Mafia Mask 271

Chapter 271: Harsh Wake Up Call

Dominic’s POV

The crushing weight of my catastrophic mistakes followed me as I walked away from Gemma’s safe house. She needed my protection, but her stubborn pride would never let her reach out first. I pulled out my encrypted phone and dialed Zoe’s secure line, knowing she would mobilize our entire network without hesitation.

"Dominic, you absolute disaster," Zoe’s voice cut through the phone before I could even explain the carnage I’d created. "You’re a complete liability, you know that?"

I hadn’t heard that particular insult used against a Capo in years, but she delivered it with surgical precision. Every word stung because it carried truth. My demons had won again. The toxic legacy my father Marcus left behind had poisoned another relationship, maybe permanently this time.

"Just get the girls to Gemma’s safe house," I managed to say through gritted teeth.

"Already coordinating with Ivy’s security detail," Zoe replied curtly. "But don’t think this conversation is over, Frost."

The line went dead, leaving me alone with the wreckage of my choices and the bitter taste of failure.

Soon after, my private compound became ground zero for an intervention I didn’t request but desperately needed. Xavier, Finn, and Jude showed up with enough high-end whiskey to stock a speakeasy and the kind of brutal honesty only blood brothers could deliver in this life.

"The girls are fortified at Gemma’s place with armed security tonight," Xavier announced, cracking open a bottle of aged bourbon. "Which means we’re stuck with your pathetic ass until you return to some semblance of sanity."

They weren’t gentle about it. Every stupid tactical decision got dissected, every fear I’d let compromise our operations got exposed, and every excuse I tried to make got shot down immediately. By the time we finished talking and drinking, the sun was rising over Port Serenity and my head felt like it might split open from the inside.

Dragging myself into Zenith Systems headquarters the next morning was an exercise in pure masochism. The digital clock showed well past ten, and I looked like I’d been through a territory war carrying nothing but regret and alcohol poisoning. My designer tie hung crooked, my tailored jacket dangled from one arm, and my hair defied every law of gravity and executive grooming standards.

My receptionist Mia took one look at me and shook her head with the kind of disappointment usually reserved for natural disasters and failed hits.

"Don’t say a word," I muttered, sliding dark sunglasses over my bloodshot eyes.

Making it to my executive office felt like crossing hostile territory in formal wear. Zoe was there, organizing intelligence files on my desk with the efficiency of someone who had mastered both corporate management and underground operations, unlike certain Capos who shall remain nameless.

"Well, well, look what the streets dragged in," Zoe’s voice hit my skull like a sledgehammer on concrete.

"Volume control, please," I whispered, collapsing into my leather chair.

She leaned closer, analyzing me like a forensic investigator. "Are you kidding me right now, Dominic? I specifically told you never to show up here compromised or hungover. You’re late, you smell like a distillery raid, and you look like you slept in an alley behind one of our collection points."

"Zoe, not today. Just tell me how Gemma is holding up."

"She’s secure. Actually, she’s going to catch a movie with Hunter this afternoon." The words came out casual, like she was discussing weather patterns instead of dropping a bomb on my territorial instincts.

My blood turned to ice water. "What did you just say?"

"I said you're getting aspirin, black coffee, and a mandatory rest period on that couch until lunch. Then we're going to pretend you're a functioning Capo and handle some actual business." She kept talking like she hadn't just declared war on my sanity.

I started to stand up, every protective instinct firing. "I'm going to intercept that situation right now."

Her hand slammed down on my shoulder, pushing me back into the chair with surprising force that reminded me she'd trained with our best enforcers. "You're not going anywhere. Listen carefully because I'm only saying this once. Today, you're going to leave Gemma alone. She's going to enjoy her movie and have some normalcy. Tomorrow, you're going to show up here sharp, punctual, and ready to run this operation properly. Are we crystal clear?"

"Zoe, do you seriously think I'm going to let my woman spend time with some civilian while there are still threats circulating? You've completely lost your tactical sense."

"I never lose my tactical sense, Dominic. And she's not your woman anymore, remember? You threw that protection away when you decided to trust your paranoia instead of your judgment. Gemma is going to that movie, and you're going to handle it like a professional."

She stormed out, leaving me staring at the ceiling and questioning every strategic choice that had led to this moment of complete powerlessness. When she returned, she carried a tray loaded with orange juice, two military-grade painkillers, and coffee strong enough to wake the dead from concrete shoes.

"Drink. Swallow. Sleep," she commanded, watching me comply like a drill sergeant monitoring a recruit.

The leather couch in my office had never felt so much like solitary confinement. But the forced rest actually helped stabilize my system, and when I woke up several hours later, the world had stopped spinning quite so violently. I headed to my private bathroom, grateful for the shower and fresh clothes I kept there for emergencies exactly like this strategic meltdown.

Feeling marginally human again, I walked to Zoe's office and found Vincenzo lounging in a chair, chatting her up with his usual charm offensive that worked on everyone except family associates.

"Vincenzo, are you seriously trying to hit on my intelligence coordinator again?" I asked, getting his attention.

"Uncle, I'm wounded by your accusations," he said, placing a dramatic hand over his heart before turning back to Zoe with renewed focus. "Beautiful, I'm not hitting on you, but if you're interested in some protection services, I'm absolutely available."

"You two are hopeless cases," I said, rolling my eyes while Zoe laughed despite herself. "Have you secured lunch yet?"

"I'm meeting Ruby and Lila to coordinate their relocation into Gemma's apartment, and we need to finalize the security logistics because—"

"Hold on," I interrupted. "What relocation? What security arrangements?"

"Wow, Uncle Dominic, you're really out of the intelligence loop here. Even I know Willow moved in with her boyfriend's crew and left Gemma the whole safe house, so Gemma invited Ruby and Lila to be her new security roommates. They're relocating this week," Vincenzo rattled off like he was reading from surveillance reports.

"Take a breath, information broker," Zoe teased him.

"And beautiful, if you need any heavy security work handled, I'm your man," Vincenzo added quickly.

My head was spinning again, but not from the hangover this time. The tactical implications were staggering. "When exactly did Willow relocate with her boyfriend's protection?"

"The other night," they answered simultaneously.

"What other intelligence am I missing here?" I asked, watching Zoe's expression shift slightly, like she was calculating whether to reveal classified information. "Zoe, what else don't I know about our current situation?"

"That you're an idiot who compromised himself with some random associate because you couldn't trust the one person who actually had your back?" She looked at me with pure contempt that could cut glass.

"Zoe Miller, you better watch your—"

"Don't you dare finish that threat, Dominic," she snapped, standing up and raising her voice with the authority of someone who'd earned respect in this world. "You're already on my bad side, and if you push me even one inch further, I will make your operations a living hell until Gemma forgives you. And based on how catastrophically you screwed up, that might take several lifetimes to accomplish."

The threat wasn't empty, and we both knew it. Zoe could be absolutely ruthless when she wanted to be, and right now, her loyalty clearly lay with Gemma's protection rather than my comfort. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and counted slowly.

Was I actually intimidated by my own intelligence coordinator? Absolutely. Sometimes Zoe exhibited a level of calculated menace that would make professional interrogators nervous and enemy Capos think twice about crossing her path.

Chapter 272: Recruiting Family Allies

Dominic's POV

I desperately needed allies in my war to win Gemma back from the catastrophic damage Marcus's schemes had inflicted on us. My options in the Thorne family hierarchy were limited, but when I spotted Vincenzo deep in conversation with Zoe in the family's command center, inspiration struck like a lightning bolt. My nephew was my best asset for this delicate operation. The kid possessed natural charisma that could disarm even the most hardened soldiers, and his ability to extract information rivaled our best interrogators. All I had to do was leverage his loyalty and let his relentless curiosity work in my favor.

"Vincenzo, want to grab lunch with me?" I approached my nephew with the most casual tone I could manage, given the stakes.

His face brightened instantly, the same way it had when he was younger and I'd teach him how to handle firearms. "Absolutely, Uncle Dominic."

"Perfect. Let’s get out of this fortress." I headed toward the reinforced exit of our family compound.

"This afternoon sharp for the territory sweep, Dominic. Don’t even think about being late!" Zoe’s authoritative voice followed us out, reminding me of my duties as Capo.

"Got it, boss," I muttered under my breath, feeling like a scolded foot soldier as I left our operations center.

I knew exactly where to take him. Vincenzo had developed an obsession with perfectly grilled steaks and crispy fries during our family dinners at the safe houses, so I drove us to the most exclusive steakhouse in Port Serenity, the kind of place where Thorne family money guaranteed both privacy and the finest cuts.

"Uncle Dominic, you’re seriously the best! This place is incredible," Vincenzo’s eyes practically sparkled as we walked past the armed doorman who nodded respectfully at my arrival.

"I know what my favorite nephew likes," I said, genuinely pleased by his excitement despite the weight of my mission.

"Hold up. Am I your favorite nephew, or do you need a favor?" Vincenzo wasn’t just charming, he was sharp as the switchblade I’d given him for his birthday years ago.

"Mostly the second, but definitely some of the first," I admitted. No point in playing games with someone who’d grown up watching family negotiations since childhood.

"In that case, I’m going all out." When our private server appeared, Vincenzo ordered the restaurant’s most expensive ribeye with an enormous portion of truffle fries. "And don’t even look at my fries, Uncle."

"You little extortionist! Where did this attitude come from? Your mother’s practically a saint and your father’s got more class than half our associates."

"I learned from my player uncle who runs the family's most profitable operations," he shot back without missing a beat, making me burst out laughing despite my inner turmoil.

"Are you still furious with me about what happened with Gemma?" I asked, remembering how livid he'd been when news of our breakup spread through the family network.

"It's not anger, Uncle Dominic. But what you did to Gemma was unforgivable. You don't treat any woman that way, especially not her. And you're the one who taught me never to let family paranoia destroy something precious." His words cut deeper than any enemy's blade.

"You're absolutely right. I acted like a complete animal. But Marcus has this way of making me lose every bit of strategic thinking I have."

"That man isn't family anymore, and you give his psychological warfare way too much power over your decisions. Mom does the same thing with family ghosts."

"Sometimes I think you're actually decades older trapped in a teenager's body, with the wisdom of a seasoned consigliere." His maturity constantly caught me off guard in our dangerous world.

"I watch everything in this family, Uncle. I watch and I learn from every mistake, every victory, every betrayal." He cut into his steak with surgical precision. "So what's your master plan to get her to forgive you for choosing Beatrix's lies over her loyalty?"

"I've got some strategies brewing, but I'll need backup from someone she trusts. Can I count on your support?"

"That's exactly why I tracked you down today. I'm not letting some civilian steal Aunt Gemma away from our family empire!"

I held up my hand and he slapped it enthusiastically. This kid was going to be either my salvation or my downfall.

"First, I need to know what intelligence I'm missing."

"What do you already know from your surveillance network?"

"That she went out with that outsider Hunter yesterday and they're hitting the movies today."

"Here's the reality check, Uncle. Hunter's not some street punk you can intimidate. The guy's actually gorgeous, comes from legitimate money, and he's genuinely decent. He's not some player who bounces between women like certain family members. He's the type girls bring home to meet their parents, the complete opposite of dangerous men like us." Vincenzo's intel was disturbingly thorough and painfully accurate.

"You know him personally?"

"Brenda's older sister dated him for months. When Zoe mentioned Aunt Gemma's date, I got the full background check from Brenda. Nothing but sterling reviews. Complete opposite of your reputation."

"That's not what I wanted to hear." I reached for his fries and he smacked my hand away playfully. "Are you seriously going to eat all of those?"

"I warned you fair and square!" He popped another piece of steak in his mouth, savoring every bite like he was celebrating my misery.

"Do you know which theater they're going to?"

"Great minds think alike!" His grin was pure calculated mischief. "Already figured that out through my network. Brenda and I are going to show up there and accidentally bump into them. Maybe I'll even invite Brenda's sister along to completely destroy the romantic atmosphere." He made air quotes around "accidentally."

"Kid, you're the most valuable intelligence asset in our entire operation," I said, genuinely impressed by his strategic thinking.

"Obviously. And you're buying me dinner here regularly from now on as payment for my services."

"Whatever you want, just name your price."

"But you can't show up at the theater today, or she'll know we orchestrated this whole surveillance operation."

"Understood completely. How did you extract all this information?"

"Zoe told me everything. She was hoping I'd report to you so you'd crash their date and make yourself look even more possessive and dangerous. But that's not happening under my watch."

"You're getting dangerously smart for family operations. Too bad you can't keep your mouth shut to save your life," I teased, and he gave me an exaggerated fake smile.

"There's more intelligence. I volunteered to help with their apartment move, which keeps me embedded in the inner circle. And Wednesday night, Aunt Gemma and I have established plans."

"What kind of plans?" My interest was definitely piqued by this development.

"We're checking out this new retro diner with the classic car theme. Tomorrow's the women's gathering at the Social Union, which presents perfect cover for your casual appearance."

"You've mapped out my entire week like a military campaign." This kid's strategic thinking was honestly both impressive and frightening. His innocent face made people treat him like an adorable pet, which gave him incredible access to sensitive information. "What's our next tactical move?"

"I was thinking we could use the anonymous message strategy again, like at the shopping district. But instead of pickup lines, we go with heartfelt apology messages," I suggested, building on our previous successful operations.

"Yeah, that approach could work to break through her defenses. But it needs more sophisticated execution," Vincenzo considered thoughtfully. "What if you send one card every day with a carefully chosen gift? Nothing flashy that screams mob money, just things she'd genuinely appreciate. Maybe her

favorite imported chocolate, a quality pen, a ceramic coffee mug. Skip the dozen roses and go with one single flower each day."

"I love that strategy. But you have to be my courier for this operation."

"Oh hell no. Why me?" Vincenzo dropped his fork dramatically and rolled his eyes.

"Because it carries meaning. You were the one delivering messages before, and she trusts you." He sat quietly, processing the tactical implications.

"No, Uncle. I've got something way more effective!" His eyes lit up with inspiration. "For pickup lines, you needed someone charming and smooth like me. But for apologies, you need someone gentle, sweet, innocent, and completely irresistible. Someone who demonstrates your intentions are pure and your apology comes straight from the heart with zero ulterior motives."

"And who exactly fits that description in our family, genius?"

"How many nieces and nephews do you have in this organization, moron?"

"Watch the language, smart mouth," I warned, but he just stared at me expectantly. "You and Carmen. So what's your point?"

"Which one of us is gentle, sweet, innocent, and completely irresistible to civilians? Okay, I'm irresistible too, obviously."

"Your ego is completely out of control!" I couldn't help grinning at his audacity. "But that idea is pure tactical brilliance, especially if she wears that pink tutu from ballet class. She looks like a tiny angel in that outfit, nothing threatening about it."

"Easy operation. She has class every single afternoon at the same time."

"But how do we recruit Carmen without raising suspicions?"

"Same way you win over any female in this family. Gifts and shameless spoiling until they're completely loyal!"

"You're exceeding all my expectations for this mission, kid!"

"Just be ready to convince Carmen without telling Mom about the real operation. Because if she finds out we're manipulating family dynamics, I'm throwing you completely under the bus."

"Leave Carmen to me. What time does ballet end?"

"Late afternoon." Vincenzo flagged down our server and ordered the most elaborate ice cream sundae on the menu.

"You still have room for that monster after that steak?" I asked in disbelief.

"I'm a growing teenager who needs fuel for intelligence operations!" he declared matter-of-factly, making me realize that despite everything, having family like this made even the darkest moments bearable.

Chapter 273: Unlikely Allies

Frost's POV

I returned to my office at Zenith Systems and dispatched Vincenzo to the upscale shopping district with my black card, instructing him to purchase everything from my carefully curated list plus a special gift for my niece. Handing over that card to a young family associate would undoubtedly prove costly, but I desperately needed his assistance in this delicate operation.

In the late afternoon, I approached Zoe with a fabricated story about a splitting headache from reviewing our latest money laundering reports, requesting permission to leave the family business early. She granted it reluctantly, her sharp eyes studying me with suspicion. The irony wasn't lost on me that I, a Thorne family Capo, was asking my lieutenant for permission to leave before our operations concluded

for the day. However, maintaining Zoe's cooperation was essential to keeping my pursuit of Gemma under the radar.

I hurried downstairs where Vincenzo waited with our family driver Alfred at the building's fortified entrance. Our destination was Carmen's exclusive ballet academy in the safe zone of Thorne territory. When she emerged from her dance class, suspicion immediately clouded her young features upon spotting my armored sedan.

"Uncle Dominic, I refuse to help with any of your schemes! Vincenzo always ends up in family trouble because of your plans!" The girl launched into her accusation before offering any greeting, her voice carrying the authority that ran in our bloodline. What happened to respectful children in mafia families these days?

"Carmen sweetheart, your uncle simply missed you terribly," I replied with calculated gentleness, planting a kiss on her forehead while scanning the area for potential threats out of habit. "Besides, I heard whispers that a certain little princess desperately wanted a brand new tablet with military-grade security features and a pink armored case." I presented the elegantly wrapped package, knowing Vincenzo had spared no expense at the high-end electronics store.

"Impossible! I can't believe this!" She pressed both palms against her mouth, eyes widening with wonder that reminded me of her grandmother's reaction to her first diamond necklace from the family vault. "Is this really mine, Uncle Dominic?"

"Absolutely, princess, it belongs to you," I declared, thoroughly enjoying her astonished reaction while Alfred discreetly monitored the street for surveillance.

Carmen attacked the wrapping paper with the enthusiasm of a true Thorne, revealing the premium device beneath. Vincenzo had selected the most advanced tablet available on the black market, complete with encrypted communications software. Her joy was infectious, momentarily making me forget the dangerous game we played daily. My sister maintained strict policies regarding her children's material desires, insisting they remain humble despite our family's underground empire. Her philosophy held merit in our world where excess could attract unwanted attention. However, I wasn't their father but their uncle, and spoiling them brought me genuine pleasure between family operations.

"Thank you, Uncle Dominic! I adore you!" Carmen embraced me tightly, pressing a small kiss against my cheek with the fearless affection that only family blood could inspire. Yet as she withdrew, her next

words deflated my triumph completely. "But I still won't do anything to help you with Aunt Gemma." She pivoted away and climbed into our bulletproof vehicle, cradling her gift protectively.

Vincenzo clutched his stomach, consumed by laughter while I felt utterly ridiculous. Even a seasoned Capo could be outmaneuvered by a young Thorne. I followed Carmen into the car's leather interior and instructed Vincenzo to occupy the front passenger seat beside Alfred.

"Carmen sweetheart, please assist me in this family matter! The task isn't dangerous or complicated, I swear on the family honor. Am I not your beloved uncle who's always protected you?" I gazed at her with the most pitiful expression I could muster, the same look that had once convinced rival families to reconsider their territorial disputes.

"You're my only uncle on this side!" She responded firmly. Her father possessed two sisters, both divorced after their husbands proved incompatible with family business. "And you claimed you simply missed me. What do you actually want from me?" She fixed me with a stern look while securing her seatbelt, displaying the natural suspicion that would serve her well in our world.

"I require your assistance regarding Gemma Valance." She rolled her eyes with dramatic flair worthy of our family's theatrical reputation.

"Absolutely not! You treated her terribly, and Aunt Gemma is wonderful to all of us. Barrett from my academy behaved identically toward his girlfriend Selena and she suffered greatly." I stared at her, genuinely shocked by this unexpected parallel.

"What exactly do you mean by that?" I grew increasingly concerned about the romantic dynamics at her prestigious academy.

"He held Selena's hand every day during recess, brought her gifts from his family's legitimate businesses. Then suddenly he refused to acknowledge Selena and began courting Lydia instead. Later he wanted Selena back when Lydia's family proved problematic!" She appeared thoroughly annoyed with this young heir. "That behavior is completely unacceptable in our circles, Uncle Dominic!"

"You're absolutely correct, sweetheart," I suppressed my amusement while noting the sophisticated understanding of loyalty she'd already developed.

"Exactly! If you claim a woman in our world, you cannot betray her trust and pursue another. You must first formally release the original commitment with honor." I found myself slightly bewildered by this elementary logic applied to adult relationships.

"Who suggested I behaved like young Barrett?" My curiosity peaked dangerously.

"I overheard mama discussing with grandmama on our secure family line, saying you betrayed Aunt Gemma's trust with that terrible Beatrix woman. Though mama insists I shouldn't call people from other families terrible names." I was stunned into silence! Vincenzo doubled over with renewed laughter in the front seat while Alfred attempted concealing his entertainment behind professional composure.

"Did Barrett seek forgiveness and make proper amends?" I tried redirecting our conversation, though I planned addressing my sister later about both this academy situation and her phone conversations within Carmen's hearing range.

"No, Uncle Dominic. He didn't apologize with honor. When Selena refused his advances, he approached Lola from another family instead! Can you imagine such disrespect!" This Barrett child was clearly problematic for future family alliances. Fortunately, my niece had already assessed his character accurately.

"Carmen, I deeply regret my actions and wish to seek proper forgiveness from Gemma. You've learned that acknowledging mistakes and requesting forgiveness demonstrates strength in our family, correct?"

She nodded with solemn understanding.

"That's precisely my intention, but I need your help to prove my sincerity."

"Uncle Dominic..." I sensed I needed presenting my case quickly before losing her attention to the tablet.

"Carmen, simply visit Uncle Caleb's Syndicate Thorne office and deliver a card with flowers and a small gift to Gemma daily after your ballet classes until she forgives me, which should happen soon with proper persistence. That's everything I'm asking!"

"Uncle Dominic..." This assistance would prove expensive beyond the tablet, I could already sense her calculating mind working.

"If you help me restore family harmony, I'll convince your mother to allow you that guard dog you've wanted, and I'll provide the trained protection animal plus all necessary care." Her eyes sparkled with interest as I'd captured her full attention.

"Besides the guard dog, I want spending money for shopping in the protected districts, and you must personally accompany me there with proper security detail." Carmen regarded me with the serious negotiation skills of a future family matriarch.

I recognized this pattern from my encounter with Lila at the cosmetics store. I was about to be thoroughly outmaneuvered by another miniature entrepreneur with Thorne blood! I exhaled deeply, accepting my fate.

"Agreed! However, your mother cannot discover anything about this arrangement. If questioned, we're spending quality time together because I love my niece and nephew, I need emotional support during this difficult period, and I enjoy spoiling you both appropriately." I surrendered and reclined against the leather seat. Vincenzo and Alfred laughed as though witnessing the most entertaining negotiation of their careers.

"The biggest security risk for family gossip is that loudmouth over there," she indicated Vincenzo with pointed accuracy, prompting my own reluctant laughter. The girl possessed remarkable intelligence that would serve our family well.

"Your turn, Alfred. What's your price for silence and this route modification to enemy territory?" I addressed our veteran driver who'd been heartily enjoying my complete defeat.

"Don't concern yourself, Mr. Frost. Simply guarantee my continued employment and family protection if the boss discovers our activities." Alfred, a gentleman who'd served our organization since my childhood with unwavering loyalty, was trustworthy and never opportunistic. Nevertheless, I would provide him a substantial bonus for this delicate service.

"Consider your family's security permanently assured," I promised him with genuine warmth. "Now, let's proceed to Syndicate Thorne before Gemma leaves Uncle Caleb's legitimate business operations."

Chapter 274: The Little Diplomat

Gemma’s POV

After my evening with the girls at the secure safehouse, I felt considerably lighter. Ivy and I had worked through our concerns about the recent territory disputes this morning, and Hunter had confirmed our movie plans for tonight at the civilian theater downtown.

The encrypted desk phone rang, cutting through my afternoon routine at Caleb’s legitimate front office. Our security detail informed me that Carmen, Dominic’s niece, was downstairs requesting clearance to see me. My stomach twisted with equal parts curiosity and apprehension. Despite everything with her uncle, I approved her visit anyway.

Ivy stood by my workstation when the reinforced elevator doors slid open, revealing that breathtaking little girl. She moved with practiced elegance in her ballet attire, golden hair swept into a perfect bun, those enormous emerald eyes achingly familiar to her uncle’s.

"Auntie Gemma! I’ve missed you desperately!" Carmen practically glided toward me with her dancer’s poise, her voice carrying the refined accent of private tutoring.

"Sweet girl, I’ve missed you too." I wrapped her in my arms, breathing in her innocence that seemed untouched by her family’s bloody empire. "Let me look at you properly. That ballet outfit is absolutely stunning on you."

"Thank you, Auntie! I slipped away from my security detail and dance class just to visit you before returning to the compound," she confessed with that disarming smile that could manipulate hardened soldiers.

"Carmen, meet my dear friend Ivy. She’s dating Don Caleb." Carmen transformed instantly into a perfect little diplomat, extending gracious greetings to Ivy with the poise that came from being raised in a crime family where manners could mean survival.

"Auntie, I brought you something special from the family vault." Carmen presented me with a crimson rose, an expensive envelope with the family seal, and a box of Swiss chocolates that probably cost more than most people's monthly salary.

"From your Uncle Dominic?" I asked, catching Ivy's knowing smirk as she recognized the Thorne family's signature peace offerings.

"Absolutely, Auntie." Carmen released an exaggerated sigh worthy of a seasoned negotiator. "Listen, Auntie Gemma, he's being completely pathetic. I think you should discipline him like my ballet instructor does when the older boys act foolish in advanced class. But then forgive him afterward because he genuinely worships you, and men in our family are naturally stupid about emotions, Auntie."

"What makes you so certain he worships me?" Curiosity consumed my better judgment, though I knew I was being manipulated by a master.

"Because if he didn't adore you completely, he never would have agreed to my negotiation terms for delivering these family tokens." Ivy watched our exchange with barely contained laughter while Carmen continued her explanation with the confidence of someone raised in boardroom deals and territorial agreements.

"What exactly did you negotiate, little diplomat?" I leaned forward, fascinated by this miniature businesswoman who could probably run half the city before coming of age.

Carmen arranged herself elegantly in the leather chair, crossing her ankles like royalty discussing state affairs. "First, he purchased that military-grade tablet I've been desperately wanting that Mom refuses to buy due to security concerns." My eyes widened appreciatively at her tactical thinking. "Additionally, he's persuading Mom to let me adopt a specially trained protection dog from the family kennels, plus providing all care and security protocols, and..."

"There's more to this negotiation?" Ivy interrupted, thoroughly entertained by the miniature Machiavelli before us.

"Obviously! My compensation must reflect the magnitude of Uncle's strategic stupidity." Little Carmen justified her position while I raised my palm for a celebratory high-five, which she delivered with perfect

precision. "He’s also taking me on an unlimited shopping expedition through the family’s protected districts."

"Girl, you absolutely devastated those negotiations," Ivy declared, settling beside Carmen with obvious admiration for someone who could outmaneuver a seasoned Capo.

"But Mom cannot discover I’m assisting Uncle’s reconciliation efforts, understood?" Carmen lowered her voice to the conspiratorial whisper used in family business meetings.

"Understood completely," I promised while Ivy nodded agreement with the gravity of someone who understood family politics. "Care for some chocolate while we handle this diplomatic mission?"

"Must I provide Uncle with confirmation that this strategy will succeed?" Carmen asked with the directness of someone accustomed to status reports.

"Actually, he needs confidence this approach will work, or he’ll abandon our arrangement and try something more dramatic," Carmen explained with the ruthless logic that impressed even me.

"Fair enough! Let’s examine your uncle’s message." I opened the sealed card carefully, recognizing the expensive stationery used for family communications. "I apologize. You represent my happiness. I refuse to lose you." The words hit harder than expected, written in Dominic’s distinctive handwriting.

"What’s your response, Gemma?" Ivy prompted while I considered my options carefully, knowing this would be reported back through family channels.

"Perfect! I’ve got it." I grabbed official stationary from my desk drawer and crafted my reply with deliberate precision, choosing words that would keep Dominic hoping without making promises.

Ivy read my response first, then passed it to Carmen, whose eyes expanded dramatically with the expression of someone witnessing a masterful power play.

"Auntie, that response was absolutely savage! May I document it for family records?" Carmen's request sent us into fits of laughter, and I nodded permission. She quickly photographed the card with her encrypted phone. "Now I must depart. See you tomorrow, Auntie."

"You're returning tomorrow?" Confusion clouded my thoughts as I tried to understand the family's long-term strategy.

"Every single day, until you forgive that idiot or until he surrenders his territorial pride completely." When Carmen mentioned surrender, something painful twisted in my chest, knowing what surrender meant in their world. She headed toward the reinforced elevator just as Caleb materialized from his private office.

"Little Carmen! Hello, princess. What brings you to our legitimate establishment?" Caleb crouched to her eye level with genuine warmth, though his eyes automatically scanned for her security detail.

"Hello, Uncle Caleb. I visited Auntie Gemma on family business, but I'm departing now," Carmen responded with the diplomatic sophistication drilled into family children from birth. "However, Uncle Caleb..."

"What is it, sweetheart?" Caleb's smile carried the indulgence reserved for family blood.

"Your wife is absolutely stunning! Don't sabotage things with her like Uncle Dominic did with Auntie Gemma, understood?" Carmen raised one authoritative finger with the commanding presence of future family leadership.

"Carmen, I suspect Caleb taught your Uncle Dominic his terrible romantic habits," Xavier announced from the doorway with perfect timing, his consigliere instincts always aware of family dynamics.

"Well, here comes our little intelligence expert," Jude added, emerging from the secure conference room behind Xavier.

Carmen gracefully acknowledged each family member individually, then struck a sophisticated pose and delivered a diplomatic wave that would make ambassadors proud.

"Gentlemen, I must return to the compound. Wonderful seeing everyone." She blew a theatrical kiss before stepping into the armored elevator with perfect composure.

"That child is like a living weapon disguised as a porcelain doll," Jude observed with genuine wonder.

"She truly is breathtaking," I agreed, opening the chocolate box to share with the family leadership team.

Hunter waited outside the building when I finished work, looking polished in business attire with his hair neatly secured. He obviously came straight from his law office, one of the few legitimate professionals willing to work in our protected district.

"You look absolutely radiant! Looking at you gives me butterflies every time." Hunter kissed my cheek gently before opening my car door with the careful attention of someone who understood the value of protecting what mattered.

"Hunter, you're incredibly sweet." I settled into the passenger seat as he closed the door with care, his civilian gentleness a stark contrast to the world I'd grown accustomed to.

We planned to see an action blockbuster featuring my favorite actor at the downtown theater, one of the few public venues still considered neutral territory. Hunter handled arrangements like a gentleman, purchasing tickets online plus the premium snack combinations. We simply needed to collect everything at the concession counter without drawing attention to ourselves.

Hunter was retrieving our refreshments when someone called my name, and I immediately recognized the voice that made my blood freeze. I closed my eyes, already anticipating Dominic's inevitable presence and the security complications that would follow.

"Auntie Gemma! What an incredible coincidence!" Vincenzo shouted enthusiastically, forcing me to turn around slowly while mentally assessing potential exits.

I scanned the area carefully but only spotted Vincenzo with Brenda and an older girl I didn't recognize, though I knew family security would be positioned throughout the theater.

"Vincenzo! Movies on Monday night?" This seemed unusual since weeknight outings typically faced strict security protocols from the family matriarch.

"Yeah, Auntie, Brenda and her sister invited me, and since I aced my recent private tutoring exams, Mom decided to reward me with this supervised movie excursion tonight." Vincenzo explained casually, though I noticed the discrete security detail maintaining perimeter positions.

"That's fantastic! What movie are you seeing?" Vincenzo displayed his ticket while they balanced their concession loads. "What an incredible coincidence! We're watching the same film."

"Awesome, Auntie, we can create one big group. Where are Ivy and the family?" Vincenzo searched the lobby expectantly, clearly accustomed to traveling with full security details.

"They couldn't make it tonight. I came with a friend." I gestured toward Hunter at the concession stand.

Hunter turned around and nearly dropped our entire refreshment order. His face drained of color like he'd encountered something that threatened his very existence.

Chapter 275: Orchestrated Interference

Vincenzo's POV

While Uncle Dominic and I sat in the armored Escalade outside Thorne territory waiting for Carmen to slip the message to Aunt Gemma, I grabbed my encrypted phone and dialed Brenda's number. The plan forming in my head needed backup, and fast.

"Hey gorgeous, want to catch a movie tonight?" I asked when she picked up.

"Absolutely," Brenda's voice brightened immediately.

"Perfect. Think you could drag Juliet along? I know she's been stressed with dental school and could use a break."

Brenda paused. "That’s random, but sure. Let me ask her."

Juliet was older than Brenda by several years, but she never made us feel like kids despite knowing about our family business. She was the most laid-back person I knew, which made her perfect for what I had in mind. Pure luck had struck when I spotted that text notification on Zoe’s secure phone earlier mentioning which theater and movie Aunt Gemma was hitting up with this Hunter character.

Carmen slid back into the car, slightly out of breath from navigating the family’s legitimate front businesses, and handed Uncle Dominic the folded note.

"Uncle Caleb, Uncle Xavier, and Uncle Jude all saw me in the executive offices," she announced, slightly panicked. "You better make sure they keep their mouths shut, especially Uncle Xavier. He gossips worse than Vincenzo about family business."

"Hey, that’s harsh even for you, little sister," I protested.

"Mom always says honesty shouldn’t get you in trouble with the family," Carmen fired back with that stubborn chin lift she’d perfected.

"Already handled, sweetheart. I texted them on the secure line to zip it," Uncle Dominic assured her, then unfolded the note with shaking fingers despite his usual Capo composure.

"What’s the verdict?" I leaned forward, catching Carmen’s satisfied smirk.

"Betrayal earns no second chances. If it did, even the devil would sprout wings again," Uncle Dominic read aloud, his voice cracking slightly. "Christ, she really knows how to twist the knife."

"At least she responded, right? That’s something," I offered, though his defeated expression made my chest tighten. Seeing a Thorne family Capo look this broken was unsettling.

"Yeah, something," he muttered.

I barely had enough time to race home to our family compound for the world's quickest shower before arriving at Brenda's house right on schedule, making sure to switch to an unmarked civilian vehicle.

"Hey gorgeous," I said, lifting Brenda's hand to my lips while nodding respectfully at her mother and Juliet, who were lounging in the living room, both blissfully unaware of what my family really did for a living.

"You won't keep them out too late, will you Vincenzo?" Mrs. Sanchez asked with that motherly concern I'd grown used to.

"Just the movie and maybe grab some food after. I'll have them home at a reasonable hour," I promised, then turned to Juliet with my most charming smile. "You're definitely coming with us, right?"

"Vincenzo, you're sweet, but I'm really not feeling it tonight," Juliet said, curled up on the couch in her pajamas.

"Come on, it's that movie you mentioned wanting to see," I pushed.

"What movie? I never said anything about wanting to see a movie," Juliet looked genuinely confused.

I pulled out my phone, typed "Hunter" on the screen, and angled it so only she could see while keeping it hidden from her mother.

"This one," I said meaningfully.

Juliet's eyes widened, and her mouth opened to ask something, but I cut her off.

"Better hurry and get ready so we're not late. Already got the tickets through our family connections."

Juliet shot up from the couch like she'd been electrocuted, shouting over her shoulder to her mom that she'd changed her mind while disappearing down the hallway.

Thank God Mom had let me borrow one of the family drivers tonight. We'd need the speed and the legitimate cover. The moment we were in the car with the privacy partition raised, Juliet pounced.

"How do you know Hunter?" she demanded.

"I don't know the guy personally, but he's going to be at this showing with someone important to my family," I explained carefully.

"Who?" Both girls asked simultaneously.

"My uncle's girlfriend. Well, ex-girlfriend."

"Wait, is Gemma cheating on your uncle?" Brenda's voice pitched higher with shock.

"No, Uncle Dominic made some serious mistakes. They're broken up, but not really broken up, you know? She met Hunter through some civilian friend connection, they went out yesterday, and they're out again today."

"So are they together or not?" Juliet pressed.

"Nothing's happened yet, and if I have anything to say about it, nothing will happen. My uncle needs her back," I said firmly.

"I like this plan," Juliet nodded approvingly.

"Fair warning though, she's absolutely stunning," I added.

"Juliet, Gemma is seriously gorgeous and super sweet," Brenda chimed in helpfully.

Juliet's face fell. "Great, way to boost my confidence, guys."

"We’re not trying to discourage you, just being honest. But don’t worry, Gemma belongs with my uncle. We just need to make sure she and Hunter stay in the friend zone," I explained.

We reached the upscale mall in neutral territory and moved quickly. The key was arriving before them so it wouldn’t look orchestrated. We got our tickets, loaded up on popcorn, and found a strategic corner to wait.

"There they are," I whispered when I spotted them entering, Gemma looking every inch the mafia queen she was destined to become.

"I’m going home," Juliet announced, turning to flee.

"Juliet, what the hell? Why are you bailing?" I grabbed her arm, completely confused.

"Look at that woman, Vincenzo. She’s a literal goddess," Juliet’s eyes were actually watering.

"That’s exactly what my uncle calls her," I grinned. "But what’s the problem?"

"The problem is me," Juliet gestured at herself frantically. "Next to her, I look like a discount store knockoff. There’s no way Hunter would choose me after seeing her."

"Juliet, stop being ridiculous," I gripped her shoulders. "You’re beautiful. Sure, Gemma and her crew are in a league of their own, but you’re gorgeous too. And besides, we’re not letting Hunter end up with her anyway. Family loyalty comes first."

"There are more like her?" Juliet asked weakly.

I nodded, laughing. "Several of them total. They’re all traffic-stopping beautiful and amazing people. The Thorne family women don’t mess around."

Brenda smacked my arm hard. "Ow, babe! I'm just stating facts. But you're the only one who makes my heart race," I added, stealing a quick kiss. "Now let's move before we lose our chance. And Juliet, act surprised when you see Hunter."

We approached Aunt Gemma casually, striking up conversation. The moment Hunter spotted Juliet, I had to bite back laughter. The poor civilian went white as a sheet and started trembling like he was facing down a made man.

"Vincenzo, meet my friend Hunter. Hunter, this is Vincenzo, his girlfriend Brenda, and her sister Juliet," Aunt Gemma made the introductions smoothly, her poise reminding me why she belonged in our world.

"Hey man, good to meet you," I said, shaking his slightly damp hand with just enough grip to let him know I wasn't some regular teenager.

"H-hi there," he stammered, clearing his throat nervously.

"We've met before, haven't we Griffin?" Juliet said coolly, approaching him with complete confidence and giving him kisses on the cheek while he stood frozen like a deer in headlights.

"You two know each other?" Aunt Gemma asked, curiosity evident in her voice, that sharp intelligence that made her perfect for Uncle Dominic flashing in her eyes.

"We've known each other for ages. What brings you here tonight, Juliet?" Hunter managed, still looking shell-shocked.

"Movie night with my sister and her boyfriend. I've been dying to see this one," Juliet pointed to the poster beside us, "so I convinced these lovebirds to tag along and spend some quality time together."

"What a coincidence," Hunter said awkwardly, and I could see Aunt Gemma studying him with growing suspicion, her instincts sharpened by months in our world.

"Right? Crazy how these things work out," Juliet beamed with Robert-worthy enthusiasm.

"We should head in before the previews end," I suggested, taking Brenda's hand and placing my other hand on Aunt Gemma's back, guiding her toward the theater while leaving Juliet and Hunter trailing behind. To keep things natural, I started rambling about how Aunt Ruby and Aunt Lila were planning to move to larger safe houses within family territory.

The girls and I executed our plan flawlessly. Hunter ended up sandwiched between Aunt Gemma and Juliet during the entire movie, barely able to focus on the screen. When it ended, I smoothly suggested dinner at Aunt Gemma's favorite restaurant in the mall, making sure to emphasize how much she loved the place so she couldn't refuse without seeming rude.

But as we prepared to leave the restaurant, I faced a crucial problem. How could I prevent Hunter from driving Aunt Gemma home to her secured apartment? They'd barely gotten any words in during the movie and dinner, so I needed to think fast.

Then I remembered the advanced mathematics materials Aunt Gemma had mentioned lending me recently for my accelerated program.

"Hey Auntie, sorry to be a pain, but could I grab those calculus notes you offered to lend me?" I asked with practiced innocence.

"Tonight?" she asked, and I deployed my most pitiful puppy dog expression.

"Okay fine, but I came with Hunter," she sighed.

"No problem at all. If Griffin wants to see you home safely, that's totally cool. My driver can just follow you guys for security," I said casually.

Aunt Gemma looked at Hunter expectantly.

"I'd love to see you home safely, Gemma, since you came out with me tonight," Hunter said, clearly smitten but having no idea he was dealing with a woman under Thorne family protection.

"Such a gentleman," I said, clapping his shoulder. "I respect that completely. Where's your car parked, Griffin? We'll meet you there."

In our family car, I'd already arranged with Juliet to cover for me with her mom if we ran late, and she'd agreed immediately. When we reached Aunt Gemma's secured building in the safe zone, all of us climbed out and waited by the entrance. There was absolutely no way Hunter could go upstairs if he wanted alone time with her, because we'd be right there the entire time, and I knew the building had family security measures he couldn't bypass anyway.

They exchanged polite cheek kisses, he waved goodbye to us, and drove off into the night, completely unaware he'd just been outmaneuvered by Thorne family tactics.

"Come on up, Vincenzo," Aunt Gemma said, approaching the building entrance with resigned amusement, her keycard already in hand for the reinforced entry system.

Chapter 276: Wrong Soldier Chosen

Gemma's POV

Running into Vincenzo at the upscale shopping center in Thorne territory felt like the strangest coincidence. We were heading to the same movie screening, and if Dominic had orchestrated this meeting, I would have sensed his manipulation immediately. But Vincenzo was accompanied by his girlfriend Nadia and her sister Phoebe, which seemed legitimate enough. The truly puzzling part was Hunter's reaction when he spotted Phoebe among our group. The normally composed enforcer nearly lost his cool, and I could sense dangerous history simmering between them. Another complication in my already tangled existence within the family's inner circle.

Despite the unexpected encounter, I genuinely enjoyed our impromptu group outing. The girls were surprisingly engaging, especially Phoebe with her bold personality and sharp wit that reminded me of the fearless women who survived in our world. It made spending time with my former lover's nephew and a man I was potentially interested in surprisingly comfortable. Still, something felt calculated about the entire situation, like pieces moving on a chessboard I couldn't see.

After the movie, Vincenzo insisted on collecting those financial planning materials I'd offered him during our coffee meeting at one of the family's legitimate businesses. Hunter departed with obvious tension in his shoulders, and the teenagers followed me upstairs to my secure apartment in the family's residential compound.

"Here are those documents, Vincenzo," I said, handing him the encrypted ledgers and money laundering guides I'd retrieved from my bedroom safe. "Now tell me what that coincidence today was really about."

"It was perfect, wasn't it?" Vincenzo replied with an excessively enthusiastic smile that reminded me of his uncle's dangerous charm. "Just running into each other like that in our own territory—totally random!"

I narrowed my eyes, studying his expression for tells. "Are you concealing something from me?"

"Never! But you know I conduct business at that shopping center regularly," he answered, maintaining his wide smile. His expression seemed genuine enough, though growing up as Dominic's nephew meant he'd learned deception early.

Phoebe jumped into our conversation. "These two are something else, Gemma. I was desperate to see this movie but had nobody trustworthy to accompany me. My father finally granted permission for an outing, and since it was my invitation, Nadia agreed to come along. I'm obsessed with that actor's previous work in those crime thrillers!"

"Girl, me too! And wasn't the cinematography incredible?" I responded, and within a while, Phoebe and I were conversing and laughing like we'd been allies for years. Her street-smart confidence reminded me of the women who thrived in our dangerous circles.

After plenty of casual conversation about movies and fashion, I finally asked Phoebe how she knew Hunter. She explained that his cousin worked enforcement for her family's business interests, and they'd met at the cousin's birthday celebration in neutral territory. They went out several times, but her expression revealed lingering attachment and unresolved feelings.

"You still care for him, don't you?" I asked, already certain of the answer from reading her body language.

"I got attached to the wrong soldier. He didn't get attached to me," Phoebe said with a melancholic smile that carried the weight of our world's brutal realities. "It'll pass eventually. But whatever's developing between you two, Gemma, it's genuinely acceptable. Hunter is one of those men worth pursuing in our line of work, so go for it."

"Oh, Phoebe, you're incredibly kind. But Hunter and I are simply allies," I replied, watching my potential romance with Hunter dissolve before it had even begun. Phoebe genuinely cared for him with the intensity our world demanded, while I was merely trying to move past Dominic's devastating betrayal. It wasn't worth causing her heartache over my own healing process.

We continued chatting until the teenagers decided to leave, but before departing, Vincenzo turned to me with that calculated Thorne family charm. "Gemma, are we still meeting Wednesday?"

"Of course, Vincenzo. We'll visit that steakhouse in the business district. Girls, you're obviously welcome to join us," I offered with sincere warmth.

"Oh, the gentleman didn't extend a proper invitation to us," Phoebe teased with mock offense.

"Well, I'm inviting you now. What do you think?" I replied, and they all responded with genuine enthusiasm that felt refreshing in our world of constant suspicion.

After they left through the compound's secure exit, I messaged our inner circle's encrypted group chat. Ruby revealed that Vincenzo had visited the organization's headquarters and shared lunch with Dominic earlier today, but she hadn't mentioned anything about my outing with Hunter—just that I was attending a movie screening. So perhaps it really was a bizarre coincidence in our tightly controlled territory.

Parker shared intelligence about Hunter's history with Phoebe through his extensive information network. Apparently, they hadn't pursued a serious relationship because Phoebe was still completing her education, and Hunter felt they were at vastly different stages of life within the family hierarchy. He thought it better to end things before they truly began, despite his initial strong interest in her potential.

I had absolutely no desire to enter another dead-end situation involving complicated family politics and unresolved attachments. But I wanted to hear Hunter's perspective directly. I decided to invite him to lunch the following day, sending him an encrypted message that he quickly accepted with professional courtesy.

We met at a restaurant outside Thorne territory, deliberately chosen to avoid any interference from Dominic's extensive surveillance network that still monitored my movements.

"Gemma!" Hunter stood to greet me when I arrived, his posture reflecting the discipline of a seasoned enforcer.

"Hello, Hunter. Everything secure?"

"Yes, though our movie plans yesterday didn't quite unfold as expected," he laughed with slight tension.

"Yes, what an extraordinary coincidence in our territory," I commented carefully. "Especially since you have history with Phoebe, correct?"

Hunter sighed heavily. "You already discovered that?"

"Yes, Parker informed me through proper channels. Phoebe's a remarkable woman, and she only mentioned you two had something in the past. Though she still harbors feelings for you."

"Is that problematic?" he asked, looking genuinely disheartened.

"I don't know, you tell me. I'm not interested in becoming entangled in unresolved relationships within our circle."

"I think I'm the one dealing with unresolved complications, Gemma. You have feelings for Dominic. I don't want to become another Parker in your recovery. So perhaps we should remain professional allies." His tone carried defensive undertones that triggered my survival instincts.

I studied his expression carefully. Certainly, my separation from Dominic was recent, and the wounds were still dangerously fresh. But Hunter was being evasive, clearly not completely honest with me about his true feelings.

"You still have strong feelings for her, don't you?" I challenged directly, and he exhaled sharply.

"Phoebe’s just completing her education, constantly socializing. I’ve moved past that stage of life in this business."

"That wasn’t my question. But you don’t need to answer."

"No, I don’t." He was obviously concealing something significant.

My secure phone screen lit up with an urgent message from Caleb summoning me back to headquarters immediately.

"We should end this conversation here, Hunter. I don’t need another man in my life who isn’t completely transparent with me," I said, standing up with finality. "But if you want my advice, don’t lose Phoebe over something trivial."

"Wait, what about lunch?" he asked as I turned to leave.

"My boss needs me back at headquarters immediately for family business. I apologize. But you’re a decent man, Hunter—call Phoebe!"

I left the restaurant convinced that Carmen was absolutely right—men really are impossibly complicated, even in our world.

Chapter 277: His Precious Songbird

Gemma’s POV

I rushed through the steel reinforced doors of Zenith Systems, only to find the entire executive floor transformed into a war zone. Jude intercepted me with devastating news that sent ice through my veins: Max had been taken by rival family operatives.

"Ivy needs you right now," Jude explained, his voice carrying the deadly edge that meant blood would be spilled before this ended. "Dominic’s bringing the girls from the safe house, and Nora’s en route with additional security."

"What's my priority here?" I asked, my mind already shifting into crisis mode, the same survival instincts that had kept me alive in the dangerous streets now serving me in this world of organized violence.

"This place becomes our command center within the hour. Focus on keeping Ivy stable and clearing Caleb and Xavier's schedules completely. Handle whatever operational details you can so they can concentrate on hunting down whoever dared touch that boy. If the workload becomes unmanageable, signal me immediately," Jude directed as I took my position at the fortified desk. He paused, noting my frazzled appearance. "You haven't eaten since this morning, have you?"

"No, but that's not important right now. I can order something to eat while I work."

Jude shook his head grimly. "We need to think strategically about this. Everyone's going to be running on pure adrenaline and fury for the next several hours. We can't afford to have anyone collapse from exhaustion while we're orchestrating a retrieval operation."

"Smart thinking. What should I arrange?" I asked, already reaching for the secure phone line.

"Contact our usual discrete catering service. Tell them we need a full spread delivered within the hour and continuous service until further notice," Jude instructed before striding back toward Caleb's heavily armored office.

After coordinating the emergency catering, I updated Jude and went to check on Ivy in the secure conference room. When Dominic arrived shortly afterward with the protection detail, my breath caught despite everything. Even with my heart still raw from our recent conflicts, his commanding presence affected me profoundly. I'd been maintaining careful distance since our last confrontation, but there was no avoiding him during a family crisis of this magnitude.

I threw myself into the work with desperate intensity, and when the women arrived to support Ivy, I returned to my station to tackle the mountain of rescheduled meetings and cancelled appointments Jude had assigned. By late afternoon, I was so absorbed in damage control that I didn't notice someone approaching until a crystal glass of fresh juice and a plate of carefully arranged food appeared beside my keyboard.

Looking up, I found Dominic standing there, his green eyes intense with concern. "You need to maintain your strength," he said quietly.

"Dominic..." I started to deflect.

"Gemma, please." He moved to kneel beside my chair, his voice dropping to that intimate tone that always unraveled my defenses. "Let me take care of you. Your wellbeing will always be my priority." His thumb traced along my cheek with heartbreaking tenderness. "You're precious beyond measure to me, Gemma. Like a nightingale."

His eyes held mine with an intensity that made my pulse quicken despite everything. "A nightingale?" I couldn't suppress a small smile at the unexpected comparison.

"In the old country, nightingales symbolized divine connection, beauty, harmony, and joy of the soul," he explained, his voice deepening with emotion. "There's no beauty in this world that compares to yours, Gemma. Not just your face, though you're breathtaking. You're the joy of my soul, my hope, my comfort in this brutal world. You gave me something to fight for beyond territory and power, made me want to build something lasting. In a way, you connect me to something sacred." His voice cracked slightly, revealing a vulnerability that began chipping away at my carefully constructed walls.

We remained locked in this charged silence until a small voice cut through the tension.

"I don't care what's happening, Uncle! You made me a promise!" Carmen stood before my desk with one hand planted firmly on her hip, dressed in her pristine ballet costume despite the chaos surrounding us.

I couldn't help laughing despite the gravity of the situation. "Dominic, with everything falling apart around us, you still remembered that?"

"You're too important to forget, my nightingale." Dominic winked, rising to his full imposing height. "Carmen, as soon as this family business is resolved, we'll make that mall trip happen. You have my word."

"You better keep it this time!" Carmen warned with childish severity. "Have you forgiven this silly man yet, Aunt Gemma? I think you should keep him in timeout much longer."

"No, Carmen, he's definitely still serving his sentence," I replied with genuine amusement. "Would you like some food? We have those dulce de leche pastries your uncle mentioned you're obsessed with."

Her eyes lit up as she ceremoniously handed me a deep red rose with an attached card and a small teddy bear clutching a heart-shaped balloon. Dominic settled into the chair across from me, watching with focused attention as I opened the card and read aloud:

"Forgiving the past means giving the future a chance."

I found myself genuinely smiling, contemplating my response while Carmen devoured her pastry, sugar coating her small fingers and mouth.

"Auntie, you can't forget to write back," she reminded me between enthusiastic bites.

"Oh, is that a requirement?" I teased as she nodded emphatically. An idea formed. "Alright, I'll respond, but my answer can only be delivered from outside the building."

Dominic rolled his eyes as I suppressed laughter. Taking a fresh card, I wrote: "Opportunities don't return just because you regret losing them."

"Here you go, Carmen," I said, handing it over as she finished eating. She read it carefully and grinned with approval.

"Auntie, you're absolutely the best." Carmen stood up, ready for her diplomatic mission.

"I'll escort you, Carmen," Dominic said, grabbing a package of snacks. "Deliver these to Brandon downstairs."

"You just want to peek at the note!" Carmen accused with knowing eyes.

"Absolutely guilty!" Dominic admitted with a devastating smile, guiding her toward the elevator.

When Dominic returned after several minutes, he silently placed a sealed envelope on my desk before heading toward Caleb's office. I opened it to find his careful response:

"I'm not asking for an opportunity, Gemma. Those can be manufactured through power and influence. I'm asking for your forgiveness, for a genuine fresh start where I can prove I'll never make another mistake that costs us what we have."

His words were systematically dismantling my defenses.

As the afternoon wore on, I realized I hadn't seen Lila in a while. Concern gnawed at me as I made my way through the secured corridors, checking each room methodically. I finally found Ruby in the break room, her usually immaculate appearance slightly disheveled from the day's stress.

"Ruby, have you seen Lila anywhere?" I asked, trying to keep the worry out of my voice.

She looked up from her coffee, dark circles under her eyes betraying the toll this crisis had taken on everyone. "She's with the security team in the monitoring room. Dominic specifically requested she help coordinate the surveillance feeds." Ruby's expression softened slightly. "That girl has been running on pure determination since this morning. She refuses to leave her post."

"I should check on her," I said, already turning toward the door.

"Gemma," Ruby called softly, making me pause. "Dominic's been asking about you every time he passes through. Whatever happened between you two, he's genuinely torn apart by it."

I nodded, not trusting myself to respond, and made my way to find Lila.

Later that evening, as the initial crisis management began to settle into a more organized rhythm, I found myself back at the reception desk with one final card in my hand. The weight of Dominic's words,

his vulnerability, and the impossible situation we found ourselves in had been churning in my mind for hours.

I wrote simply: "Some bridges can be rebuilt, but only with complete honesty as the foundation."

When Dominic appeared at the reception desk, his eyes immediately went to the card in my hand. Without a word, I extended it toward him, our fingers brushing as he took it from me. The contact sent electricity through my entire body, reminding me of everything we'd shared and lost.

He read it quickly, his expression shifting from hope to something deeper, more determined. "Complete honesty," he repeated quietly, meeting my eyes. "I can do that, Gemma. I will do that."

As he turned toward the elevator, I found myself watching his retreating form, and despite everything that had happened, despite all the walls I'd built around my heart, I felt a small smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

Chapter 278: Make Me Believe

Dominic's POV

I couldn't believe my eyes when I read those three simple words on Gemma's card: "Make me believe." Standing in that elevator as the doors closed, I felt a surge of hope flood through me like adrenaline before a family hit. After days of coldness and rejection from the one woman who mattered more than any territory or business deal, this small gesture was everything. Those three words held more meaning than a thousand-page contract could have conveyed. They were my lifeline, my chance to reclaim what I'd lost through my own stupidity.

As soon as my unavoidable meeting with the family accountants concluded, I raced to the upscale shopping district under Thorne protection. I needed something special, something that would speak volumes about my intentions to win back the woman I'd die for. At the luxury boutique where we sourced gifts for important allies, the manager personally helped me arrange a perfect offering. Twelve delicate red rose buds were carefully positioned around a bottle of Amarula liqueur—Gemma's favorite, which I'd memorized like intel on a rival family—with imported Belgian chocolates nestled between them. The manager secured the elegant arrangement with a silk ribbon, and I attached a card reading, "I'll do whatever it takes to prove I can be the man worthy of your trust."

When I returned to Caleb's legitimate front office, I placed the gift on Gemma's desk like laying down weapons in surrender. The small smile that curved her lips and the sparkle in those dark eyes told me she remembered our night together in my safe house. I felt hope warming my chest like the satisfaction after successfully eliminating a threat.

But my fleeting moment of triumph quickly spiraled into disaster worse than a botched operation. After Ivy and Max were found safe from the kidnapping attempt, the discussion with our security team turned to Roman's recent acquisition of a remote ranch property—land that could serve as either a safe house or a burial ground, depending on circumstances. Without thinking, I mentioned I'd been there recently with Beatrix, conducting what I'd told myself was just business. I looked up to find Gemma standing in the doorway, her eyes filled with fresh disappointment that cut deeper than any blade.

I wanted to explain that Beatrix had called me in hysteria after Gemma caught us together, begging me to escort her to the ranch where she claimed to have hidden assets from her deceased father's estate. I wanted to tell Gemma that nothing happened between us beyond the business of recovering those items, but I had to finish briefing our security detail first about potential threats to the family. By the time I was free, I rushed to find her like a man chasing his own execution.

"Gemma, can we talk?" I pleaded, my voice carrying the desperation of a man whose empire meant nothing without her.

"No, Dominic, we can't. I'm done!" Her voice was flat, final, like a judge pronouncing a death sentence.

"Gemma, I can explain what happened at the ranch..." I tried desperately.

"Don't you think it would be better if you didn't constantly need to explain yourself?" The coldness in her eyes pierced me worse than any rival's bullet.

"Gemma, please!" I begged, my pride as a Capo crumbling like dust.

"Dominic, I'm working. Now is not the time."

"I’m going to sit in that chair, Gemma, and wait until you finish your work, but I will explain myself." I settled into the reception area like a soldier maintaining position under fire, determined not to retreat without clearing the air.

Just when I thought things couldn’t get worse than a federal investigation, my mother appeared. She’d come to support Caleb during the crisis, but couldn’t resist taking calculated shots at me about my "complicated romantic situation" like she was discussing a failed business venture. I watched Gemma grow increasingly furious with each passing moment, her anger building like pressure before an explosion.

When I finally caught her alone on the fire escape—a location we used for sensitive conversations that couldn’t risk surveillance—I couldn’t help grabbing her arm. Touching her felt like returning to sacred ground, but the disappointment in her eyes was unbearable. For the remainder of our time at Caleb’s company, Gemma didn’t miss a single opportunity to call me a worthless piece of trash and display her anger with the precision of a skilled interrogator.

Exhausted but determined like a soldier planning his next campaign, I left with a strategy forming in my mind. Thanks to Zoe clearing my schedule for the rest of the week—rescheduling meetings with money launderers and arms dealers alike—I had time to execute the most important operation of my life: winning back Gemma. I would start at Caleb’s engagement dinner the next day and wouldn’t leave her side until she forgave me or put a bullet in my head.

True to my word, I arrived at Gemma’s apartment the following evening with a bouquet of red roses that cost more than most people’s monthly salary. The building security still had me on the approved list despite everything, so I went straight up and rang her doorbell like I was announcing my surrender.

"What are you doing here?" she frowned when she opened the door, looking like an avenging angel in her form-fitting dress.

"I came to escort you to dinner!" I flashed my most disarming smile, the one that usually worked on business associates and enemies alike.

"You wasted your time. Jude is picking me up," she said, turning her back and walking into the apartment with the confidence of someone who knew they held all the power. I followed, closing the door behind me like I was sealing my fate.

"No, he’s not, my goddess. You’re coming with me tonight." I held out the roses, which she accepted with a sigh that suggested I might not be completely beyond redemption.

"I’m only accepting these because the flowers aren’t responsible for your stupidity," she muttered, heading to the kitchen to find a vase. I trailed behind her like a loyal soldier, admiring how stunning she looked in her aqua dress that hugged every dangerous curve.

When she finished arranging the flowers in the living room with the precision of someone accustomed to creating order from chaos, I pulled her against my chest. "You’re absolutely beautiful," I whispered before capturing her lips with mine, putting everything I had into that kiss like my life depended on it.

I kissed her with all the passion and desperation of a man who’d realized too late what truly mattered, pouring all my longing and devotion into that connection. To my amazement, Gemma responded, her hands finding their way to my neck as she kissed me back with equal intensity. When we finally broke apart, both breathing hard, she handed me a tissue along with her lipstick and a small mirror. After touching up her own lipstick with practiced efficiency, she looked at my confused expression.

"Clean the smeared lipstick off your mouth," she instructed with the authority of someone used to giving orders that mattered.

"Hell no! I want everyone at that dinner to know you’ve been kissing me!" I grinned foolishly, feeling like I’d just won a war.

"Clean that lipstick off if you don’t want to show up at Caleb’s engagement party looking like you lost a fight! And if you actually want me to accompany you."

My triumphant smile faded as I complied, wiping away the evidence of our kiss with the reluctance of someone destroying precious evidence. When I opened the car door for her, she reached up and cleaned a spot I’d missed, her thumb brushing the corner of my mouth with a touch that sent electricity through my entire body like a shock from a live wire.

"Now you look presentable. Come on, let’s go handle this evening," she said with newfound authority that made my blood run hot. I had to admit, I was completely addicted to this commanding side of her.

After the dinner concluded and the engagement was properly celebrated with champagne that cost more than most cars, I caught Gemma by the arm as she tried to make her escape. "No way, beautiful, you came with me, you're leaving with me. Let's go!" I whispered in her ear with the finality of a business decision.

I drove deeper into the exclusive complex where Caleb lived, stopping five hundred meters past his mansion in front of another impressive residence that looked like it belonged to someone with serious money and connections. I activated the garage door with a remote and pulled my car inside like we were entering a fortress.

"Oh my god, what now, Dominic?" Gemma rolled her eyes, making me laugh despite the nervousness eating at my gut like acid.

I helped her out of the car, took her hand like I was making the most important deal of my career, and led her to the front door. As I opened it and guided her inside, I hoped this gesture would convey how deeply sorry I was and how committed I was to making things right between us. But Gemma just stood frozen at the entrance, stunned into complete silence by what she saw before her.

Chapter 279: Roses and Tears

Gemma's POV

Dominic guided me through the entrance, and I stopped dead in my tracks. The spacious interior took my breath away—not from any lavish furnishings, but because the entire house had been transformed into something from a dream. Countless red roses filled every corner, soft candlelight cast warm shadows across the walls, and heart-shaped balloons drifted along the ceiling like silent sentinels.

The living room's center showcased plush cream carpets surrounded by vibrant cushions of every size. A small table held fresh strawberries, imported chocolates, and champagne cooling in a silver bucket. Dominic was recreating one of our most treasured nights together, but he'd elevated it to something magnificent.

"Whose safe house is this?" I asked, still absorbing the breathtaking scene around me.

"Ours," Dominic replied, moving closer with that predatory grace typical of Thorne family enforcers.

"I don’t understand," I said, my mind struggling to process his meaning.

Dominic’s expression softened as he explained, "Gemma, I purchased this property several years ago, before Caleb lost his parents to that rival family hit. My crew was stationed here temporarily, and I was considering relocating my operations closer. But I never actually moved in because something crucial was missing."

"Obviously—furniture and proper security systems!" I quipped, crossing my arms defensively.

He chuckled at my deflection. "You know resources have never been an issue for someone in my position." After a pause, his voice grew more serious, "What was missing was the woman I love, someone who could make this place feel like home instead of just another safe house."

"But you already had that snake Beatrix in your life!" The words escaped before I could stop them.

"She was never the woman I truly loved," he said, his eyes holding mine with the same intensity he reserved for family business.

"What exactly do you want from me, Dominic?" I asked, anxiety creeping up my spine like ice.

"I want you back—for good. I want us to share this house, raise our children here, build something real together. I want to prove to you every single day how deeply I regret my mistakes and swear on my honor never to betray you again." His arms encircled me with surprising gentleness for hands that had spilled blood.

"Dominic..." I began, but he silenced me with a tender kiss that ended far too soon.

"I love you, Gemma. Please give me another chance to earn your trust." His voice carried a vulnerability that the brutal Capo never showed to anyone else.

"I don’t know if I can," I admitted, looking away from those emerald eyes.

"You'll never know unless you try," he said, hope flickering across his dangerous features.

"Can I see the rest of the house?" I offered a tentative smile, which he returned with genuine warmth.

"It's all yours, beautiful." Dominic took my hand as we began exploring.

The house was stunning—modern architecture with bulletproof windows and rich hardwood floors throughout. Every room had been meticulously decorated with roses, balloons, and candles. The effort must have been enormous considering the property's size, not to mention coordinating his crew to set this up without compromising security. We spent a considerable time exploring each room, discussing possibilities of starting fresh away from the constant violence.

When we returned to the living room, Dominic helped me settle onto the cushions, poured champagne for both of us, and sat beside me, gently running his fingers through my hair.

"Why did you set this up in the living room instead of the master bedroom?" I asked curiously.

"Because I need you to understand that I want more than just physical intimacy. Had I chosen the bedroom, you might have thought I only wanted your body. But I want all of you in my life." Dominic smiled as he raised his glass. "Besides, the sunrise view from here is incredible."

"Strategic thinking," I said, narrowing my eyes. "But who said I'm staying until sunrise?"

"Hope dies last, Gemma," he replied with that subtle smirk that made him so dangerous in negotiations.

"What exactly do you want from me, Dominic?"

"I told you—a fresh start. I want you in my life every day from now on. I want you to bear my children. I want to be the man you can depend on through both the easy times and when rival families come for us. I want your love and trust. I want to be the love of your life, because you're already mine." His words nearly knocked the breath from my lungs.

"Remember to breathe, Gemma," he added softly.

"You’re quite ambitious for a man who chose another woman over me," I said, making him wince.

"Yes, and stubborn too." He took my hand and pressed a gentle kiss to my palm.

"What if I can’t forget what happened with her?" I asked, feeling tears threatening.

"That’s why we’re here tonight—to talk through everything, to answer all your questions, and to put your doubts to rest," he said with the patience of someone accustomed to high-stakes negotiations.

"I thought we were here for other reasons," I teased.

"My beautiful girl, nothing would please me more than losing myself in you, but I refuse to touch you that way before we’ve resolved everything between us," Dominic sighed. "You drive me to distraction, but I won’t make love to you until you’ve truly forgiven me. And when I undress you next time, it won’t be just physical—it’ll be complete surrender."

The man certainly knew how to use words like weapons. But I needed to stay strong, regardless of how much I desired and loved this dangerous man. I needed complete understanding before I could truly forgive him.

"Why did you believe that photograph, Dominic? Why didn’t you come to me first?" I asked, the pain still sharp in my chest.

"Because Marcus has always poisoned my thoughts and controlled my decisions," Dominic sighed heavily. "Gemma, it’s always easier to believe betrayal when it’s what you’ve been conditioned to expect. He’s spent years undermining me, making me question my own judgment, finding ways to make me doubt everyone around me..."

Dominic’s eyes glistened with unshed tears, compelling me to run my fingers through his hair. His father represented an infected wound in his heart, and despite his fearsome reputation in the family, he suffered deeply from this toxic relationship.

"My father operates the same way—selfish, manipulative, narcissistic," I began speaking without filtering my thoughts. "He never genuinely loved me, though as a child, I believed fathers naturally loved their children. Eventually, I realized he was using me as a weapon against my mother. In his twisted mind, he enjoyed watching her suffer. I’ll never comprehend that mentality. But once I understood he didn’t love me, I cut him out completely. It hurt, but watching my mother’s pain was worse."

"Exactly," Dominic growled disapprovingly. "Society teaches us that family bonds are sacred."

"Right. Sometimes we remain trapped in toxic family dynamics that bring us nothing but harm, simply because we’ve internalized these concepts so deeply that we force ourselves to endure the abuse," I concluded.

"Marcus is poison, Gemma. And I refuse to become like him. Help me," Dominic pleaded, a tear sliding down his handsome face.

"I can’t save you, Dominic. That’s not possible. But I can stand beside you and hold your hand when he gets in your head. For that to work, though, you need to trust me more than you trust his manipulations," I said, meeting his gaze.

"I’ve learned my lesson. I don’t make the same mistake twice," Dominic assured me with conviction that made me believe him.

"Why did you go to Beatrix?" I needed complete clarity.

"Gemma, Beatrix is like those socialite daughters of rival families—always appearing where she’s not wanted. We have history, and before you, she would occasionally show up and we’d have casual encounters, but I always made it clear it meant nothing serious," Dominic explained, repeating his earlier confession.

"I understand that part, but why after me?" I pressed.

"Because I was an idiot. I felt wounded and angry. She appeared at my lowest moment, and I thought returning to old patterns might hurt less than the agony of losing you. I was trying to protect myself from further pain," Dominic answered honestly.

"And you were in agony?"

"I am in agony," he emphasized. "From the moment I started leaving those notes at your workplace until we became lovers, I fell completely. I can't explain when it happened or adequately describe what I feel, but it burns in me like fire. I love you, Gemma. That's why Marcus's trap cut so deep, why I reacted so poorly, and why I didn't have the courage to face you afterward."

"That brings me to my next question—why didn't you end things with me before being with her?"

"Because I couldn't bear hearing you confirm that he was right about me, and I couldn't face the pain of losing you or hearing you say goodbye," Dominic admitted as tears flowed freely.

"He could never be right about you," I assured him.

"He's always convinced me otherwise, made me believe his version of who I am," Dominic said, his eyes reflecting distant painful memories.

I pulled him into an embrace, feeling his tears dampen my shoulder. This powerful man who commanded respect and fear throughout the underworld was, in this moment, just a vulnerable soul seeking comfort.

We lost track of time holding each other. While he battled his demons, I wrestled with my own doubts. Could I truly forgive him and heal from the betrayal that still ached in my heart?

Chapter 280: Dawn of Forgiveness

Dominic's POV

Gemma and I remained locked in our embrace for what felt like hours. My mind drifted through memories I'd buried deep—painful recollections of blood, betrayal, and the father who'd destroyed everything our family had built. These were secrets I'd never shared with another soul, wounds that festered in the darkness of my position as Capo. Yet somehow, feeling her arms around me, offering silent understanding, began to heal those raw scars Marcus had carved into my psyche.

When we finally separated, I gazed into her eyes with absolute conviction. If not her, then no one would ever stand beside me in this brutal world, helping me overcome the shadows of my past in the Thorne organization.

"Come back to me, Gemma, forever," I whispered, voice barely audible above the distant sounds of the harbor.

"Dominic..." she exhaled softly. "After I caught you together, did you really go to that horse ranch with her?"

"Yes." Truth was agony but necessary between us.

"Why would you go?" Her question carried the weight of everything we'd been through.

"Because she sent me a voice message claiming rival forces had put a price on her head and she was going to overdose rather than face their interrogation. She threatened to kill herself if I didn't meet her. I can show you the recording."

"I don't need to see it." Gemma turned away, crossing her arms defensively against the morning chill.

"Gemma, I don't have feelings for her, but I couldn't ignore a death threat against someone connected to family business. I'd been involved with her for years when she worked the high-stakes games at Social Union," I confessed, knowing it wouldn't help my case but needing complete transparency. "The very least I could do was assess the situation and offer protection as a former associate." I emphasized those last words deliberately. "Nothing more."

"Just that?"

"Just that," I confirmed without hesitation. "I found her at her usual spa with her accounts frozen by federal investigation. I paid her tab and got her out before the Feds could trace the connection back to our operations. Can you imagine the exposure risk if she'd been arrested at a place where everyone knows she's connected to our circles?"

"Don't expect sympathy from me!" Gemma snapped.

"I'm asking for understanding," I clarified. "After the spa, I drove her to her father's import business, where she discovered the Feds had seized everything in a RICO investigation. She completely broke down, and her father was too busy destroying evidence to deal with her emotional state. He dismissed her without consideration for the danger she'd face alone."

"So?"

"So I was going to take her to a safe house, but she begged me to go to the ranch instead, claiming she needed to retrieve something valuable before the federal seizure. I agreed because I needed to ensure nothing there could compromise our money laundering operations."

"And then what happened?"

"Damn it, Gemma!" My frustration surfaced with the edge that came from years of commanding soldiers. "Nothing happened between us, understand? We spent the afternoon there while she collected whatever personal items she could salvage, and then I dropped her at a secure location. That's the entire story, I swear on my position in this family!"

"I need more wine." That's all Gemma said.

"We've already finished a bottle!" I pointed out.

"I don't care! Figure it out! I want more wine!" Her anger was unmistakable, and I recognized the dangerous tone.

"You're meeting Zoe and the girls in a few hours for Ivy's wedding preparations," I reminded her, hoping to dissuade her from further drinking.

"And you'll make sure I wake up ready, beautiful, and hangover-free, but right now I-WANT-MORE-WINE!" Her volume increased, and I knew better than to argue with justified fury from the woman I'd nearly lost.

I retrieved another bottle from the wine cooler in my penthouse kitchen. When I returned, she was staring blankly at the harbor lights. I filled her glass, which she emptied in one continuous gulp, then gestured for a refill. After her second glass from the new bottle, the alcohol's effects were becoming evident.

"When does this damn sun actually rise?" Gemma asked, her irritation softening into something I found endearingly vulnerable.

"It's already the early morning hours; sunrise will be soon." I pulled her close, and we sat embracing in comfortable silence, the weight of family business temporarily forgotten.

She finished the second bottle entirely by herself. Her eyes were heavy, fighting to stay open as the first rays of sunlight appeared over Port Serenity. Looking down at her head against my chest, I noticed her eyes sparkle and a smile spread across her face.

The sun performed its daily miracle, lazily climbing the sky, transforming darkness into brilliant light, heralding a new day and renewing my hopes—after all, she was here in my arms, wasn't she? Yes, she was. She nestled closer, and gradually her eyes closed as she drifted into deep slumber.

I held her tighter, kissed her forehead, and sighed contentedly. This woman was my personal salvation. I fell asleep surrounded by her scent and the warmth of my sun against my skin.

Our rest was brief. By mid-morning, I had to wake her—we had commitments to help with Ivy and Caleb's wedding preparations. As expected, she woke with a severe hangover, so I provided her with headache medication, anti-nausea tablets, and an antacid, all washed down with fresh orange juice.

"Can you even stand?" I asked gently.

"Ughh..." she groaned. "Yes. Why did you let me drink so much?" I couldn’t help laughing.

"Because you were angry with me," I said, holding her close and giving her a quick kiss. "And I’d do anything, absolutely anything for you!"

"I wanted to drink, but not get hungover." She rested her head against my chest.

"Songbird, those two things don’t go together, especially with that quantity." I smiled, kissing the top of her head. "Come on, breakfast will help."

I’d prepared an omelet, fresh fruit, orange juice, coconut water, and black coffee. She ate and drank the juice and coffee.

"Songbird, drink the coconut water to rehydrate yourself."

"I don’t want to," she replied childishly.

"But you need it." She reluctantly took the glass and drank.

"Let’s go, I’ll drive you home to get ready. Zoe will pick you up there."

"I still haven’t forgiven you," she said with a pout.

"I know, but I’ll keep trying."

"You’re impossible." Her small smile emerged, and I couldn’t resist giving her another quick kiss.

The day passed without communication from Gemma. That evening was poker night at Xavier's apartment, but I needed to see her beforehand. So I stopped at her apartment before heading to our consigliere's bachelor celebration.

"What do you want, Dominic? I need proper sleep tonight," Gemma said, opening the door in short leopard-print pajamas.

I entered, closed the door, pulled her into my arms, and kissed her deeply, passionately. When we separated, we were both breathless.

"Just needed to see you before sleeping," I said, caressing her face.

"I still haven't forgiven you," she reminded me.

"I know. But I'll keep trying." My smile triggered her own.

"I'll pick you up tomorrow at ten for the wedding," I said, holding her tightly.

"I'm not going with you!" she protested without releasing me.

"Don't start! We're the godparents, and you're absolutely going with me." I smiled while inhaling the scent of her hair.

"Fine. Are you attending Xavier's thing?"

"Yes, he's organized a poker game as his bachelor celebration," I explained.

"Hmm. You'll need to pick me up at eight. Zoe arranged breakfast at Caleb's penthouse. We'll go together from there to the wedding venue," she informed me.

"Zoe ruined my plans!" I pretended disappointment. "But I'll be here at eight."

My phone rang, which I ignored. I kissed Gemma again, but the phone persisted. When I checked the screen and declined the call, it rang once more, and Gemma caught a glimpse of the caller.

"Seriously, Dominic?" She pulled away angrily.

"It’s not my fault, Gemma," I defended.

"Why haven’t you blocked that woman’s number yet?"

"I’ll block it now." I drew her close for another kiss. "Get some rest now."

After getting into my car, I received a message from Elza claiming Beatrix was at Social Union threatening to overdose on pills in the high-stakes room. Exactly what I didn’t need tonight.

I called both women but got no answer. I tried Beatrix’s father without success. Frustrated, I struck the steering wheel; I’d have to go to the club.

Upon arrival, I found Beatrix and Elza in the parking lot beside Elza’s car. Spotting me, Beatrix rushed over and flung herself at me.

"Baby! I knew you cared! You love me!"

I struggled to detach Beatrix from my neck. "What’s going on here, Beatrix?" I demanded angrily.

"I knew you’d come! You do care. You love me!" she repeated, revealing the manipulation.

"I despise you both! I can’t believe you’d fabricate such a story to lure me here." Furious, I stormed back to my car. "Don’t ever contact me again!"

I sped away with tires squealing, completely unaware that the damage was already done.