.

"Now you want to have a conversation?" My sarcasm cut through the kitchen's warmth.

"Gemma, please, hear me out first, then judge me." His eyes held a pain that I refused to let affect me. He had betrayed me, humiliated me in a way that went against everything the family stood for about protecting what belonged to them.

"Dominic, nothing you say can justify what you did." I moved away from the counter, focusing on arranging teacups on a tray with shaking hands.

"Gemma, I know I was completely wrong, but I need to explain why. I need to beg for your forgiveness."

He stepped closer, his body almost pressing against my back. His familiar warmth and cologne made my body respond instinctively, despite everything. A tear slipped down my cheek as I fought against the pull I still felt toward this dangerous man who'd claimed my heart.

"Dominic, please stop hurting me," I whispered without turning around.

"Gemma, please, give me one chance to make this right. I'm begging you for just one opportunity." The desperation in his voice was unmistakable, and hearing a made man beg was something that shouldn't have affected me, but did.

I took a shaky breath and turned to face him. His eyes showed a mixture of pain, exhaustion, and something deeper. His face looked drawn, dark hair disheveled, but I couldn't allow myself to feel sympathy. I was barely holding my own broken pieces together after what he'd done.

"Dominic, let's just pretend everything's normal and not destroy Caleb and Ivy's happiness. They've suffered enough betrayal and finally found their way to forgiveness and truth. Can you do that for your Don? Just pretend everything's fine between us?"

"Gemma, pretending everything's fine means I get to touch you, kiss you, be close to you. Everything I want most right now." His voice dropped to that dangerous whisper that used to make me melt. "Can you handle that, Gemma?"

"Don't push your luck," I shot back. "Just for today, so we don't ruin their moment. Tomorrow we can tell everyone we're done."

"Well, that gives us all night to talk," he said, and I could hear the hope creeping into his voice.

"Only if you plan on chatting with that woman you've been sleeping with, because I'm going to bed." I walked past him toward the bathroom, slamming the door behind me.

When I returned to the guest bedroom, Dominic stood by the bulletproof window still fully dressed, staring out at the compound's security lights. I climbed into bed wearing only the shirt Xavier had lent me and underwear.

Dominic turned around, his predatory gaze slowly traveling over my body before meeting my eyes. "Want me to take the floor?"

"Don’t be ridiculous, Dominic. This bed is enormous, there’s room for both of us," I replied coolly.

"So you’ll let me sleep beside you, but you won’t talk to me?" His persistence was exhausting.

"Dominic, just take off your clothes and get in bed already," I snapped, my irritation flaring. "I’m exhausted and need sleep. You look tired too. I’m not petty enough to make you sleep on the floor when there’s plenty of space."

Dominic smiled, that beautiful smile that used to make my heart race, though sadness still lingered in his dangerous green eyes. He began unbuttoning his shirt as he approached the bed, dropping it carelessly on the nearby chair. Standing directly in front of me, he removed his pants, tossing them aside as well. His body was magnificent, and the obvious arousal straining against his black boxer briefs was impossible to ignore. He leaned down, bringing his face close to mine.

"I’m exhausted, Gemma, but I need to talk to you." He wasn’t giving up.

"Fine, Dominic," I sighed, already feeling drained. "Let’s make a deal. We rest tonight since we’ve both been through an emotional marathon. Tomorrow we can arrange a time for you to say whatever you’re so desperate to tell me. Deal?"

"Do you promise you’ll actually listen? That you won’t change your mind tomorrow and disappear on me?" The pleading in his voice was almost heartbreaking.

"I promise, Dominic. I’ll listen to you one more time, but understand this will be our final conversation. Clear?"

"I can live with that tonight." He stood up with a heavy sigh.

Dominic headed to the bathroom, leaving the door wide open. The sound of running water filled the room, and I had to fight every instinct not to go watch his magnificent body under the spray. I was furious with him, deeply hurt, but that didn't change the fact that he was gorgeous and still affected me physically.

Chapter 265: Morning Surrender

Dominic's POV

At least she had listened to me. I knew forgiveness wouldn't come easily, wouldn't happen overnight with just one conversation. Trust, once broken by betrayal, required time and sacrifice to rebuild. But I had opened a door, created a crack in the fortress she'd built around her heart. Now I had to prove myself worthy of walking through it.

My body was on fire, every nerve ending screaming for her touch. I needed distance, needed the cold bite of reality to tame the hunger clawing at my insides. One wrong move, one moment of weakness driven by possessive instincts, and I'd destroy whatever fragile progress we'd made tonight.

The bathroom tiles were cold against my heated skin as I let the icy water cascade over me. Each droplet was a reminder of my resolve, sharp as practiced discipline. I couldn't let desire cloud my judgment. Not when so much hung in the balance between us, not when enemies still circled like vultures waiting for weakness.

When I returned to the bedroom of my private safehouse, Gemma appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Her breathing was even, her face relaxed in the pale moonlight filtering through the reinforced windows. I could have activated the blackout screens for security, but I wanted to see her, needed to memorize every detail of this moment.

She lay on her side, dark curls spilling across the white pillowcase like silk. The thin sheet draped over her curves, revealing the elegant line of her shoulder, the gentle slope of her waist. Her skin seemed to glow in the silver light, beautiful and untouchable.

I slipped between the sheets, maintaining careful distance. Even in sleep, she was magnetic, drawing me like gravity itself. I lay there watching her, drinking in the sight of the woman I'd hurt through my own stupidity and paranoid pride. The same suspicion that kept me alive in our dangerous world had nearly cost me everything that mattered.

Sleep came fitfully, filled with dreams of holding her again, of erasing the pain I'd caused. When morning light crept across the room, I felt warmth pressed against me. Gemma had moved closer in her sleep, her body curved against mine like she belonged there, one arm draped across my chest in unconscious trust.

I held perfectly still, afraid to breathe too deeply and wake her from this rare moment of peace. This was torture and heaven combined, like every dangerous pleasure our life offered. Her t-shirt had ridden up, exposing smooth skin that I ached to touch. The scrap of lace she wore as underwear left little to imagination, and my body responded with predictable intensity.

She stirred, consciousness returning slowly. I squeezed my eyes shut and forced my breathing to remain steady, hoping she wouldn't notice my obvious arousal. Maybe if I pretended to sleep, she'd move away before things became awkward, before the careful boundaries we'd negotiated last night crumbled under the weight of want.

A soft moan escaped her lips, followed by a whispered confession she clearly thought I couldn't hear.

"God, you're gorgeous. And already hard, you impossible man. How am I supposed to resist when you're right here, tempting me like this? Even knowing what you're capable of, what you've done."

My resolve cracked like glass under pressure. I couldn't pretend anymore, couldn't let this moment slip away when she was offering what I'd thought I'd lost forever.

"If you want me so badly," I murmured without opening my eyes, my voice carrying quiet authority, "then take what you need. I'm yours, Gemma. All of me. Every dangerous piece."

The mattress shifted as she pulled away, and panic shot through me like a gunshot wound. I opened my eyes to find her sitting on the edge of the bed, her back rigid with tension.

"Gemma, please don't leave. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to overstep. You were holding me, and I couldn't help responding. I would never take advantage, never force anything you weren't ready to give."

"Be quiet, Dominic." Her voice was breathless as she pulled her shirt over her head, letting it fall to the floor like a declaration of war against her own reservations. The lace underwear followed, and my mouth went dry. "Stop talking before I change my mind about what I'm going to do to you."

She turned back to me, her eyes dark with desire and something else I couldn't quite read, determination maybe, or the same reckless courage that let her stand up to dangerous men. Climbing onto the bed, she straddled my hips, her hands braced on my chest like she was claiming territory of her own.

Slowly, deliberately, she lowered herself onto me, taking me inch by torturous inch. The sensation drove every coherent thought from my mind, left me with nothing but the primal need to possess and be possessed in return.

When she had taken all of me, she stilled, her eyes closed in concentration. I could feel her pulse around me, the tight heat of her body adjusting to accommodate me. Every muscle in my body tensed with the effort of remaining motionless, letting her set the pace.

The sensation was overwhelming. Every nerve ending sparked with electricity, every breath came shallow and quick. She was velvet and fire, passion and tenderness wrapped in golden skin. I wanted to worship her, to show her with my body what my words couldn't convey about devotion and permanence.

"Dominic," she whispered, my name like a prayer on her lips.

"What do you need?" I managed to ask, my voice rough with restraint.

"Make me forget everything except this moment. Make me forget the danger, the threats, all of it."

That was all the permission I needed. I wrapped my arms around her waist and rolled us over, settling between her thighs with careful precision. Instead of the desperate passion I expected, something softer took over, something that felt like absolution.

"Not rough, beautiful," I murmured against her ear, my voice carrying promises deeper than any oath of loyalty. "Tonight, I want to love you slowly. I want to worship every inch of you until you understand how much you mean to me, until you know you're more valuable than anything in the world."

I kissed her deeply, pouring all my regret and longing into the connection between our mouths. My tongue traced hers as I began to move within her, slow and deliberate. Each thrust was a promise, each caress a silent apology for every moment my paranoia had kept us apart.

We moved together in perfect synchronization, her hips rising to meet mine, her body welcoming me deeper. This wasn't just physical desire, wasn't just the desperate coupling of two people trying to forget the violence that surrounded us. This was communion, souls recognizing their match despite the darkness of our world.

"Look at me," I whispered against her lips. "I want to see you when you fall apart. I want to watch you surrender the way you've never surrendered to anyone else."

Her eyes opened, meeting mine with an intimacy that stole my breath. In that gaze, I saw everything I'd almost lost, everything I was fighting to reclaim. We reached our peak together, her body pulsing around me as I poured myself into her, holding her gaze through every wave of sensation.

"I love you, Gemma," I said as we slowly came back to earth. "More than I thought possible. And that terrifies me because I know what loving someone this much means in our world."

A single tear escaped, tracking down her cheek. I kissed it away, tasting salt and hope and the possibility of redemption. This was different from every other time we'd been together. This wasn't just physical satisfaction, it was emotional healing, love rebuilding itself from the ashes of betrayal and suspicion.

Chapter 266: Hearts Laid Bare

Gemma's POV

I woke up entangled with the Capo who had destroyed my heart completely. His powerful frame pressed against mine, that intoxicating blend of expensive cologne and danger still clinging to my skin, and despite everything, desire pulsed through my veins like liquid fire.

When he whispered that he belonged to me, something fractured inside my chest. For one foolish moment, I believed the beautiful lie this Thorne family enforcer painted with his words.

I needed to feel him once more before walking away forever. Without hesitation, I stripped away every barrier between us, positioning myself above him, seizing control of our connection. What consumed me in that moment terrified me with its raw intensity. I craved his touch, needed him to ignite every nerve ending in my body, wanted him to claim me with that devastating hunger that made him the most feared man in Port Serenity.

But Dominic had entirely different plans. Instead of the brutal, desperate encounter I expected from a man who ruled through violence, he worshipped me slowly, tenderly, transforming our passion into something sacred. He lifted me beyond the physical realm, beyond anything I had ever experienced with anyone from his world. That gentle devastation destroyed me more thoroughly than any harsh interrogation ever could.

As he moved within me, every caress became a declaration of ownership. His hands, his mouth, his emerald eyes branded me as his exclusive territory. When pleasure crashed over him, words escaped his lips that changed the entire power dynamic between us forever.

He loved me. And that revelation terrified him more than facing down rival families.

In that transcendent moment, he reached past every defense I had constructed against his dangerous world, merging our souls in ways that felt permanent and terrifying. What happened between those silk sheets rewrote the very fabric of who I was. Every wall I had built crumbled to dust, leaving me exposed and vulnerable in ways I never thought possible around someone who commanded fear throughout the underground.

My emotions raged like a hurricane inside my chest, chaos and destruction spinning out of control. I desperately needed the calm waters of certainty, the peaceful flow of normal life. Instead, I found myself drowning in a tempest of conflicting feelings about loving a man whose hands were stained with blood.

After the most earth-shattering intimacy of my existence, I lay completely defenseless, my armor scattered like broken glass around us. I collapsed against his chest and wept, releasing years of buried pain through my tears, letting them cleanse the wounds I had hidden so carefully from his predatory world.

Dominic shifted our positions, pulling me on top of him, his strong arms creating a fortress around my trembling form. His fingers traced gentle patterns through my hair while his other hand drew soothing circles across my back, a stark contrast to the brutal efficiency those same hands showed in family business.

"My beautiful goddess, we can fix this together. You will find it in your heart to forgive me. I will earn back your trust, no matter how long it takes. I will spend every day making you happy, proving that I will never hurt you again."

We remained entwined for what felt like hours, surrendering to the raw emotion flowing between us. He continued making promises while I cried, neither of us breaking the sacred silence with unnecessary words about territory wars or family obligations.

By the time we finally emerged from our sanctuary, the sun had climbed high in the sky. Xavier immediately spotted us, his knowing grin spreading across his weathered face like wildfire.

"Well, well, look what the cat dragged in. Hope you two enjoyed testing out our hospitality." His eyebrows waggled suggestively, completely ignoring the fact that he was talking to a Capo.

"Xavier, shut your mouth," Dominic warned, though his own smile betrayed his amusement at his consigliere’s irreverence.

"Gemma, you look absolutely glowing this morning," Zoe added with a mischievous wink that made heat flood my cheeks.

"Enough commentary from the peanut gallery," Dominic declared, his arm tightening possessively around my waist. "My private moments with my goddess are off-limits to your entertainment."

Xavier insisted we stay for lunch, and throughout the entire meal, Dominic remained glued to my side, his protective instincts on full display. When we finally managed to escape, I knew I had no choice but to leave with him before the interrogation about family business began in earnest.

The drive to my apartment passed in heavy silence. Dominic seemed to be walking on eggshells, carefully measuring each breath like he was defusing a bomb. When he pulled up to my building, his hand captured mine before I could flee.

"Gemma, when can we sit down and really talk?" The anxiety in his voice was unmistakable, unusual for someone who commanded respect through fear.

"During the week sometime. Call me and we will figure it out," I replied, exhaustion weighing down every word.

"Can I at least call you tonight?"

"Dominic, please give me some space to process what happened today. I need time to think."

"All right." His heavy sigh filled the expensive car. "But remember that I love you."

"Dominic, please..."

Something shifted in his expression, like he was wrestling with invisible demons from his violent past. Suddenly, he pulled me toward him, crushing our mouths together in a kiss that claimed ownership of my very soul. His tongue invaded and conquered, leaving no doubt about his intentions or his territorial nature. Only when our lungs burned for oxygen did he release me.

"I am already missing you, my goddess," he whispered as I stumbled out of the car.

My mother was waiting when I walked through the door. Desperate to hide the emotional wreckage written across my face, I mumbled something about needing a shower and escaped to my bedroom. After pulling myself together, I rejoined her in the living room and shared stories about Caleb and Ivy's obvious happiness, carefully omitting any details about their true roles in the Thorne organization.

Mom had her bags packed and ready for her new adventure, though nervous energy radiated from her small frame. We talked until Ryder arrived to collect her. When the moment came to say goodbye, I

summoned my brightest smile and wished her nothing but joy in this new Chapter, far from the dangerous world I had become part of.

Alone in the suddenly quiet apartment, I welcomed the solitude I needed to sort through the chaos in my head. When my phone rang, the unknown number made me hesitate. Something could be wrong, so I answered.

"Gemma, gorgeous Gemma." The voice made my skin crawl with immediate recognition.

"Oh for crying out loud, is it not enough that you exist? Do you have to be completely revolting too?" My patience had officially reached its limit.

"Come on, sweetheart, stop playing games. I know you are curious. You have had a taste of the son, now let daddy show you what a real man can do."

"Exactly how delusional are you?"

"Do not pretend with me, darling. You want this and I can give you..."

"Here is what you can do. Crawl back into whatever sewer you came from and pretend I do not exist. Oh, and I will be sure to mention this conversation to Jude."

I slammed the phone down and screamed at the ceiling. This exiled family member was draining what little sanity I had left. Pizza and ice cream seemed like the only logical solution. I settled in with "Pretty Woman" and cried like my teenage self, wishing life could be as simple as Hollywood made it seem.

I woke up on the couch surrounded by empty containers, my phone screaming for attention.

"Good God, I was about to file a missing person report," Zoe announced without preamble.

"Hello to you too, Zo. What a lovely way to start the morning."

"Morning, sunshine. Now explain why you are not wrapped around Dominic right now. I called him and he said you wanted to go home alone last night."

My brain was too foggy for this level of interrogation from the family's intelligence coordinator.

"Mom moved in with her boyfriend, Zo. I wanted to be here for her big goodbye."

"Why did Dominic not stay with you then?"

"Because I needed some mother-daughter time without distractions."

"That makes sense." Finally, she dropped the inquisition. "Dominic is coming to get you, obviously, but I wanted to call first with the big news."

"What news?" I asked, starting to clean up my disaster zone.

"Ivy and Caleb are officially moving in together, and we have been drafted as the moving crew for today."

"That is incredible news!" Genuine happiness bloomed in my chest for my friend, even knowing the complications their relationship brought to the organization.

"So get yourself ready, and save the romance for later. We need all hands on deck."

After hanging up with Zoe, I was about to call Dominic when he beat me to it.

"Gemma, good morning. How are you feeling?" His voice carried careful neutrality, the tone of a man accustomed to navigating dangerous conversations.

"Fine. You?"

"Missing you terribly." He sighed before continuing quickly. "Did Zoe fill you in?"

"Just hung up with her."

"I am downstairs right now."

"You did not need to come all this way."

"But I wanted to."

"Dominic, I literally just woke up. I need to shower, get dressed, drink some coffee..."

"I will wait as long as you need."

"Dominic, seriously..." I took a steadying breath. "Fine, since you are already here, come up."

Minutes later, the doorbell echoed through the apartment. I opened the door to find him staring at me with raw hunger blazing in those emerald eyes that had intimidated countless rivals. Only then did I remember my current state of undress.

Chapter 267: Facing The Truth

Honesty

Dominic’s POV

I stood outside Gemma’s apartment door in the Thorne family’s protected territory, my breath catching as she appeared before me in nothing but a fitted white tank top and matching underwear. The sight of her nearly undid my resolve to keep things simple between us while I tried to earn back her trust.

"Dominic, Zoe just called from the family operations center and woke me up, then you called right after. I forgot I wasn't dressed properly. You've already seen everything anyway. Come in and get comfortable while I change," she said, a flush creeping up her neck as she realized her state of undress.

As Gemma turned to walk away, something inside me snapped. The weeks of separation, of knowing I had destroyed what we had through my own paranoid stupidity, crashed over me. I stepped inside, shut the door behind me, and pulled her against me. Our lips crashed together in a kiss that was desperate and hungry, filled with all the regret and longing I had carried since that night she found me with Beatrix. When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, I couldn't help but smile. "Good morning, beautiful. You look incredible."

I released her, watching as she walked unsteadily down the hallway, leaving me grinning like an idiot. She had kissed me back. That had to mean something, even after everything I had put her through. I made my way to her kitchen and started preparing her usual breakfast. Black coffee, buttered toast, and strawberry jam. I knew her preferences by heart, had memorized every detail during the months we were together.

Later, Gemma emerged wearing dark jeans and a black button-down shirt, her hair swept up in an elegant twist secured with a blue silk scarf. She looked breathtaking as always, though I could see the wariness in her dark eyes when she looked at me. I set the plate before her and poured her coffee, playing the role of contrite suitor rather than the feared Capo who normally commanded respect through violence.

Throughout breakfast, she remained quiet, lost in whatever thoughts were consuming her. We drove to the girls' house in the family compound in comfortable silence, arriving to find chaos that resembled a children's birthday party rather than the usual controlled atmosphere of Thorne family residences. Conversations overlapped, laughter echoed, and someone was actually squealing. Zoe quickly took charge, separating us into groups with military precision that would have made our family enforcers proud.

The men were assigned to Max's room to handle the heavy lifting. Between moving boxes and furniture, Jude pulled me aside with the serious expression he wore during family business meetings.

"How are you holding up?" Jude asked in a low voice. I studied his expression, understanding immediately what he meant.

"Like I'm burning alive, just like Caleb was when he thought he lost Ivy," I whispered back.

"That woman is suffering because of your choices. You screwed up worse than Caleb ever did, and that's saying something considering the mess he made," Jude murmured.

"What are you ladies gossiping about over there?" Xavier called out with his usual teasing grin, though I caught the underlying tension in his voice. The whole family knew about my situation.

"Just planning a guys' poker night," Jude answered smoothly before turning back to me. "We need to talk privately. There's something you need to know about your father's latest moves."

I nodded grimly. Marcus's schemes never ended, even after being cast out from the family.

When we returned to the living room, Finn burst through the front door looking panicked and out of breath, the way soldiers looked when reporting urgent intelligence.

"Can someone please explain why I just watched Gemma get into Hunter's car?" Finn demanded.

My blood turned to ice at Finn's words, and then Zoe mentioned that Gemma was officially single, making it clear to every man in Port Serenity that she was available. Hell no. I wanted to chase after her immediately, but my friends had other plans. They formed a circle around me like I was some kind of intervention candidate, or worse, like I was about to face a family tribunal.

After confessing about the scene Gemma had witnessed at my safe house and enduring my friends' justified anger, Caleb delivered the final verdict that we would have a serious conversation once the move was complete. Coming from the family Don, it wasn't a suggestion.

When we finally finished relocating Ivy and Max's belongings, I couldn't escape what my friends dramatically called their "Spanish Inquisition." We gathered in Caleb's living room, with Zoe naturally assuming the role of lead prosecutor, her skills as our intelligence coordinator making her particularly ruthless in extracting confessions.

"Alright, you player, how many times did you sleep with that poisonous snake?" Zoe's tone could have cut glass.

"Player?" I asked, feigning offense, though I knew she was being generous with her language.

"Yes, player. And you should be grateful I'm being polite, because I was thinking of much worse names that would make our enemies blush," Zoe fired back.

"This is going to be brutal," I muttered, running my fingers through my hair before deciding to confess everything to my found family.

I told them about the photograph and showed it to them, explained about my vengeful hookups with Beatrix, about ignoring Gemma's countless calls, about my confrontations with my father both at Nadia's house and at the family offices, and what I had discovered through the Social Union's surveillance footage. When I finished, Zoe smacked the back of my head hard enough to remind me why she was feared in interrogation rooms.

"You absolute moron!" Zoe exploded. "Did it never cross your mind to simply talk to Gemma about this damn photograph? You didn't even have the courage to break up with her properly! Seriously, Dominic, you're pathetic for a Capo."

"I've been trying to reach her since yesterday, but," I attempted to defend my actions, though even I found my excuses weak.

"Since yesterday, you fool?" Xavier spoke like he was explaining something obvious to a child, his consigliere training showing. "You've had that photograph for weeks and said nothing? Knowing your father's methods, watching what Caleb went through with family betrayal, you decided to ignore Gemma and sleep with Beatrix instead? No, Dominic, you're beyond disappointing."

"Sorry, man, but I can't defend this one," Caleb said with a shake of his head. "And I've made some spectacular mistakes myself."

"Dominic, you actually managed to be worse than Caleb during his darkest period," Ivy observed, making me cringe.

"Sweetheart, I thought we agreed to move past my mistakes," Caleb whined, earning a sharp look from Ivy.

"I forgave you, Caleb, but I didn't forget!" Ivy was crystal clear. "You'll be making this up to me for the rest of your life, that's our arrangement!" It was impossible not to laugh despite everything.

Suddenly, Ruby smacked Xavier's arm. "Don't get any ideas, honey, because if you ever pull something like this, I'll destroy you in ways that would impress our enforcement crew!"

"But baby, you're the only woman I see!" Xavier whined back.

"Maybe so, but you had that disgusting affair with that other witch's assistant before we were official, so stay vigilant, sweetheart, stay very vigilant." Ruby's threat made me glad I wasn't Xavier.

Jude had been sitting quietly, seeming lost in his own thoughts with the weight of secrets he carried as our intelligence gatherer. He sighed deeply and stood up, brushing off his jeans with both hands.

"It's actually worse than you all realize," Jude announced, drawing everyone's attention like he was delivering a critical intelligence report. "Dominic's father is actively harassing her. He's been sending flowers and calling her. I have no idea how he obtained her number, but given his connections to rival families. I personally warned him to back off, but you know how he operates, and if you've declared war on family business..."

"Damn! He won't quit." I said, finally understanding Marcus's strategy. He was using her to get to me, just like enemy families targeted loved ones.

"I can't believe Gemma is dealing with all this alone while dodging your father's schemes," Nora said sadly.

"I don't think she's completely alone, Nora. I suspect Lila knows something. She's been acting strange lately, taking private phone calls, looking stressed like she's carrying intelligence," Ruby observed with the sharp eye of someone raised around family business.

"You’re right, Lila does know everything." I admitted. "And she probably wants to put a bullet in me."

"Wait, Lila knew everything and kept it secret?" Zoe was furious about the entire situation. "Speaking of which, where is she?"

"She went home to visit family, Zo." I reminded Zoe that I had given Lila time off from her duties.

"She only did what Gemma requested. Gemma didn’t want to burden the family, said that Ivy and Caleb’s problems were serious enough without adding another crisis to the Thorne organization," Jude explained, staring at the floor.

"Hold on, Wright, you knew as well? And said nothing to the family?" Nora demanded.

"Nora, it was Gemma’s choice. I sensed something was wrong and confronted her about it. But she begged me not to tell anyone, and I honored her wishes while still providing protection," Jude tried to justify his silence.

"I feel terrible. Gemma’s been suffering through all this alone while I’ve been monopolizing everyone’s attention with my own family drama. Even Jude noticed something was wrong when I completely missed it," Ivy said, clearly distressed.

"We were all awful friends, missing all the warning signs. But the real villain is this pathetic excuse for a Capo!" Zoe concluded.

"Yes, I was completely wrong, but can you help me figure out how to earn her forgiveness?"

"Oh, absolutely!" Caleb spoke with false confidence. "I know exactly how to start - get on your knees and beg like your life depends on it!" Everyone laughed at my expense. "But what I really want to know, Jude, is what other family secrets you’re keeping from us."

"What do you mean?" Jude looked genuinely confused.

"Well, you knew about Ivy's pregnancy, you knew about Gemma's situation with this disaster who calls himself our Capo. Makes me wonder what other intelligence you're sitting on," Caleb studied Jude with the penetrating stare he used during family interrogations.

"Oh, please." Jude huffed in frustration. "Right now, I'm not hiding any other family business, okay? Can we focus on cleaning up the disaster that our so-called friend created?"

I groaned and sank deeper into the couch. But my day wasn't going to improve as I had hoped when I picked up Gemma this morning. My phone buzzed with a text message from my sister.

"I have to leave. Nadia wants to see me. We haven't talked since my confrontation with Marcus at the family offices. I need to check on her." I said goodbye to my friends and headed to my sister's house in the protected part of town.

Another difficult conversation awaited me, as telling Nadia about what happened at the club would devastate her completely.

Chapter 268: Unexpected Arrival

Gemma's POV

I stepped out of Ivy's fortress-like penthouse to find Hunter leaning against his armored car, waiting for me. The moment he spotted me, his scarred face lit up as he strode over and planted a gentle kiss on my cheek.

"Gemma, you look absolutely stunning," Hunter said with genuine warmth in his voice.

Hunter possessed the kind of dangerous handsomeness that commanded respect in our world. Though not quite matching Dominic's imposing height, he still stood impressively tall beside me. His shoulder-length black waves caught the afternoon light, complementing his naturally bronzed skin that bore the subtle marks of our violent lifestyle. Those calculating dark eyes sparkled with predatory energy, while his well-groomed beard framed a disarming smile that could charm information from anyone.

"You always know exactly what to say," I replied, sliding into the bulletproof passenger seat as he held the door open like a true gentleman.

"So, my beautiful queen, I have something special planned," Hunter announced as he settled behind the wheel, checking his rearview mirrors with practiced caution. "There's this incredible private estate restaurant just outside our territory. It's secure, exclusive, and serves the most amazing food. The owner owes my family several favors. Does that sound appealing to you?"

The prospect of escaping the suffocating surveillance of our territory filled me with the first genuine lightness I'd experienced in days. "That sounds absolutely perfect, Hunter."

During the drive through carefully monitored checkpoints, Hunter kept our conversation flowing effortlessly. His natural wit and endless stream of amusing stories about rival families created an atmosphere of carefree joy I'd almost forgotten existed. Yet I could sense the question hovering beneath his cheerful demeanor, the one he was too strategic to rush into asking.

Finally, his curiosity won out, though he approached the subject with careful calculation. "My queen, I don't want to pry into matters that could get us both killed, but I need to understand what Dominic did to hurt you so deeply."

The simple truth felt like swallowing broken glass. "He betrayed me with another woman, Hunter."

"What an absolute fool," Hunter declared with a brilliant grin spreading across his face. "His spectacular stupidity is definitely my gain."

"Is that so?" I found myself laughing despite everything, just as Hunter guided the armored car into a heavily guarded private parking area beside the restaurant.

"Because now I finally have a real shot at winning your heart." His boldness was refreshing and utterly disarming.

"Look at you being so confident," I teased back.

"Darling, you haven't experienced anything yet." He leaned over to kiss the tip of my nose before jumping out to signal his security detail. "Come on, my queen. I'm going to spoil you completely, and we're going to create some beautiful memories this afternoon."

"Now that’s a plan I can definitely get behind."

The hours that followed with Hunter felt like stepping into a fairy tale. The private estate exceeded every expectation with its farm-to-table cuisine that tasted like pure heaven. Afterward, we explored the secure grounds on horseback, the wind whipping through our hair as we raced across protected fields while armed guards maintained discreet perimeters. We paddled a small boat across the pristine lake, sharing stories about our families and survival while swans glided alongside us. Hunter revealed pieces of himself with genuine openness, clearly wanting me to see the real man beneath the criminal exterior. The entire experience felt wonderfully uncomplicated and joyful.

As evening painted the sky in soft pastels, Hunter drove me home and once again demonstrated his impeccable manners by walking me to my secured door.

"My gorgeous queen, when can I have the pleasure of your company again?" he asked, that trademark calculating smile making his dark eyes absolutely luminous.

"Anytime you want to ask me out again."

"How about tomorrow evening? I could pick you up after your shift at the compound, take you to catch a movie, then dinner somewhere special?"

"I absolutely love movies! You can choose whatever you want. I’m game for anything - action, horror, science fiction, romantic comedies, you name it."

"You’re absolutely incredible! I’ll send you an encrypted message so we can nail down all the details."

"It’s a date. Hunter, today was truly magical. Thank you for everything."

"My queen, spending time with you is pure privilege. I should be thanking you."

We exchanged warm hugs and gentle kisses on the cheek before I headed inside my fortified apartment. Once in my secured space, I finally checked my encrypted phone for the first time since leaving with

Hunter. Multiple messages from my fellow mafia wives filled the screen, along with several from Vincenzo and even missed calls from him. Concern immediately flooded through me, so I quickly dialed his number.

"Auntie, my absolute favorite person!" Vincenzo's familiar warmth greeted me instantly.

"Vincenzo, my sweet boy! How are you doing?"

"Missing you terribly, auntie. Is everything going well with you?"

"Yes, everything's fine. I spent the afternoon with a friend and completely missed your calls. I'm so sorry about that."

"Just a friend, auntie? Or are you maybe trying to find yourself another handsome young soldier like me?"

"Oh honey, even if I had a hundred gorgeous young soldiers in my life, you'd still hold the top spot in my heart!"

"You're my number one favorite auntie too! Do you have any free time this week to hang out?"

"I always make time for you, sweetheart, but it would have to be after my shifts at the compound. Where did you want to go?"

"I was thinking we could check out that amazing retro diner with all the classic car decorations on Wednesday evening. What do you think about that?"

"Speedway? Oh Vincenzo, that sounds absolutely fantastic! I've been dying to try that place but haven't made it there yet."

"Auntie, you're the absolute best! But speaking of other things..." His tone shifted slightly.

"I already know what you're going to ask."

"Have you heard about the massive family war that erupted at the compound today? The whole mess with my mother, my uncle, and their father?"

"No, I haven't heard anything about that yet. What exactly went down?"

"Marcus managed to completely destroy his relationship with my mother and the entire family alliance."

For the next while, I listened as Vincenzo painted a detailed picture of the chaos that had erupted within our criminal organization. He described his mother's devastation and revealed the disgusting behavior Marcus had been displaying toward women at our underground casino operations. Throughout his account, I couldn't stop thinking about how absolutely crushed Dominic must be feeling right now.

"My uncle swears he had no idea his father had harassed you like that. Why didn't you tell him what happened?" Vincenzo's concern was genuine and touching.

"Because your uncle already had enough territorial wars and family problems to deal with, and I knew the moment he found out, he'd immediately execute Marcus for it." I let out a heavy sigh. "Now I know he's going to demand to know why I kept it from him."

"It's actually much more complicated than that, auntie. If you had told him everything, so many of these problems could have been prevented entirely."

"What exactly do you mean by that, Vincenzo?"

"I can't tell you the details. My uncle would absolutely murder me if I spilled everything before he gets the chance to explain it himself."

"Vincenzo, you can't leave me hanging like this. Tell me what you know."

"Auntie, please don't put me in this impossible position."

"Come on, Vincenzo, I can tell you're practically bursting to share this information with me!"

"This is what we get for trying to help people - absolutely no appreciation!"

"Oh Vincenzo, don't try to play innocent with me. You're the family's official intelligence coordinator. But honestly, who am I to judge you for that?"

Vincenzo's wonderful laughter filled the encrypted line.

"Auntie, I'm not a gossip at all - I'm a dedicated historian of other families' fascinating operations!" Now it was my turn to laugh at this impossible kid. "But since you're completely in the dark about this situation, you better sit down because I'm about to tell you quite a story."

I made my way to the kitchen, grabbed leftover takeout from the refrigerator along with a cold drink, then settled into my most comfortable chair. Apparently, this was going to be some seriously shocking information. And it's definitely good that I sat down, because what Vincenzo revealed next would have knocked me flat on the floor.

Vincenzo told me about the surveillance photograph that manipulative snake Beatrix had taken and sent directly to Dominic on the exact day his father harassed me at our underground casino. He explained how Dominic had completely lost his mind afterward, and instead of coming to talk with me about what he'd seen, he went straight to that whore's bed. And to make everything even worse, that treacherous old bastard had been dropping calculated hints to Dominic for weeks. I could feel rage burning through my veins - I wanted to make Dominic suffer for his stupidity, but I also wanted to completely destroy Marcus.

"Auntie, my uncle made a catastrophic mistake with you and you know you have my complete support in whatever you decide, but he's really suffering right now. He's genuinely heartbroken. He actually cried like a baby in my mother's arms today. I thought he had come to comfort her because of what her father did to her, but she ended up having to comfort him instead."

"Vincenzo, do you understand how incredibly stupid your uncle was? Why didn't he just come talk to me directly? But no, instead he had to run straight to that whore!"

"I know, it was completely ridiculous and absolutely senseless. I definitely think you should make him suffer for a while, but I also think you should eventually work toward forgiveness."

"Work toward forgiveness, Vincenzo? Are you serious right now? Have you been watching religious programming lately?"

My reinforced doorbell suddenly rang, which struck me as odd since the security team hadn't announced any visitors. I walked to the door while continuing to listen to Vincenzo describe how much his uncle was suffering. I peered through the bulletproof peephole and couldn't believe who was standing outside. I opened the door, ready for absolute war.

"Vincenzo, we'll have to continue this conversation later because a complete clown just showed up at my house." Vincenzo immediately asked if it was his uncle. "The one and only!" Vincenzo begged me not to reveal that he had told me everything, as if I needed that reminder. "Okay. See you Wednesday. Love you."

I ended the call, closed the reinforced door firmly, then stood directly in front of Dominic with my arms crossed defiantly.

"Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in!"

Chapter 269: Truth Cuts Deeper

Dominic's POV

I left Caleb's estate and drove straight to Nadia's place, but my mind kept spiraling back to the image of Gemma with Hunter. The thought was eating me alive from the inside. When I arrived at my sister's house in the family's protected residential district, she wrapped me in her arms immediately. The pain Marcus had caused her was written all over her face, but at least she was finally seeing our exiled father for the snake he really was. The awakening had come at a brutal cost.

We settled into her living room, and I spilled everything. The harassment incidents at the Social Union where our family laundered money, the formal complaints brewing against Marcus through the Commission, what he had done to Gemma, what I had done to Gemma, and how he was now stalking

her like some deranged predator seeking revenge against the family. By the time I finished, I was stretched out on the couch with my head in Nadia's lap, sobbing like a child and drowning in regret for being such an impulsive fool who destroys first and thinks never.

Nadia stroked my hair and told me to stop wallowing and start fighting for Gemma. Her husband, normally a man of few words who handled family security, even chimed in with encouragement. But Vincenzo was a different story entirely. That kid worships Gemma and looked ready to tear my throat out with his bare hands. I had to endure a full moral breakdown from my teenage nephew, and honestly, every word he said about dishonoring the family and betraying trust was deserved.

I left Nadia's house with renewed determination burning in my chest. I drove directly to Gemma's apartment in the civilian district, prepared to camp outside her door if necessary. If she wasn't home, I would wait until she returned. Either way, I was starting my campaign for forgiveness tonight.

Relief flooded through me when the doorman confirmed she was upstairs and that my access hadn't been revoked yet. The building's security knew better than to cross a Thorne family Capo without direct orders. I took the elevator up two steps at a time in my mind. When Gemma opened the door, I almost lost my nerve. She wasn't just angry or furious. This was pure, concentrated rage that could have melted steel. She looked like she wanted to disembowel me slowly while I was still breathing. But when I caught fragments of her phone conversation, everything clicked into place.

I stepped inside and waited while she finished her call. When she finally stood before me with her arms crossed like a prosecutor about to deliver a death sentence, I knew I needed the complete picture. I held up one finger, pulled out my phone, and dialed.

"Vincenzo, you little gossip, what exactly did you tell her?" Vincenzo's voice came through stammering and guilty. "Speak up, kid, I can't understand you."

"Uncle Dominic, I wasn't planning to say anything, but she called and..." I cut him off before he could spin some elaborate excuse.

"What did you tell her?" I demanded.

"Everything!" He exhaled heavily. "Including how you were crying like a baby with your head in Mom's lap."

"Christ, Vincenzo! We'll have words about this later."

I ended the call and turned back to Gemma. She took two deliberate steps toward me, raised her finger to my nose, and spoke through clenched teeth. "If you so much as raise your voice at Vincenzo, I will personally remove your scalp with a rusty spoon."

She moved to the living room and dropped onto the couch. Perfect, now my teenage nephew had a bodyguard who'd witnessed enough family violence to make good on her threats. I took a steadying breath and followed her, settling beside her on the cushions.

"Why, Dominic? Why believe some photograph that witch sent you instead of having an actual conversation with me?" Gemma's voice carried bone-deep exhaustion.

"I could throw that same question back at you, Gemma. Why didn't you tell me what Marcus was doing? Why keep his harassment and stalking to yourself?"

"Jude filled you in, obviously."

"Yeah, he told me because he's genuinely worried about your safety. Marcus isn't just some civilian creep. He's a dangerous man with dangerous connections."

"Dominic, I kept quiet because you were already drowning in stress after your father showed up trying to worm his way back into family business. You were barely holding it together, and I didn't want to pile more problems on top of everything else."

"God, Gemma! You should have told me immediately. He's not just a predator, he's an exiled family member with nothing to lose! I would have had him dealt with long ago. You don't understand Marcus like I do. He has connections to rival families, friends who are just as twisted as he is."

"I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Dominic."

"Not against Marcus, you're not. He has access to resources, people who owe him favors from before his exile." I felt my control slipping but forced myself to stay calm. "If you had spoken up, I could have acted through the Commission, and several other women wouldn't have suffered even worse harassment than what he put you through."

"I do regret not filing an official complaint through Caleb's people. Maybe it would have protected those other women."

"No, Gemma, it wouldn't have stopped him. But if you had told me, I could have used my position in the family to demand his immediate elimination, just like I did Friday."

"I'm glad you finally took action. Now explain yourself, Dominic." I knew exactly what she was asking.

"Because I'm a complete idiot."

"That much I already figured out."

"Ouch, that stings." Gemma's mouth curved into the smallest, saddest smile I'd ever seen.

"I was completely blinded by rage. Marcus has this talent for bringing out my absolute worst instincts, and he's a master manipulator who knows exactly which buttons to push. I believed that snake Beatrix because that's Marcus's specialty. Every time he resurfaces in my life, he destroys everything good I have."

"Your relationship with him is toxic beyond repair. Why keep someone like that in your world?"

"My mother. She's never allowed us to choose sides. She insists what happened between them was a private marriage issue, but that doesn't change his role as our father. She's deeply religious and takes that commandment about honoring your parents seriously, regardless of who they are or what they've done to the family."

"That’s exactly how so many people romanticize family, even when it’s completely dysfunctional. Real family should be built on love, understanding, acceptance, and genuine unity. Not just shared blood. Sometimes the person who shares your blood is the one who damages you most."

"I completely agree. That’s why I work to keep my father satisfied but at arm’s length, so I don’t have to tolerate him while keeping my mother happy."

"Even so, Dominic, that doesn’t justify or excuse your actions. You didn’t even have the backbone to break up with me properly."

"I was a complete coward, Gemma. I hoped you would just vanish so I wouldn’t have to face you, because confronting you would have been harder and more painful than I could handle. I slept with Beatrix trying to convince myself I could return to my old life before you existed, but I couldn’t. Every time I was with her only made me feel more empty, only proved that I can’t survive without you."

"Hold on, it wasn’t just that one day when I walked in on you? How many times did you sleep with her?" I watched the fury reignite in Gemma’s eyes and realized Vincenzo hadn’t shared absolutely everything after all.

"Shit." I pressed my palm against my face and closed my eyes before answering. "Multiple times."

"You bastard! You screwed that witch in your house, in your bed, where you used to make love to me! But that wasn’t enough satisfaction for you. No! You had to keep going back for more."

Gemma shot to her feet and began pacing like a caged animal while tears streamed down her cheeks. I stood and reached for her, but she recoiled like I had struck her.

"Gemma, please, I was out of my mind! Let me try to make this right."

"Get out of here, Dominic! Leave right now, or I’ll claw your eyes out while I’m throwing you down the stairs."

"Gemma, please, just listen to me."

"You had plenty of opportunities to talk to me, but you were too busy between that whore's legs, so now go have your conversations with her."

Gemma yanked the door open and pointed toward the hallway. I decided to give her space and try again tomorrow, but I absolutely would not give up. I left her apartment and immediately called Zoe.

Chapter 270: Rescue Squad Mobilized

Gemma's POV

My heart shattered like glass hitting concrete. This wasn't just one betrayal cutting through me, but layers upon layers of broken trust from a man who controlled entire neighborhoods with his iron fist. The worst part? Dominic didn't believe in me. He chose to embrace the lies his exiled father Marcus had planted instead of having a simple conversation with me. He couldn't even find the backbone to end things properly with the honor expected of a Capo, just moved on to someone else and tossed me away like I was nothing more than another expendable asset in his criminal empire. This was completely wrong.

After shutting the reinforced door behind me, I collapsed against it, sliding down until I hit the floor. Raw sobs tore from my throat as I buried my face in my hands. Time became meaningless as I sat there drowning in my own tears. It felt like someone had ripped open a dam inside me, and the rushing water of grief wouldn't stop flowing, pulling me under wave after wave of crushing pain that cut deeper than any knife wound.

Hiccups wracked my body while a burning sensation spread across my chest. My breathing became labored and ragged, but the tears kept coming without mercy. The doorbell's sharp ring cut through my misery, but I couldn't bring myself to move. It rang again, yet I remained frozen in place, consumed by my sobbing and agony. Only when I heard Zoe's familiar voice threatening to call her contacts in the fire department to break down my door did I finally stir, knowing Dominic's intelligence coordinator would absolutely follow through on that threat.

Dragging myself upright, I opened the door to find my girls standing there like a rescue squad ready for action, armed with enough supplies to survive a siege.

"We're here for you now and always, Gemma," Zoe wrapped me in her strong embrace, her voice carrying the same steel that made rival families think twice about crossing Thorne territory. "We thought it was better not to involve Ivy today since she's dealing with some family business, but tomorrow we'll fill her in on everything."

I melted into Zoe's arms, my tears flowing freely again. Soon I felt the other girls joining our huddle, creating a cocoon of warmth around me. God, how desperately I needed this comfort from the only people in this dangerous world who truly had my back. Slowly, my breathing steadied and my sobs quieted enough for words to form. When my racing heart finally settled, I managed to speak.

"What are you crazy women doing here?" I attempted a smile while wiping away tears with the backs of my hands.

"That broker Basil called me, explained what went down with Dominic's mess, and said you needed your girls. So here we are. And he was absolutely right," Zoe declared with the authority of someone who coordinated intelligence networks across the city.

"Plus we came armed for every emotional emergency - pizza for rage, burgers and fries for hatred, ice cream for sadness, chocolate for wounded hearts, gummy bears for anxiety, and plenty more backup supplies," Ruby rattled off like she was reading a battle plan for surviving heartbreak in mafia territory.

"And naturally, skincare essentials, because we might crumble inside, but the world doesn't need to witness it, especially not those lowlife rivals who'd love to see us weak. Tomorrow we'll look stunning as usual," Nora's logic made me smile despite everything, knowing appearance was everything when you moved in circles where showing vulnerability could get you killed.

"Oh girls, you're incredible! The absolute best friends anyone could ask for in this godforsaken city!" I sniffled gratefully.

"So, gorgeous, we'll fall apart tonight, but tomorrow we'll be gorgeous and armed for whatever comes next in this war zone," Zoe announced, throwing herself onto my couch with dramatic flair.

The doorbell chimed again and I answered it to find Lila rushing inside, dragging her compact suitcase behind her. After squeezing me tight, she started chattering away. "I made it, everyone! Did I miss the important stuff?"

"Chill out, Little June, we literally just arrived ourselves," Zoe called from her spot on the couch, using the code name she'd given Lila for their secure communications. "But you've got some serious explaining to do about keeping secrets!"

Lila shot me a guilty look, like a kid caught with her hand in the cookie jar and desperately needing backup. I guided Lila into the living room, where Ruby and Nora had already transformed my coffee table into an impressive food distribution center.

"Listen up, Little June, I want to start by understanding why you've been hiding Gemma's troubles from us," Zoe began her interrogation of Lila with the same intensity she used on informants.

"Zo, she begged me not to say anything while Ivy and Caleb were dealing with that internal family crisis, but now thankfully they've sorted things out and we can focus on helping Gemma," Lila explained, settling cross-legged on the floor.

"I see. And exactly how long have you been in the know?" Zoe locked her gaze on Lila, who was casually taking a bite of pizza before answering.

"Um, since the first threatening letter showed up." When Lila mentioned the letter, I felt every drop of blood drain from my face. The girls weren't supposed to discover that detail about Nick's escalating harassment.

"What letter, Little June?" Nora dropped her burger mid-bite, immediately alert to potential danger.

"You know, those threatening letters that psycho Nick keeps sending her from prison," Lila said matter-of-factly, earning a sharp elbow to her ribs that made her yelp and rub the sore spot.

"Start talking, Gemma! Because I can't believe you think I'm such a pathetic friend that I wouldn't care about death threats against you and help mobilize our resources just because our other friend was struggling with family warfare," Zoe's complaint came with a scary angry expression that reminded me why she was feared throughout the criminal underworld.

"Zo, you girls are the most amazing friends on Earth, but I didn't want to become a burden when everyone's already dealing with territorial conflicts," I tried defending myself.

"Oh really, so you decided that only Lila counted as your real friend and the rest of us were just decoration," Ruby said, clearly hurt by my decision to hide the escalating danger.

"Oh no, girls, that's not it at all." New tears started flowing. "It's just that I've never had friends like you before, incredible people willing to mobilize armed protection and resources to help me, and I didn't want it to look like I was competing with Ivy for attention during her crisis with Caleb and..."

"Oh, Clair..." Zoe cut me off as I sniffled pathetically. "We get it, but you can never shut us out again, ever! Friends share the beautiful moments and the bloodbaths, and sometimes everyone's drowning in their own territorial wars, but they survive together."

"Exactly, Gemma, no matter how terrible things get for one of us, if another person has trouble, we'll mobilize and protect them just the same!" Nora pulled me into her arms. "And Ivy feels awful because you've been handling prison threats and stalkers alone."

"Right, Gemma, we'll always stand by your side against any enemy. Promise you won't do this again," Ruby pleaded earnestly.

"I swear I won't do it again." I laid out everything for the girls about Nick's threatening letters and the security consultant's warnings about escalating danger. They sat there completely stunned by the level of menace.

"You absolutely cannot keep living alone in this neighborhood, Gemma!" Ruby exclaimed with alarm, knowing how dangerous the streets could be.

"Lila's moving in with me for protection, right Lila?" I said hopefully.

"That's the plan. That's why I went back home. To discuss the lease situation with my dad and arrange for better security. My family was thrilled that I found someone to share a place with, especially since it's you and this area has Thorne family protection," Lila confirmed with an adorably satisfied smile.

"Ru, why don’t you move in with us too? Parker’s return from his assignment is still up in the air, you haven’t committed to living with Xavier, come stay with us. There are four bedrooms in this place and it’s in protected territory," I said, getting genuinely excited about having another friend sharing the fortress-like house.

"Oh girls, are you being serious? I would absolutely love that! I’m miserable at home with all the family drama right now," Ruby admitted.

"More than serious!" I practically bounced with excitement. "This is going to be amazing! I’ll love having both of you here for safety and company!"

"Hey! You meanies! Nobody extends an invitation to me. On top of everything, Ivy abandoned me for Thorne family duties." Zoe whined and pouted dramatically, sending us all into fits of laughter.

"Zo, Finn just moved into your secure compound. Are you really going to abandon him there alone to come live with us?" Ruby was laughing so hard she could barely speak.

"Maybe I will..." Zoe pretended to consider it seriously, making us laugh even harder. "No, actually my prince provides me with something you ladies can’t offer in this dangerous world."

"And what might that be?" Lila asked with complete innocence.

"Some quality protection and benefits, Lila!" Hearing Zoe’s blunt response, Lila turned bright red like a ripe tomato, sending us into another laughing fit.

"Oh girls, only you could pull me out of the darkness I was sinking into," I said when I finally caught my breath from laughing.

"See? Friends are everything in this brutal world! And there you were, playing hard to get with us," Nora teased playfully.

"I won’t do it again, I promise!" I replied firmly.

"And are you planning to forgive that Capo Dominic?" Zoe asked directly, using his title with obvious disdain.

"I'm really wounded, Zo. He jumped straight to conclusions without giving me a chance to explain myself, and in our world, trust is everything," I said, staring down at my hands.

"Gemma, we'll save you from retelling the whole story because Dominic already filled us in through channels. But let me tell you something, Dominic's issues with his exiled father Marcus run incredibly deep. There are family secrets that only Xavier, Caleb, and Jude are aware of, and I'm telling you, it's seriously twisted mafia drama!" Nora made it clear the situation involved dark family history.

"And you won't share it with us?" I asked curiously.

"I can't. Please try to understand. I discovered some classified family information accidentally, and Jude made me swear blood oaths not to tell anyone. It's not my story to share." Nora was completely serious about this sacred promise.

"I understand." I sighed heavily, knowing how sacred such oaths were in our world.

"Look, Gemma, from what I've witnessed in family operations, this Marcus character really messes with Dominic and Nadia's heads. Maybe, and I'm saying maybe, just this once you could try not being so harsh on that idiot Capo." Zoe was actually giving Dominic a vote of confidence. Was this really happening? I hadn't expected that from someone who coordinated intelligence against family enemies, and it definitely got me thinking.

Maybe Zoe had a point. I had witnessed Dominic around his father during that disastrous family meeting. I had watched how that exiled traitor completely destabilizes Dominic and even poor Nadia. But still, he had betrayed my trust, and I'd experienced betrayal before. Being betrayed doesn't just destroy trust, which is essential in any relationship especially in our dangerous world, but it also attacks your ego, your self-worth, makes you wonder if you're truly good enough and if you're sufficient for someone who commands such power and respect.

I was sinking back into thoughts, doubts, and overwhelming feelings, but a voice reached through and pulled me back to the surface.

"There’s plenty to think about, Gemma, but right now I really want to hear how things went with Hunter!" Ruby dragged me from my spiraling thoughts about mafia politics.

The room instantly filled with excitement and curiosity about my afternoon adventure outside this dangerous world. I shared every detail of how Hunter was gentle and attentive, plus our plans for a movie date the following day. The girls became animated and enthusiastic about this normal romance possibility.

We finished the night watching music videos, laughing until our stomachs hurt, dancing, and singing along in front of the TV, temporarily forgetting about the brutal realities of our world.