Mafia Mask 281

Chapter 281: Wedding Day Reckoning

Gemma's POV

After Dominic left, I remained in bed, contemplating my next move. Perhaps forgiving him at Ivy and Caleb's wedding would be the perfect symbolic gesture to restart our relationship with the Thorne family's blessing.

The sudden beep of my phone interrupted my thoughts. I reached for it on the nightstand, unprepared for what awaited me. An unknown number had sent a photo that felt like a dagger to my heart—Dominic with his arms wrapped around Elza, wearing the exact same clothes he'd had on when leaving my house earlier. The background revealed they were at the Social Union parking lot, one of the family's underground gambling establishments. Today. Right after seeing me.

Rage bubbled up inside me. That lying, cheating Capo! After everything we'd been through, after all his blood oaths and declarations of protection, he'd gone straight to that mafia princess. I was done shedding tears over him. Instead of crying, I made myself some tea, returned to bed, and somehow managed to fall asleep despite the storm of emotions inside me.

The next morning, I woke with determination. I got ready quickly, packed my things, called a taxi, and headed straight to Ivy's house under the protection of Thorne family security. My first act of independence was turning off my phone completely.

It didn't take long before Zoe's phone started ringing.

"What do you want, man-whore?" she answered bluntly. Dominic was calling, predictably. "Yeah, she's here. What did you do this time?" She paused, listening. "Oh, you don't know? Well, then keep not knowing. But listen carefully, today is Ivy and Caleb's wedding, so behave yourself. When Gemma wants to talk to you, she will." She hung up and turned to me. "Spill it, Gemma."

"There's nothing to spill, Zo. Let's focus on Ivy's wedding," I forced a smile that felt like it might crack my face.

Ivy stepped in, her authority as the Don's wife evident in her tone. "Is this how you consider us your family? I already feel terrible that you've gone through so much alone in this dangerous world. Are you going to keep shutting us out?"

"Oh, Ivy..." Her words broke through my defenses.

I ended up telling them everything—how I'd been ready to forgive Dominic until that damning photo arrived in my messages. I showed them the evidence on my phone.

Nora studied it carefully. "Don't you think you might be jumping to conclusions just like Dominic did with that setup his father orchestrated?"

"But the photo is right here, Nora," I argued. "There's nothing to doubt."

"But he also had a photo of you with his father that wasn't what it seemed," Lila pointed out gently. "These family betrayals run deep."

Ivy leaned forward, her experience with mafia politics evident. "Gemma, in my experience dealing with rival families and traitors, that trio of snakes lies, deceives, invents, and does anything to grab what's ours. I recommend you investigate before making any decisions."

"I just think the girls are right," Ruby added, "but you need to stay alert with that snake Elza hovering around your Capo."

Zoe, always practical with her intelligence network, offered a solution. "Gemma, here's what we'll do. I'll ask the Social Union manager for the security footage right now. After the wedding, we'll sort this out. But think about it and don't rush. Dominic's a ruthless killer, but the way he's been about you, I don't believe he'd fall into temptation."

I nodded reluctantly. "Alright, you're right. But now, let's focus on what's important today..."

The rest of breakfast passed peacefully under the watchful eyes of Thorne family guards. We headed to the wedding venue, a fortified estate that could host a proper mafia celebration. Watching Ivy's

excitement was beautiful. We helped each other with makeup and hair, laughing and enjoying the special day.

My dress was stunning—bright orange with lightweight fabric and a flowing skirt that featured a daring V-neckline, delicate straps, and a thigh-high slit. I paired it with elegant black strappy sandals that completed the look perfectly. The hidden security detail blended seamlessly into the background.

When we finally emerged into the garden, the men were already lined up waiting for us, looking imposing in their tailored suits that concealed their weapons. Zoe immediately slipped into her organizational mode, directing everyone into position with military precision.

"Little June, come here," Zoe called to Lila.

"Yes, general!" Lila replied with a playful salute.

"Oh, I like that!" Zoe laughed. "I might want to be called that more often." We all joined in her laughter. "Let me introduce you—this is Daniel Martinez, the detective who found Max and now works exclusively for our family. Remember him from the office?" She positioned Lila in front of a tall, dangerous-looking man whose badge meant nothing compared to his loyalty to the Sterlings.

"Y-ye-yes," Lila stammered, her face flushing crimson.

"Perfect!" Zoe declared. "He’s the newest member of our exclusive circle and will be your partner today."

She nudged Lila toward Daniel, bringing them uncomfortably close. The contrast was striking—Lila petite and delicate, Daniel towering and broad-shouldered with the predatory grace of a trained killer. But despite his lethal presence, there was something undeniably attractive about him.

Following the introduction, Daniel turned his charm to maximum, causing Lila to blush even more intensely. He immediately claimed her, placing her hand on his arm with a possessive yet gentle touch that spoke of his protective instincts.

While arranging everyone, Zoe commented on the height difference between Daniel and Lila. To tease them, I offered to switch partners with Lila. Dominic immediately scowled with territorial aggression, but Daniel firmly refused my offer without a second's hesitation.

As Zoe continued organizing and explaining protocol, Dominic leaned close to my ear. "You look stunning, nightingale," he whispered, placing a soft kiss just below my ear.

"Don't get too familiar," I hissed back.

"What happened, Gemma? I thought things were working out between us," Dominic asked, genuine confusion and hurt in his dangerous green eyes.

"That mafia princess happened!" I replied through clenched teeth.

"What?" He seemed genuinely bewildered, his hand instinctively moving toward his concealed weapon.

"Now's not the time. After the wedding, I'll refresh your memory," I snapped, earning only a resigned sigh in response.

The ceremony was breathtaking—every detail executed flawlessly under the protection of Thorne family soldiers. Throughout the reception, Dominic shadowed me persistently, his imposing presence deterring anyone who might approach, refusing to leave my side despite my best efforts to create distance.

"It's no use, Gemma," he declared firmly, his voice carrying the authority of a Capo. "I'm not letting you go, I'm not giving up on you, and we are going to talk."

"Dominic, this isn't the time or place," I protested.

"I don't give a damn! Whatever happened today, I want to know. And you better tell me before I throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of this wedding." His voice betrayed his growing frustration and barely contained violence.

"Don’t you dare!" I warned. "Let’s sit down. I want to eat and drink something."

We joined his mother at her table, surrounded by other high-ranking family members and their women. Dominic went to fetch me some food, his movements fluid and predatory even in this social setting. As we ate, Bee entertained us with stories about her recent charity work—the perfect cover for laundering family money.

Xavier appeared suddenly, his presence commanding immediate attention as he requested Dominic’s immediate attention on family business. With obvious reluctance, Dominic excused himself. Once he was gone, Bee leaned toward me with a cautious expression.

"Sweetie, I don’t like to meddle in family affairs, but Nadia mentioned to me what happened," she said carefully, her voice carrying the wisdom of a woman who’d survived decades in this dangerous world. "But I’d like to tell you something."

I found myself intrigued. What could the mother of a Capo possibly know about the shadows that threatened our relationship?

Chapter 282: Mothers Dark Secret

Gemma’s POV

Bee studied me with those distinctive emerald eyes that Dominic and his nephew Vincenzo had inherited. Yet hers carried a maternal tenderness that immediately dissolved my tension.

"I’m certain you’ve realized by now that my former husband is absolute scum, correct?" Bee began with startling directness.

I shook my head slowly. "Bee, I cannot comprehend how someone as remarkable as you survived being bound to that monster for so many years."

"Different times, different family codes, my dear," she sighed deeply. "My marriage to Marcus wasn’t founded on love—it was a strategic alliance between two powerful mafia families. As the sole daughter of a feared Don who valued tradition above all else, I was essentially traded to cement his partnership with Marcus’s father." Her voice held no trace of self-pity, merely cold acceptance. "My father was fully

aware of Marcus's countless affairs with other men's wives and daughters. His response? 'That's simply how made men conduct themselves.' He made it clear that if I ever attempted to break the marriage contract, I would forfeit everything—my protection, my status within the family, and most crucially, access to my children. So I endured and survived."

"Until he abandoned the family for another woman," I said, finishing her thought.

"Precisely. Fortunately, by that time, my father had developed Alzheimer's, and the family council appointed me as his legal guardian, granting me authority over his entire criminal enterprise." A flash of fierce pride crossed her elegant features. "When Papa's mind began failing, I refused to allow Marcus anywhere near the power structure. I seized control of everything. Marcus had already squandered most of his inheritance through reckless gambling and failed territory expansions—Zenith Systems was his final remaining asset. If I hadn't taken a stand, supported by Gerard and several loyal capos, he would have left me and the children with nothing but debt and enemy contracts on our heads. Instead, I assumed control of Papa's operations and, with Gerard's strategic guidance, assembled a trustworthy inner circle to help me manage the family's interests."

Bee recounted her history like someone observing scenes from another lifetime—detached yet fully present. Looking at her now—vibrant, confident, commanding respect from soldiers across multiple territories—no one would suspect the steel resolve beneath her gracious demeanor.

"I had no idea you wielded such influence," I admitted with genuine admiration.

"Indeed. I oversee Papa's entire criminal portfolio and hold a seat on Dominic's legitimate business board. After Papa's death, we acquired all of Marcus's remaining shares and expelled him completely from family operations. We paid far above market value, but eliminating his influence was worth every dollar." Her eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "Dominic assists me with the other enterprises as well. I'm preparing for him to inherit everything eventually, with Vincenzo serving as his lieutenant once he comes of age."

"Vincenzo possesses exceptional intelligence and idolizes his uncle," I observed.

"Absolutely. And he has developed profound affection for you too." Her comment warmed my heart unexpectedly. Then she asked, "Do you know the identity of the woman Marcus abandoned his family obligations for?"

"Some young opportunist seeking protection and money, from what I understand," I replied, puzzled by her question.

"No, you don't know the complete truth." Her smile vanished entirely. "Even my son remains unaware that I know." She lowered her gaze, appearing to wrestle with internal conflict. "I've always feared that if Dominic discovered I possessed this knowledge, his guilt would destroy him completely."

"What do you mean?" I asked, growing concerned.

"Gemma, Dominic was barely of age when his father deserted our household. Their relationship was already poisonous. Nothing Dominic accomplished ever satisfied Marcus's expectations, despite being exceptional in every aspect—devoted son, brilliant strategist, ruthless when necessary—he excelled at everything required of a future capo." Bee's voice grew quieter.

"Was he desperately seeking his father's approval?" I asked. She nodded sadly. "I've witnessed how that monster treats Vincenzo, and if he was worse with Dominic, it explains so much about his behavior."

"Infinitely worse. The constant humiliation, brutal punishments—including physical beatings that left scars—cruel psychological games designed to break his spirit... Dominic endured it all since childhood, and I failed miserably to shield him." Tears gathered in her eyes. "I made a catastrophic error by concealing Marcus's true nature from my children. I never revealed the affairs, the humiliation I suffered, his complete emotional abandonment of our family. I believed I was preserving household stability."

She paused, gathering her resolve. "When Dominic came of age, he fell deeply in love with a young woman named Nancy. She was young. Dominic, desperately wanting to do everything properly, introduced her to Marcus first, seeking his blessing. Instead, Marcus seduced his son's girlfriend and then demanded I grant him a divorce so he could parade her publicly."

"That's absolutely monstrous!" I gasped, genuinely horrified.

"And Marcus never loses an opportunity to remind Dominic that his girlfriend chose the father over the son—that he remains superior to his own child in every way."

"Bee, I’m completely stunned."

"That’s exactly why Dominic fought so viciously for control of the family assets. After a brutal confrontation that nearly resulted in bloodshed, he succeeded, primarily because that parasite preferred enjoying life without the responsibilities of leadership. Dominic committed to providing generous monthly payments, but apparently financial support wasn’t sufficient for that leech."

"This Marcus is truly evil incarnate," I whispered.

"Indeed. And he continues tormenting my children. I usually travel extensively to avoid encounters with him, but this time I’ve returned to eliminate his influence permanently. Nadia is devastated by his manipulations, and he’s already inflicted tremendous damage on Dominic’s ability to trust anyone."

"What’s your strategy?" I asked carefully.

"Cutting out the cancer at its source, dear." Bee patted my hand reassuringly. "My son is an extraordinary man—don’t allow him to slip away because of malicious schemes orchestrated by a bitter exile. I must stop Marcus before he destroys Dominic entirely, even if it means exposing family secrets publicly."

"Jude mentioned he possessed the means to bring him down," I offered.

"He absolutely does, and that’s precisely the weapon I intend to deploy," Bee confirmed with deadly determination. "If Marcus continues harassing you, notify Jude immediately—he’ll know exactly how to respond. Jude possesses evidence that even Dominic doesn’t know exists, but I’ll share it with you."

"Is it truly that serious?" I asked. She nodded gravely. "How can I assist?"

"Remain at Dominic’s side, support him through what’s coming—he’s going to need tremendous strength."

"Bee, the complication is that Dominic betrayed my trust," I admitted reluctantly.

"I've revealed everything so you understand what Marcus does to Dominic, how he manipulates his mind like a master puppeteer. Now can you see how that horrible photograph affected him so deeply?"

"I understand that aspect now, Bee, but there's this." I showed her the photograph on my phone—Dominic with that woman. "This was taken yesterday. He's begging for forgiveness, yet he's still meeting with that prostitute."

"Are you certain that's the actual situation, or are you jumping to conclusions like my son tends to do?" Bee asked, her eyes narrowing skeptically.

"Well, Zoe pointed it out to me, and she's helping me investigate the circumstances."

"Ah, the Morgans! Loyal soldiers, honorable people despite their profession. Do investigate thoroughly—I'm confident it's not what it appears. That girl's father has close ties to Marcus—another unsavory character involved in territory disputes. I wouldn't be surprised if this entire situation was orchestrated. They've always wanted Dominic to end up with her for strategic reasons. I've heard the father is facing bankruptcy and potential elimination by rival families too." Bee seemed remarkably well-informed about family politics.

"I'll proceed cautiously, Bee. I promise."

"Excellent! Here comes your gentleman! My handsome son." Her face brightened instantly. "Acquire some treats for the women in your life."

Dominic smiled warmly at his mother and gently caressed my back with possessive tenderness. As he turned toward the dessert counter, I called out playfully: "The women in your life want cake too!"

His responding smile was absolutely breathtaking. Perhaps his mother was right—perhaps he truly was worth fighting for against all odds.

Chapter 283: Truth and Surrender

Dominic's POV

I wanted to put a bullet through Xavier's skull for dragging me away from Gemma. But his revelation explained why she had been giving me the icy treatment all evening.

"Dominic, Gemma knows," Xavier said the moment we entered Caleb's private study, away from the family gathering.

"Knows what?" I asked, completely lost.

"About yesterday. Your meeting with Beatrix at the Social Union," Xavier clarified.

I frowned. "What the hell are you talking about?" I had already briefed the crew about the Beatrix situation when I arrived at Xavier's safe house for poker night.

"It was a setup, man. That snake Beatrix orchestrated the whole thing, and you walked straight into her trap. Elza captured photos of Beatrix all over you and fed them directly to Gemma," Xavier explained, and suddenly the pieces clicked into place like rounds sliding into a chamber.

"How did you uncover this?" I asked, my fists clenching with murderous intent.

"Ruby's threatening to castrate me with a rusty blade if she catches me anywhere near Elza! I had no clue what bloodbath was brewing until I cornered her for details. She told me Zoe managed to keep Gemma from doing something reckless and promised to investigate the situation." Xavier paced like a caged animal. "I'm worried Elza might try to frame me next."

"Stay calm, Xavier," Jude advised. "Now that you know their game, just avoid their snares."

"I need to fix this mess with Gemma," I stated with deadly certainty. "Things were progressing yesterday. If Beatrix hadn't interfered, Gemma probably would have forgiven me by now."

"Whatever you do, don't take her to your penthouse," Caleb warned. "She'll remember the betrayal the moment she steps inside and want to burn it all down with you in it."

"I've prepared things at the estate. I'll take her there again," I told my brothers-in-arms. "I want her to claim it, make it her domain."

"Well, gentlemen, shall we return to our women?" Finn suggested, rubbing his hands together with anticipation.

When I rejoined the family celebration, I spotted Gemma chatting with my mother. They seemed to be bonding perfectly, and my mother had already confessed how enchanted she was with Gemma. This warmed my cold heart immensely.

I approached with a plate full of desserts they had requested, just as my sister sat down with her husband, and my niece and nephew materialized beside us.

"Auntie, you look absolutely stunning in that dress!" Carmen complimented Gemma in her sweet voice, looking adorable herself in a blue dress with ribbons and princess sleeves.

"Thank you, sweetie! You look beautiful too," Gemma responded warmly.

"Auntie, are you coming to the shopping center with us tomorrow?" Carmen asked, executing her plan flawlessly.

"Shopping center?" my sister questioned with confusion.

"Mom, I thought uncle had told you," Vincenzo jumped in smoothly. "He invited Carmen and me for lunch. He said he's been on edge lately and wants to spend time with us. He even promised to take us to the movies."

I immediately recognized their scheme. Carmen was cashing in on our deal, and Vincenzo was cleverly tagging along.

"Your uncle didn't mention anything about this," Nadia looked at me suspiciously.

"It’s exactly as Vincenzo said. I want to spend quality time with my favorite niece and nephew," I confirmed, avoiding further interrogation.

"That’s wonderful, Dominic," Gerard chimed in. "And since you’ll be babysitting my little soldiers tomorrow, I’ll take my beautiful wife on a romantic evening." His eyes sparkled as he gazed at my sister, who finally dropped her questioning.

"So, auntie, will you join us?" Carmen persisted with Gemma.

"I wouldn’t miss it for the world, Carmen!" Gemma replied enthusiastically. At least I’d get to spend the day with her.

"How perfect! Substitute parents!" Gerard exclaimed. "We should leave the little operatives with them more often, darling."

"You’re coming too, aren’t you, Bee?" Gemma asked my mother.

"No, dear, I have other, more intriguing plans," my mother replied cryptically, leaving me wondering what could possibly be more intriguing than spending time with her grandchildren.

For the remainder of the celebration, I stayed glued to Gemma’s side like a bodyguard. When it was time to leave, she attempted to escape with Finn and Zoe, but I pulled her back and dismissed Finn with a wave.

"Not happening. You’re coming with me," I said, wrapping an arm around her waist with possessive authority.

"Dominic, I want to go home," Gemma sighed, looking exhausted.

"I’ll take you home," I promised, guiding her to my armored vehicle.

When I parked in the secured garage of the estate in the gated compound, Gemma huffed and shot me an irritated look. Before stepping out of the car, she complained, "I said I wanted to go home."

"This is your home, Gemma," I declared, lifting her into my arms and carrying her inside like a conquering soldier.

"No roses today?" she noticed immediately, seeing only cushions, rugs, and a small side table.

"Not today," I pulled her closer for a kiss. "Today I just want to talk, clear the air between us."

"Right. Are you going to explain why Beatrix was draped all over you yesterday?"

"Exactly that." I sighed deeply.

"Fine. I hope you brought at least two bottles of wine," Gemma said, settling herself on the cushions.

"Just one. I need you alert to understand everything I'm about to tell you."

"You're no fun!" Gemma stuck her tongue out childishly.

I smiled and headed to the kitchen, returning with wine, glasses, and a tray of cheese and small sweets. Her face brightened at the sight. I poured the wine and began explaining everything that had happened after leaving her house the previous day.

"That's what happened, Gemma. I can show you the message Elza sent me." I pulled out my phone and opened the encrypted app, but the message was nowhere to be found.

Panic surged through me like ice water. I frantically scrolled through my messages, finding nothing. They had planned this perfectly. Elza must have sent a self-destructing message that vanished after I opened it.

"Well, seems like you don’t have the message after all," Gemma sighed. "You know what, Dominic? Sit down. Let’s just enjoy this wine and relax."

"I want more than just relaxing," I said seriously, my voice almost pleading. "I want to kiss you."

"I’m not stopping you," Gemma replied simply.

I couldn’t hold back any longer. The moment those words left her lips, I pulled her onto my lap. She straddled me willingly, and we kissed hungrily, like starving wolves finally given meat. God, how I’d missed this woman!

Gemma urgently unbuttoned my shirt, desire blazing in her eyes like fire. I was completely ready for her, wanting her with every fiber of my being.

"I want to remove your dress, Gemma. May I?" I asked between fervent kisses.

"I’m not stopping you," she repeated, making me chuckle.

I found the zipper on her dress and slowly lowered it. I slid the straps down her arms, revealing her breasts, completely bare for my eyes alone. I caressed them reverently, my thumbs circling her hardened peaks. Gemma had beautiful, full breasts that fit perfectly in my hands. I took one in my mouth while massaging the other, savoring her taste as her body trembled in response. I lingered there, indulging in her delicious curves while she released soft moans of pleasure.

Gemma was breathtaking. I was completely captivated by her beauty. Her eyes remained fixed on me, clouded with desire. I was lost in my hunger for her.

I gently turned our bodies, laying her on the cushions. I pulled her dress down her legs and cast it aside, then slowly removed her panties, my eyes never leaving hers. When I touched her intimately, she was already wet and warm for me.

I positioned myself over her and kissed her deeply, feeling her body responding to mine. A possessive growl escaped me, a primal declaration of ownership. There was no room for thought, only sensation and the certainty that we belonged to each other.

Her hands explored every tense muscle in my chest and shoulders, greedily touching every inch of my skin. I felt the light scratch of her nails on my back, sending shivers down my spine. My entire body surrendered to her, just as she surrendered to me.

I pulled back briefly to admire her, beautiful under my control, while simultaneously controlling every emotion within me, every movement of my body.

I aligned myself with her welcoming entrance, penetrating her slowly as I lowered myself onto her. I captured her mouth with mine, and we began moving together in perfect rhythm, in perfect surrender.

Sensing her desire to set her own pace, I rolled us over without breaking our connection, allowing my goddess to straddle me. Her curls bounced as she rode me, creating a hypnotic vision I couldn't tear my eyes from.

I could only stare at this beautiful, fierce woman who had enchanted me, shaken my world, and dismantled all my defenses, making me willingly throw myself into the unknown abyss of vulnerability, yearning to be loved in return.

Gemma spread her palms across my chest and arched backward, moaning with pleasure. I caressed her breasts before sliding my hands down her belly and between her thighs, feeling her tighten around me in response.

Unlike our previous encounters, this joining was quiet, interrupted only by our passionate moans. The sensations and emotions that had been suppressed during our painful separation now communicated without words.

Gemma leaned down to kiss me, her breasts pressing against my chest as her lips met mine. I held her tightly, maintaining our perfect rhythm, creating delicious friction that brought us to the edge of ecstasy. Between kisses, I made my declaration and promise:

"I love you, Gemma. I'll never stop loving you. I'll be yours forever."

Our movements accelerated sensually, our desire transcending mere physical release. This was pure feeling, genuine love that nothing could destroy.

Gemma captured my mouth once more, and with frenzied yet delicious movements, we reached our peak together. She moaned into my mouth as she climaxed, feeling me spill inside her.

We remained connected, gradually calming our breathing and heartbeats, savoring the warmth of our bodies and the shivers from our gentle caresses.

We fell asleep entwined, perfectly nestled against each other. We awoke with the first rays of sunlight streaming through the windows, making it impossible not to claim her once more with the sunrise as our witness to this profound love binding me to her.

Chapter 284: Making It Ours

Dominic's POV

I woke up with an energy that only came from spending an incredible night with the woman who owned my heart and soul. The prospect of having an entire day with Gemma, away from the blood and bullets of our world, filled me with an excitement I hadn't felt since childhood.

Making my way to the kitchen of our safe house, I started preparing breakfast with the supplies my men had stocked. Just as I was sliding the omelet onto a plate, I felt Gemma's arms encircle my waist and her lips press against my back through my shirt. The sensation sent warmth through my scarred body, a stark contrast to the cold steel I usually carried. I savored the surprise, flipping the last omelet before turning to face her. She rose on tiptoes to kiss me properly, her lips soft against mine.

"Mmm," I murmured when our lips parted. "This fortress must have some kind of magic."

"I think you're right," Gemma agreed, her smile radiant despite everything we'd endured in this violent world. "I absolutely love it here."

"Then I was right all along. This is where we'll build our empire together." I peppered kisses along her neck, breathing in her scent that somehow made the metallic taste of violence fade from my memory. "When do you want to start making this place truly ours?"

Gemma's laughter filled the kitchen, a sound more precious than any of the blood money flowing through our accounts. "Making it ours? I haven't forgiven you yet, remember?"

"But you will," I replied with the same unshakable confidence that had helped me survive countless territory wars. "It's just a matter of time and a bit more groveling on my part. In the meantime, you could start transforming our stronghold. A proper bed in that massive master suite upstairs would be nice."

"I like the cushions just fine," she countered, that stubborn streak that first attracted me still blazing bright.

"So do I, but I'm getting older and my body bears the scars of too many fights. My back demands a real mattress for everyday use," I joked, though the ache from old bullet wounds was real enough.

Her eyes sparkled with mischief. "So I'm supposed to forgive a battle-worn old soldier, is that it?"

"Exactly, which is why you shouldn't wait too long." Her laughter was music to my ears, drowning out the echoes of gunfire that usually haunted my thoughts. "Come on, let's eat. Then I'll take you home to get ready before we stop by my penthouse to—"

She cut me off immediately. "I am never setting foot in that blood-stained place again unless it's to burn that cursed bed." Her expression turned deadly serious, and I was reminded that my woman had spine of steel.

"I'm sorry. You're right." I sighed deeply, remembering the carnage that place had witnessed. "I'll drop you at your place, grab my things from the penthouse, then come back for you. Then we'll pick up Vincenzo and Carmen. How does that sound?"

"Much better," she said, her expression softening slightly.

"I think my accounts are going to be drained by the end of today," I said, earning a small smile from her.

"You made a deal with Carmen but didn't set any spending limits?" She raised an eyebrow as realization dawned on me. "No, I didn't specify any boundaries."

"Oh, Dominic," Gemma laughed. "You're not as strategic as I thought."

"It doesn't matter. Seeing you smile makes it worth every dollar in my offshore accounts." I gave her a quick kiss. "So, will you start making this fortress into our home?"

"I'll consider it. Maybe I'll buy a bed, and you can move your arsenal in right away."

"I'd love nothing more."

My sister and brother-in-law were so desperate for alone time away from the family business that they'd already dropped Vincenzo and Carmen at Gemma's apartment. When I returned after securing my weapons and sensitive documents, the apartment was overflowing with laughter. I stood at the door, listening like a lovesick fool before finally ringing the doorbell.

"This is exactly how I want our stronghold to be," I said, pulling Gemma into my arms when she opened the door. "Filled with joy and laughter instead of the screams that usually echo through our world."

"Good, because I told Nadia not to worry. I'll take care of them today, and they're sleeping over. My driver will take them to their private school tomorrow," Gemma announced happily.

"I'm not sure whether to laugh or cry," I joked, making her laugh.

"Let your sister and brother-in-law have some fun!" Gemma scolded playfully.

"Good morning, kids!" I called out as I entered.

Vincenzo immediately announced, "Uncle Dominic, you're taking us to Aunt Willow's new house after the shopping district."

"Excellent idea, Vincenzo," I agreed. "I haven't had a chance to buy Willow and Ryder a proper housewarming gift from our family."

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

"What matters is that you will," I replied, kissing her cheek while mentally calculating which of my clean bank accounts to use today.

Turning my attention to Carmen, I said seriously, "Little princess, we need to discuss something important." She matched my serious expression with the intensity of a seasoned negotiator.

"What is it, Frost?" The girl's sassiness was increasing daily. Gemma and Vincenzo failed miserably at hiding their amusement.

"Don't call me that! I'm your uncle," I protested.

"Whatever. What do you want?" Carmen regarded me with complete disinterest, clearly having learned negotiation tactics from watching family business meetings.

"Limits," I said, which was enough for her to understand my meaning.

"No way! Absolutely not! You didn't set any parameters when you made the deal, so now, sweetheart, you can sit and cry all you want, but hand over that unlimited black card!"

"You ruthless little thing!" I blinked in disbelief.

"Look beside you," Carmen said smugly. "Are you saying this gorgeous woman isn't worth every penny you're about to spend winning her back?"

"You’re not a child! You’re a business school graduate trapped in a tiny body!" Gemma and Vincenzo were doubled over with laughter while I sat there in mock despair.

"Now I’m curious," Gemma asked, struggling to keep a straight face. "Am I not worth every penny you’ll spend to win me back?" What could I possibly say?

"For you, my queen, I’d give my life, let alone what’s in my accounts," I answered truthfully, catching Carmen’s victorious smile from the corner of my eye.

"Hey, Uncle, I’m feeling left out here!" Vincenzo complained.

"What’s wrong, kiddo?" I asked, already anticipating his answer.

"I helped you with everything, always took your side through all the family drama, and I got nothing." He was playing the victim card masterfully.

"No need to pout. Come on, I’ll take everyone to lunch at that restaurant you love, then let you all empty my accounts at the shopping district," I said, already regretting my strategic alliances. "Tomorrow I’ll call my accountant to declare financial ruin!"

We left the apartment laughing, with my security detail following at a discrete distance. That carefree atmosphere of joy persisted throughout the day, a rare respite from our dangerous world. It was genuinely one of the best days of my life. I was certain that with Gemma by my side, all my days would be filled with this kind of happiness, even amid the chaos of family business.

"Good God, this girl is going to buy the entire district!" I exclaimed, struggling with armfuls of shopping bags while my bodyguards carried the rest.

"Oh, Dominic, it’s not that bad," Gemma tried to defend Carmen, then looked at Vincenzo and me and reconsidered. "Okay, fine, she’s a money-burning machine!"

"Now I understand why Nadia keeps her on a tight leash," I said. "Vincenzo, should we take these bags to the armored car?"

"Yes, please, Uncle. My arms are killing me," Vincenzo complained, despite having already enjoyed his own shopping spree with my card.

"Will you ladies wait for us here?" I asked, noting my men positioned strategically around the area.

"Of course, but leave the card," Gemma held out her hand, and I handed it over with a smile. We were standing near a lingerie boutique.

"Planning to buy something tempting to wear for me tonight?" I whispered in her ear.

"Perhaps," her eyes sparkled. "Carmen, sweetie, it's my turn to use your uncle's unlimited black card." The girl looked up and grinned.

When Vincenzo and I returned, we found them testing beds in an upscale furniture store that had recently opened in the luxury district. The salesman was laughing along with them, clearly unaware he was dealing with the family of one of the city's most dangerous men. Before approaching, I snapped a photo of them hugging on an enormous bed, both smiling with sparkling eyes.

"Come over here, boys, and tell us what you think," Gemma called when she spotted us.

"I love it! It's incredibly comfortable!" I commented, lying down beside her while mentally noting the store's security cameras.

"Can your battle-worn back handle sleeping on this bed every night, old soldier?" Gemma teased.

"My back would be ecstatic to sleep on this bed every night," I replied contentedly.

"Great, because I bought it. They're delivering it to the house tomorrow." I stared at her in disbelief.

"Are you serious?" I asked, breaking into a huge smile.

"You’re moving in today, Dominic. And the only thing you’re taking from that penthouse is your clothes, understood?" Gemma said firmly.

"Understood! I’m moving in today. Vincenzo, you’re helping me," I said without taking my eyes off her. "Does this mean that—" She interrupted me.

"I haven’t forgiven you yet! But this definitely counts in your favor!" Gemma maintained her tough facade.

We continued through the district as she purchased more items for our fortress, enough to make living there comfortable. I was overjoyed, knowing that home would now mean more than just a safe house.

I bought gifts for her parents and flowers and chocolates for Vincenzo and Carmen to present. The boy was such a charmer, already showing the diplomatic skills that ran in our family. We left the shopping district in high spirits, planning to have dinner with Gemma’s parents before I’d drop Carmen and Gemma at home and take Vincenzo with me to handle some family business.

We received a warm welcome at Gemma’s parents’ house. Ryder was technically her stepfather, but I considered him Gemma’s father because he’d told me he thought of her as his daughter, and in our world, family bonds mattered more than blood. The evening was delightful and entertaining, a peaceful interlude from our usual violence-filled gatherings. As we were saying goodbye, Gemma’s mother remembered something important.

"Honey, I almost forgot. The neighbor called, and I picked up your mail. This one looked important," Willow said, handing over an envelope.

Gemma’s demeanor changed instantly when she took the letter. I noticed her becoming tense, her smile forced. Something was wrong, and in our world, unexpected mail often meant trouble. I decided to ask about it later, away from her family.

When we arrived at her apartment, she remained distant. I pulled her into my arms, my protective instincts on high alert.

"I want to stay with you tonight. Can I ask one of my men to handle moving my things tomorrow? I promise it'll be done by morning," I whispered in her ear.

"Okay, I want you to stay too," Gemma hugged me tightly.

"What's in the letter, Gemma?" She shuddered at my question, confirming my suspicions that it meant trouble.

"Let's get the kids to bed first, then we'll talk," she said, taking a deep breath before turning toward the bedrooms.

Chapter 285: Letters of Threat

Gemma's POV

I thought this nightmare had finally ended, but I was wrong. Nick still hadn't forgotten about me from behind prison bars. When my mother handed me the letter in front of Dominic at her apartment, I saw recognition flash across his face. He noticed my nervousness immediately, those sharp green eyes that had learned to read danger in the streets now focused entirely on me. As soon as we arrived at my apartment in the secured building Dominic had moved me to, he asked what was wrong. It was time to come clean about everything.

After ensuring Vincenzo and Carmen were comfortably settled in the guest room and already asleep, I took a quick shower. When I emerged from the bathroom, Dominic was sitting on the edge of the bed waiting for me, his muscular frame tense with barely contained energy. I retrieved the new letter from my purse and collected the previous ones from the dresser drawer before joining him on the bed.

Opening the latest letter with trembling hands, I began shaking uncontrollably as tears streamed down my face. The words were more vicious than before, and this time Nick was threatening Dominic too. Dominic pulled me against his chest, his powerful arms wrapping around me protectively while his hands moved soothingly up and down my back, trying to calm me the same way he did after violent family meetings.

"Let me see that letter, beautiful," he said quietly, his voice carrying that dangerous edge I'd heard him use with his enemies. I nodded, and he placed a gentle kiss on the top of my head before taking the paper. He read it aloud, his voice growing tighter and more lethal with each word: "Miss me, my dark

beauty? You better stop playing house with that Thorne dog. You're mine, Gemma. And when I get out, which won't take long now that I've got friends on the outside, I'm coming for what's mine. You'll be crawling back to me after I put bullets in that bitch mother of yours, that rich boy pretending to be a gangster, and that interfering whore Lila."

Each word he read intensified the cold fear growing inside me. I knew what kind of friends a street thug like Nick could make in prison - rival families, enemy crews who'd love nothing more than to hurt Thorne family interests. The previous letters hadn't been this specific or threatening. I handed the other letters to Dominic, who read them silently while continuing to hold me, his jaw clenched so tight I could see the muscle jumping.

"Gemma, how long have you been receiving these threats?" Dominic asked, clearly struggling to control the violent anger I could feel radiating from him.

"It's been going on for some time. I spoke with the family lawyer who informed the judge, and Nick was transferred to maximum security, which stopped the letters temporarily. But now they've started again," I explained, my voice still shaky.

"And why the hell didn't you tell me?" Dominic's hands were clenched into tight fists, the same fists I'd seen break bones and end lives.

"Because they started arriving right when Marcus showed up and caused all that chaos with the family, and you already had so much blood on your hands. I didn't want to be another target you had to worry about. Then everything else happened with the territory wars and—" I tried explaining, but I understood his fury.

"Gemma, even if every rival family in the city were gunning for us, if something threatens you, I want to know. You can't hide things like this from me! I'm a Capo - protecting what's mine is what I do!" Dominic's voice rose slightly, carrying that commanding tone he used when giving orders to his crew.

"Dominic, look—" I began, but he cut me off.

"No 'Dominic' nothing, Gemma! Damn it! I have an army to protect you. More importantly, we're bound together now - we need to share these things. A psychopath is threatening you from inside a prison cell, and you keep it to yourself?" His frustration was escalating, but I could only respond with a bitter laugh.

Later, Dominic found me in the kitchen and wrapped his arms around me from behind, his broad chest pressing against my back.

"Little nightingale, I was wrong," he admitted softly, his breath warm against my ear. "I should have come to you immediately when Marcus started his games. But I didn't tell you either about the family politics, and look at the mess it created. Now you're saying we don't belong together, and I'm the one begging for forgiveness." He kissed my cheek tenderly.

"Look, Dominic, we had such a wonderful weekend. Today was perfect with the kids. I just want to sleep," I said, turning in his arms to face him.

"Our day was incredible! I want thousands of days just like this with you!" He smiled while holding me close, but his eyes remained alert, already planning. "But for that to happen, we need to talk about all the dangerous things and threats. Let's promise not to hide anything from each other anymore, no matter how deadly it might be."

"You're right," I sighed, knowing he was thinking like the soldier he'd always been.

"Good, because I'd like to know why that crew of women you run with didn't tell me anything about this," Dominic said, grabbing two mugs from the cabinet. He added honey to each and filled them with hot tea, his movements efficient despite the tension.

"Crew?" I asked, amused by his description.

"Yes, you're a crew - well-organized and ready to take over the city. And you have all of us soldiers wrapped around your fingers." He placed the mugs on the table and pulled me onto his lap. I was still laughing when he asked his next question. "When were you planning to tell me that Marcus has been sniffing around you?"

I released a long sigh. This conversation would be lengthy, but it was better to remove all the bandages at once.

"He sent flowers and called. Jude's security team confronted him, and he backed off," I explained, staring at the floor. "The girls didn't tell you because they only found out about the threats and Marcus's games recently. Only Lila knew everything from the beginning. And by the way, my mother doesn't know anything about the family business - she doesn't even know we had problems."

"I never walked away from you! Correct yourself, because we didn't break up. We had enemies trying to destroy us that we're dealing with, but we never broke up," Dominic insisted firmly, his possessiveness showing.

"Dominic, you disappeared and betrayed my trust. So yes, we did break up," I countered. He huffed in frustration, his territorial nature flaring.

"Anyway, we're together now!" he declared. I shook my head tiredly; he was stubborn as any mob boss. "But I can't believe you were dealing with this alone when you have me, your crew, your mother, and Ryder's protection."

"Dominic, Ivy and Caleb were having territory issues, and my mother had just moved in with Ryder," I explained, exhausted.

"And you think they wouldn't have called in favors to protect you? I'm surprised Zoe didn't give you one of her legendary lectures and assign you a bodyguard."

"Who says she didn't?" I rolled my eyes. "Look, I'm not hiding anything anymore. Tomorrow I'll take this letter to the family lawyer, and we'll see what moves he can make."

"I'll go with you. But I don't understand how these letters are getting out of maximum security."

"The lawyer said someone who visits him smuggles the letters out. We don't know who - the envelope only shows the address of the post office where they're mailed from," I explained.

"Can I take photos of these letters? I'll have my intelligence team investigate what they can find. Zoe's network reaches everywhere."

"That would be great!"

"See, if you had told me when this started, we could have eliminated this problem together already!" Dominic emphasized the word ’together.’ After finishing our tea, he washed the mugs and took my hand. "Let’s go to bed, nightingale."

I slept in the arms of this man who had betrayed me and deeply wounded my heart, but who now makes promises of blood loyalty. He takes me to heaven with his touch, wraps me in dangerous protection, and makes me want everything with him. Yet he also took me to hell once, and my heart still fears being betrayed again.

The next morning, we woke early, prepared breakfast, and ate with Vincenzo and Carmen in a cheerful atmosphere. After sending the kids to their secure school, I messaged the family lawyer and arranged to meet him during lunch. Dominic remained adamant about accompanying me, which he did. The lawyer said he would request that the judge open an investigation and thought it was beneficial that Dominic was conducting his own inquiry through family channels.

"Songbird, I’ll pick you up tonight. I heard the security system was installed and my crew already moved my things to the safe house. I want you to see it," Dominic said when he stopped his armored car in front of the legitimate business office where I worked.

"Look how efficient! But I can’t tonight," I replied, watching his smile fade.

"Why not?"

"Because today there’s an emergency crew meeting. Lila has problems."

"And is her problem named Daniel Martinez?"

"The very one!" Dominic smiled at my confirmation, knowing Daniel was Caleb’s enforcer.

"I can pick you up afterward."

"Better not, I’m exhausted. We’ll talk tomorrow."

"Stop punishing me, nightingale!" Dominic said sweetly, resting his head against the headrest. His pleading was endearing. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything you want."

"Why don’t you call me ’my handsome’ anymore?"

"Because we’re starting over, and I told you you’re my nightingale."

"But I also like being your handsome." I gave him a quick kiss and exited the car, leaving him behind with an ear-to-ear smile and the promise of violence in his eyes for anyone who threatened what was his.

Chapter 286: Belonging to Him

Lila’s POV

I was absolutely thriving in my new position within the Thorne family’s legitimate operations. Working at Dominic’s front company had been educational, but being stationed in Don Caleb’s executive offices took things to an entirely different level. My responsibilities extended far beyond typical clerical work—I handled sensitive communications and managed confidential files that required the highest discretion. Unlike my previous sales role, this position challenged my intellect while keeping me at the heart of the family’s carefully orchestrated business empire.

"Little June, your dedication is remarkable. You grasp the complexities so quickly," Jude commended, handing me a stack of encrypted documents with an approving nod. "You already understand exactly how to handle these sensitive materials."

"Thank you, Jude. I’m genuinely excited to be part of this organization," I replied with enthusiasm—until the executive elevator doors slid open with their distinctive chime.

Detective Adler and Detective Daniel Martinez emerged, their official shields gleaming under the office lights. I hadn’t seen Daniel since he’d left my apartment that weekend evening, his parting words still

echoing in my mind. Now here he was, approaching with that devastating smile that made my pulse quicken dangerously. Thank God I was seated because my legs immediately turned to liquid. Standing well over six feet with those powerful shoulders and that irresistibly dangerous face, he embodied everything forbidden that my sheltered upbringing had warned me against. This man completely short-circuited my rational thinking.

"Detectives, good afternoon," Jude hurried forward to greet them, immediately engaging Detective Adler in hushed conversation about recent territorial disturbances.

"Good afternoon, Lila," the gorgeous giant approached my desk, his presence commanding the entire space.

"Good afternoon, Detective Martinez," I managed with forced professionalism, struggling to maintain my composure under his intense gaze.

"Lila, please call me Daniel when we're not conducting official business," his smile was so devastatingly beautiful it made me want to vault across the desk and claim his mouth. Heat rushed to my cheeks as inappropriate thoughts flooded my mind. "How are you adjusting to your new responsibilities, little one?"

"F-fine. And you?" I stammered as his fingertips deliberately brushed against mine while reaching for a file.

"Excellent. Just finished securing the penthouse apartment I acquired in the safe district. How about having dinner with me tonight and inspecting my new place?" Those brilliant brown eyes were practically hypnotizing me with their intensity.

"N-not tonight," I cursed internally as my nervousness made me either stutter helplessly or go completely mute. "I'm meeting the girls."

"Ah yes, the support network, as Don Caleb calls your group," he tucked a rebellious strand of hair behind my ear, his gentle touch sending electricity down my spine. "But aren't those gatherings usually scheduled for earlier in the week? Today's later in the week."

"We rescheduled this week," I managed without sounding completely breathless, proud of my small victory.

"Then join me tomorrow evening. Do you have classes?"

"Yes. And since I'm missing today's lecture, I absolutely cannot skip tomorrow as well," I tried avoiding his penetrating stare, but he gently tilted my chin upward, forcing me to meet those captivating eyes.

"That presents no complications. I'll collect you after your classes conclude and we'll have dinner at my place," his tone brooked no argument. He'd reached his decision and that was final—typical of men in his position of power.

"Ma'am, we need to speak with Don Thorne," Detective Adler approached formally, and I immediately announced their arrival. They disappeared into Caleb's private office, finally allowing me to breathe normally again.

After their meeting concluded, Detective Adler offered professional farewells while Daniel lingered at my workstation, his presence both thrilling and intimidating.

"I'll collect you at the university tomorrow, beautiful little one," he leaned down and pressed his lips to my cheek in a gesture that felt far more intimate than professional courtesy before heading toward the executive elevator.

"Hey Lila," Jude teased from his office doorway, having witnessed the entire exchange. I gave him a slightly embarrassed smile before he returned to his duties and I attempted to refocus on work.

Later, during my coffee break, I returned to find a package on my desk. I found it peculiar that someone had left it without requiring my signature, but perhaps security had accepted it on my behalf. Upon closer inspection, the address label clearly read Ivy's name.

After delivering the package to Ivy's office, absolute chaos erupted throughout the building. The contents revealed a serious threat against Don Caleb's wife, and suddenly everyone was mobilizing security protocols I'd never witnessed before. Before I could fully process the rapidly escalating situation, armed guards were being repositioned, communication channels were buzzing with coded

messages, and somehow Daniel had determined I would be relocating to his protected residence for several days. I hadn't even moved into Gemma's apartment yet.

Arguing with these men proved utterly futile—they'd reached their decisions regarding everyone's safety, and the situation clearly posed genuine dangers that I couldn't fully comprehend. I returned home under armed escort provided by Don Caleb's security detail, hastily packed essential items for an extended stay at Daniel's place, and then met with my girlfriends for emergency consultation. After listening to their collective wisdom, I decided to embrace complete honesty, as we say back home. I would tell Daniel everything about my inexperience, and if he couldn't accept it, he could find himself another woman.

Later that night, Daniel arrived to collect me. He approached with that broad smile that made my heart race uncontrollably. He looked devastatingly attractive in black jeans and a black dress shirt with rolled sleeves and three buttons undone, revealing tantalizing glimpses of his chest. I couldn't tear my gaze away from him.

"Hello, beautiful little one," his lips brushed my cheek with practiced ease. "Shall we go?" I nodded and waved goodbye to my concerned friends.

At his penthouse, he provided a comprehensive tour. The space was expansive, airy, and meticulously maintained—clearly reflecting both his law enforcement salary and additional income sources I preferred not to examine too closely. Though the apartment featured three separate bedrooms, he deliberately placed my belongings in his master suite, making his intentions crystal clear.

"Little one, I cleared substantial closet space for your things," he said, taking my hand to show me the organized area.

"There are three bedrooms available," I pointed out, as if that explained my confusion perfectly.

"So what?" he asked, genuinely puzzled by my observation. I walked back toward the bedroom with him following, then watched as he settled onto the massive bed with predatory grace.

"I don't need to occupy your personal space. I don't want to impose on your privacy," I said awkwardly, wrapping my arms around myself defensively.

"Seriously, Lila? Must I explicitly state that I want to sleep with you? Don’t pretend you haven’t considered it," he stated the obvious truth with characteristic directness.

Taking a deep breath, I impulsively climbed onto his lap and grasped his neck with both hands, looking directly into those mesmerizing eyes. He wrapped his powerful arms around my waist, flashing that smug smile that made me weak.

"Here’s the situation, big guy. I’m completely inexperienced—I’d never even been kissed before you—so yes, I’m absolutely clueless about physical intimacy, but I desperately want to kiss you again," I blurted without pausing for breath. When I finished, I watched his smile fade completely. "I knew it would change everything!"

I attempted to escape his lap, but he held me firmly in place. I struggled against his strength as embarrassed tears burned my flushed cheeks. He maintained his grip while gently repositioning me on the bed, hovering above me and effectively immobilizing me while carefully supporting his weight.

"I was the first man to kiss these beautiful lips, little one?" he asked softly, and I nodded miserably. His fingers tenderly wiped away my tears. "Don’t cry, little one."

"I understand you want nothing to do with me now because I’m inexperienced, so just release me. I’ll stay with Zoe instead," I said, mortified by my confession.

"And deprive myself of kissing those sweet lips again? I want them desperately," he ran his thumb across my lower lip with reverent gentleness.

"You do?" I sniffled hopefully.

Instead of answering verbally, he cradled my face between his large hands and claimed my mouth with his. The kiss began as a simple touch, then he traced my lips with his tongue, nibbled gently, and finally sought entrance. Our tongues danced together in a kiss filled with intoxicating sensations that made my entire body come alive.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, uncertain of proper technique but letting him guide me through each new sensation. Soon I matched his movements and felt his warmth spreading through my entire

being. Something ignited deep within—a tingling in my belly and heat between my legs, accompanied by a pulsing sensation that was completely foreign yet absolutely delicious.

Daniel groaned into my mouth as his body pressed against mine, allowing me to feel his hardness through his pants. This realization set my blood on fire; I couldn't stop kissing him and moaned against his lips with abandon. He responded with increased passion, kissing me more hungrily, more primitively. His hands traced down from my face along my sides, making me shiver everywhere they touched.

He released my mouth to nibble my chin, trailing his lips down my neck while his hands moved upward to my breasts. My eyes widened as I tensed beneath his gentle exploration.

"Relax, little one. I'm simply discovering you," Daniel murmured against my throat. "Don't you enjoy me touching you here?" He lightly squeezed my nipples through the fabric, making my body quiver with unexpected pleasure. "Answer me, Lila."

"I love it," I whispered between ragged breaths, releasing a moan when he placed his mouth over my dress and kissed my breast through the material.

Daniel resumed trailing kisses up my neck until capturing my mouth again with renewed hunger. His hand traveled down my body, lifted my dress, and squeezed my bottom possessively. My body was ablaze, craving something I couldn't articulate or understand.

Without breaking our passionate kiss, Daniel released my bottom and caressed my hip, moving down the outside of my thigh and back up the inside. His thumb grazed over my panties, triggering an intense sensation that made me moan directly into his mouth. I felt his lips curve into a satisfied smile against mine. That light touch against my most intimate area was exquisite torture. When he repeated the motion deliberately, I wanted more—needed more of his touch there with desperate urgency.

He pulled away slowly, nibbling my lips one final time before releasing me completely. I lay there breathless, disheveled, and craving continuation, too embarrassed to look directly at him beside me.

"Little one?" Daniel called softly, his voice rough with desire. "Look at me."

I met his gaze, finding his smile absolutely dazzling as he traced my features with reverent fingers.

"Was that kiss satisfying for you?" I nodded enthusiastically. "Good enough to make you crave kissing me again?" I nodded. "Good enough to make you want to sleep in my bed?" I nodded. "Good enough to make you want to belong to me?" I nodded again without hesitation. "Then we definitely need to establish some ground rules."

Daniel stood and effortlessly lifted me into his powerful arms, making me feel as delicate as porcelain in his capable hands.

Chapter 287: Sweet Revenge

Dominic’s POV

After lunch with Gemma at our usual spot near the docks, I returned to my office at Zenith Systems and summoned Zoe for a briefing.

"So, how did your little reconciliation lunch go with our queen?" Zoe strolled in with that knowing smirk, claiming the leather chair across from my desk like she owned the place.

"Zoe, why the hell didn’t you tell me about those death threats Gemma’s been receiving?" I kept my voice steady, though every muscle in my body was coiled tight with rage.

"Because she made me swear on my life not to, especially after she caught you with that backstabbing whore," Zoe shot back without missing a beat, making me exhale sharply through clenched teeth.

"I can protect her, Zo," I insisted, but she just rolled her eyes like I was some amateur street punk.

"You were a complete bastard to her, Dominic! Get that through your thick skull!" Zoe’s brutal honesty was legendary in our circles. "Gemma’s got too much heart for her own good. If it were me, I’d have had you sleeping with the fishes by now."

"Don’t put ideas like that in Gemma’s head, Zoe," I warned, though I knew she was right.

"Then keep your dick in your pants and act like the man she deserves, Dominic. Otherwise, I'll turn Gemma into your personal nightmare!" Zoe laughed, clearly enjoying watching me squirm. "What's your plan to neutralize this threat?"

"I've got my best soldiers investigating who's sending these letters. She got another one today at the shop. I took her to lunch and we met with her attorney afterward. He's contacting the judge to request an official police investigation," I explained, though we both knew the cops would only go so far.

"That's something, at least," Zoe agreed. "Plus, Lila and the other girls are moving into her building this week, so she won't be alone. And that place has security tighter than Fort Knox."

"Right. Good thing this Nick psycho doesn't know her new address since he's still sending everything to her old place," I noted. "Zo, from now on, I need you to keep me in the loop about anything concerning Gemma. Her safety is my priority."

"Fine, Dominic. I'll keep you posted." Zoe flashed me a rare genuine smile before leaving my office.

Later that afternoon, Xavier called to set up a poker game at his penthouse. Perfect timing since I needed the distraction. But as the workday wound down, Caleb initiated a video call, which was unusual protocol for him.

"Hey, Caleb, what's with the face-to-face? You know these lines aren't secure," I said, forcing a smile at the screen.

"We have a situation." His grave expression made all the blood drain from my face.

"Is Gemma safe?" The words shot out of me before I could stop them, my heart hammering against my ribs.

He looked at me strangely. "She's fine. Why?"

"I'll explain later. What happened?" I pressed, anxiety eating at my gut like acid.

"Ivy received a direct threat. Can you get Zoe and Nora on this call?" The deadly seriousness in his voice told me everything I needed to know.

"Give me a moment." I left Caleb waiting while I contacted the others through our encrypted channels.

When Caleb laid out the details of the threat against Ivy, my mind went nuclear. How the hell did these women keep attracting so much heat? Though to be fair, this particular mess had Caleb's enemies written all over it. But my decision was immediate and non-negotiable. Gemma was coming to stay with me at the fortress. She'd be safe behind my walls, and I'd finally have a chance to make things right between us.

She fought me on it, naturally, but I refused to budge. Her safety trumped everything else. After the girls had their emergency meeting at the Social Union, I waited for her and brought her to our house. Yes, our house, because that's exactly how I thought of it now.

"Are you pissed at me?" I asked once we were inside the heavily fortified entrance.

"Yes, Dominic, I am," Gemma replied with that fire in her eyes that made me want to pin her against the wall.

"But why? I'm just trying to keep you breathing!" My defense fell on deaf ears.

"Dominic, this place looks like a damn mausoleum. If you're going to live here, it needs some life in it," she said, abruptly changing subjects. "I already told you that."

"Then hire some fancy decorator." Her anger seemed over the top. Something else had happened that I wasn't seeing.

"I want you to do it, Gemma. I want it done your way. It's our home." I moved to pull her into my arms, but she dodged me like I was radioactive.

"I'm taking a shower." Gemma brushed past me and headed upstairs, her hips swaying in a way that made my blood burn.

When I went up later, she had already arranged her things in the walk-in closet and was emerging from the bathroom wearing a barely-there white slip that was practically transparent. The thong underneath left absolutely nothing to imagination.

"Jesus Christ, you look good enough to devour," I growled, approaching her with my body already responding violently to the sight.

"Don’t I?" Gemma smiled with pure sin in her eyes, coming close enough to touch but staying just out of reach. "Look all you want, but hands off. This body is off-limits."

"Damn it, Gemma! What the hell happened at that meeting?" I was losing my mind with need.

Making it worse, she stretched out across the bed with that perfect ass in the air. Unable to resist, I positioned myself over her, letting her feel exactly how much she affected me.

"You think you can torture me like this and get away with it, beautiful? Not a chance in hell." I sucked her earlobe gently, drawing out a soft moan that went straight to my groin.

"You know what? You’re absolutely right." Her agreement caught me off guard, which should have been my first warning.

I lifted myself slightly as she turned to face me. Her fingers traced patterns across my chest while those dangerous eyes met mine. She gave me a quick, teasing kiss that only made me harder.

"If I ask you for something, will you do it?" She asked with a wicked smile that should have terrified me.

"Does it involve getting my hands on this incredible body of yours?" She nodded, biting that lower lip in a way that sent blood rushing south. "Anything you want."

"Use your mouth on me." Her demand lit a fire in my eyes. I was going to give her the most intense pleasure she’d ever experienced.

Rising up, I lifted her slip to her waist before hooking my fingers in her panties and sliding them down her legs slowly, never breaking eye contact.

She spread her legs wide, already glistening with arousal. I licked my lips hungrily. She looked delicious, and I was starving for a taste. I planned to lose myself completely in her pleasure and make her scream my name.

"I love it when you tell me exactly what you need," I growled. She smiled with pure wickedness in her eyes.

I started by kissing her stomach, working my way down to her center until I reached her most intimate places, parting her with my tongue. God, she tasted incredible. Sweet and addictive. I licked her entire length, from her entrance to that sensitive bud, which I sucked gently, drawing moans from those perfect lips.

Gemma began moving against my mouth, her pleasure obvious in every sound and movement. Her wetness increased with each stroke of my tongue. I slipped one finger inside her, finding her hot and soaking, then added another as she clenched around them.

The sensation nearly broke my control. I wanted nothing more than to bury myself deep inside her, but she had asked for this, and I was going to give her exactly what she wanted before taking what I needed. I alternated between sucking her sensitive spot, licking her folds, and thrusting my fingers into her, hitting that place inside that made her wild.

"Let me hear you, beautiful. Make those sexy sounds for me," I encouraged before returning to my delicious task. I blew warm air against her swollen flesh, making her even wetter. "That’s it, you’re absolutely perfect."

"Dominic... don’t stop, make me come... please!" Her moans grew more desperate.

I devoured her hungrily, licking and sucking with passionate intensity, intoxicated by everything about her. My own arousal was painful as I imagined burying myself deep inside her after she climaxed.

I continued thrusting my fingers while working her with my mouth until I felt her walls contract more intensely. I withdrew my fingers and replaced them with my tongue while my thumb circled and pressed against her most sensitive point. Gemma exploded in a powerful orgasm, her body arching off the bed as she cried out, her sweetness flooding my eager mouth.

I savored every drop, mesmerized by her beauty and completely uninhibited pleasure. Moving up her body, I kissed her deeply, letting her taste herself on my lips.

"What would you like now, beautiful?" I asked with a predatory smile, expecting her to beg for more.

"Now I want to sleep," Gemma announced with an exaggerated yawn.

"Are you kidding me?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This had to be some kind of joke.

With any other woman, exhaustion might be believable, but Gemma was passionate fire personified, never leaving things unfinished, always wanting more.

"Thanks for taking such good care of me, Dominic," she gave me a quick peck and rolled away from me.

I sat up, staring at this beautiful, infuriating woman lying beside me. Well, at least she'd had one hell of an orgasm from my attention. I looked down at my still-painful erection.

"Well, looks like it's just you and a cold shower tonight," I muttered to myself as I headed to the bathroom.

Chapter 288: Sweet Torment

Gemma's POV

It took every ounce of self-control not to beg Dominic to take me the way only a ruthless Capo like him knew how—that dangerously wicked style that drove me absolutely wild. But I refused to give him that satisfaction, especially now.

The situation with the Social Union surveillance footage remained unresolved. Our contact at the underground casino had informed Zoe they hadn't located what she requested and needed more time to check backup files from their private security network. Until I discovered what truly happened between Dominic and that vixen Beatrix in the parking lot before Ivy's mafia wedding, I was determined to keep him wanting.

I had to admit, though—seeing his face when I claimed I just wanted to sleep was priceless. Dominic knew me too well, understood my stamina, realized I never stopped after just one round. The bewilderment that crossed his dangerous features was utterly comical.

After he retreated to the bathroom, I crept silently toward the door and peeked inside without him noticing. There he stood, his impressive erection prominently displayed as he subjected himself to an ineffective cold shower. Just as he appeared ready to take matters into his own hands, I deliberately interrupted, entering with feigned drowsiness.

"You startled me, Dominic," I said with innocent sweetness. "I thought you'd abandoned me."

His predatory eyes flickered with heat. "Invading my privacy, goddess?"

"Nothing there I haven't seen before," I replied with a mischievous smile. "I've witnessed you naked quite frequently, if you recall."

"I thought you'd already showered earlier?" he questioned, his voice carrying that edge that made lesser people tremble.

"Got overheated. Weren't you supposed to be sleeping?"

"I got chilly. Perhaps you could lie beside me and warm me up?"

His excitement was immediate. The shower shut off faster than I could blink.

"Let's go, goddess. I won't let you stay cold." He dried himself hastily and pulled me toward the bedroom with the possessive grip of a man who commanded armies.

Once in bed, he pulled me close with the same intensity he used to control his territory. I curled against him, murmured a sweet "goodnight," and pretended to close my eyes. His frustrated growl was audible as he switched off the lights and nestled against me. I could feel his hardness pressing against me, and I decided to torture him further by shifting my hips slightly, as though merely getting comfortable.

"If you continue rubbing that sexy ass against me," he whispered harshly in my ear with the voice that had intimidated countless enemies, "I'll take you hard and fast. I don't care if you're asleep."

I remained motionless, suppressing a laugh while internally suffering my own sweet torment. The desire to grind against him and invite exactly what he'd promised was overwhelming. But I had to maintain control over this dangerous man who controlled half the city.

The night stretched endlessly. Whenever he attempted to move away, I found an excuse to follow. Each time he sought relief, I prevented it. Just as he'd begin to relax, I'd wiggle slightly, rekindling his arousal.

Morning finally arrived. He rose early for a shower, and I followed, shedding my clothes and joining him in the stall. He appeared tense, impatient, and distinctly uncomfortable—a rare sight for someone who never showed weakness.

"God, this water's freezing!" I complained innocently.

"It's invigorating—good for your health," he replied tersely, though he adjusted the temperature with surprising gentleness.

"Much better! Would you mind soaping my back?" I requested, deliberately ignoring his persistent erection.

He inhaled deeply, took the sponge, added body wash, and began circling motions on my back—his touch electrifying despite his frustration. Even frustrated, his hands held the controlled strength of a man who'd eliminated countless threats. He finished quickly and exited.

By the time I reached the kitchen, coffee was brewed, and he sat clutching a large mug, staring distantly with the calculating gaze of someone planning territorial moves. I served myself silently, sensing his tension. Perhaps I'd pushed too far.

"Gemma," he said abruptly, his voice carrying the authority that made hardened criminals obey, "I'll be dropping you off and picking you up from the office daily. This isn't negotiable—I'm merely informing you." His anger was palpable, the kind that usually preceded bloodshed.

"Fine. How long will this arrangement continue?" I ventured carefully.

"I don't know, but potentially forever!" He rose, placed his mug in the sink with barely controlled force, and departed. "I'll wait in the living room."

His unprecedented nervousness was evident. Even Capos had breaking points, apparently. I finished my coffee quickly, completed my preparations, and joined him in his armored vehicle. When we arrived at the legitimate business front where I worked, he simply wished me a good day without his customary kiss. Something was definitely off.

I headed directly to the executive floor, having arranged a video call with my friends to share details about our respective evenings. Lila was already there, wearing a shy smile.

"Seems like someone had an enjoyable night," I remarked, watching her smile widen.

"It was incredible, Gemma! What about yours?" Her mood was enviably bright.

"Difficult. Tormenting that man is essentially tormenting myself," I admitted ruefully.

"Gemma, you care for him, he cares for you—just forgive him already! Why continue suffering? Don't you think he's learned his lesson? Besides, let's be honest—they trapped him quite effectively," Lila reasoned.

"He should have communicated with me," I insisted.

"And did you communicate when you received that photo Friday? No, you stormed off, only staying because of Ivy's wedding." Lila defended Dominic, her argument surprisingly persuasive.

"How is this possible?" I asked, confusing her.

"What?"

"How can someone who had never been kissed until Saturday possess such relationship wisdom?" I smiled. "That detective got lucky finding you!"

"Oh, he's absolutely wonderful, Gemma!" Lila gushed.

"Has this wonderful man claimed your first kiss yet?" I inquired.

"Not yet—he says it will be special." Her eyes practically sparkled with adoration.

"I already approve—a man who understands a woman's first time should be meaningful," I smiled warmly. "But did he kiss you again?"

"I followed Zoe's advice."

"Meaning?"

"I threw my arms around his neck and told him that despite being inexperienced, I wanted him to kiss me again," Lila explained excitedly.

"You didn't!" I laughed as she nodded confirmation. "What happened then?"

"He kissed me repeatedly."

"Just innocent kissing?"

"There was nothing innocent about those kisses or his hands exploring my body."

"My God—he properly made out with you?"

"The kind that makes you burn inside. We talked extensively too."

"Did you sleep together?"

"Yes, wrapped in each other's arms. Oh Gemma, I think I'm falling for him. What should I do?"

"Just embrace it and be happy." Suddenly Lila's expression shifted to concern. "What's wrong?"

"What if when we finally have sex, he discovers I'm terrible and leaves me? I'm not even certain we're officially dating..."

"What do you mean? How can you not know?"

"We talked for hours, but he never clarified our relationship status."

"Lila, let's be modern—don't fixate on labels. You're together. What matters is establishing exclusivity while you're seeing each other."

"I think so. He mentioned wanting me since first sight."

"Possessive—I like it! Make sure he understands you're claiming him equally."

"But what if I'm awful at sex? Completely horrible?"

"Friend, it doesn’t work that way. Sex is about connection, desire, mutual attraction—with those elements, it’s good. Since you’re inexperienced, he needs patience to guide you. And you must be honest about what pleases you, what doesn’t, and what you desire."

"What do you mean by telling him what I want?"

"For instance, take initiative. Don’t wait for him to always begin. You might say something like, ’Tonight I want you to take me from behind.’" I couldn’t help laughing at Lila’s furious blushing. "Gemma, I’d be too embarrassed."

"That’s exactly what you need to overcome when you’re with him. Nothing kills passion faster than prudishness. Listen, he’s experienced, considerably older, and completely smitten. Don’t squander this opportunity!"

"I’ll remember your advice."

"If you need anything, just ask—I’m here to help."

Lila smiled gratefully. Soon Ruby and Ivy arrived, and we connected with Zoe and Nora for our video call. Everyone had stories to share, making for a thoroughly enjoyable conversation that temporarily distracted me from the dangerous game I was playing with Port Serenity’s most ruthless Capo.

Chapter 289: Calculated Revenge

Dominic’s POV

I prowled through my office like a caged predator, my blood still burning from last night’s torture. Gemma had pushed every limit I possessed, and as a Capo of the Thorne family, I was not accustomed to being played like some amateur street thug. Respecting her boundaries was one matter, but deliberately igniting my desires while denying any satisfaction? That was a calculated act of war.

My temper was hanging by the thinnest thread, and I could feel the familiar darkness rising. In my world, when someone crossed a line, blood usually followed. But this was Gemma, and despite my murderous

instincts, I would find another way to settle this debt. The smallest provocation today could trigger an explosion that would paint the walls of Zenith Systems red.

I stalked to the bulletproof windows of my penthouse office, surveying the city sprawled beneath Thorne family territory. Last night had been exquisite agony, and this morning Zoe had already delivered one of her signature lectures about controlling my impulses. The irony was not lost on me that my intelligence liaison was preaching restraint to a man who could order executions with a phone call.

Mia knocked and entered, carrying a steaming espresso in one of the fine china cups we used to maintain our legitimate business facade.

"Morning, Boss! Rough night with the lady?" she asked with barely concealed amusement. I fixed her with the kind of stare that had made grown men confess their sins before I put bullets between their eyes.

"How the hell would you know that?" I demanded, my voice carrying the deadly edge that usually preceded violence.

"It’s written all over you, Dominic. Look how on edge you are!" Mia extended the cup toward me, her fearlessness one of the reasons she’d survived this long in my employ. "But you’re lucky I’m fond of you. I overheard something that might interest a vengeful Capo."

"I’m listening." She had captured my complete attention, the way only valuable intelligence could.

"I’m sharing this so you can fix things with Gemma—she’s perfect for you, Boss—but if you screw this up again, I’ll personally ensure the Thorne family bloodline ends with you!" Her threat carried genuine conviction, the kind that made me respect her even more.

"Just tell me what you heard, Mia."

She held my gaze until I rolled my eyes and exhaled slowly. "Fine! I’ll handle things exactly as you suggest. Now what intelligence do you have?"

"The girls had a video conference last night. I caught Gemma describing her little performance, and honestly, it was brilliant. You deserved every second of frustration—maybe now you'll learn some self-control."

"Don't push your luck, Mia. My patience is razor-thin today. What else did you intercept?"

"That it was all orchestrated. They planned to torment you boys as punishment, though apparently you were the only one who actually suffered the consequences." Mia's laughter only deepened my scowl. "But she admitted it was difficult pretending she didn't want you. According to Gemma, she was burning for you just as badly, but she was determined to teach the big bad Capo a lesson."

"So that's what this was about. I'd bet my territory this was Zoe's twisted scheme."

"I wouldn't take that wager because I'd lose everything. Yes, your dear intelligence liaison masterminded the entire operation."

"Those two are going to pay dearly for this, Mia! And you're getting something special for this intel!" I pressed a kiss to my secretary's cheek and handed back the espresso. "I'm leaving before Zoe returns from her morning briefings. If she asks, tell her I'm meeting a potential client about expanding our money laundering network."

I strode from the office, my mind already calculating the perfect revenge. This little game of psychological warfare would end today, and they would learn that crossing a Thorne family Capo carried consequences. I drove to the upscale district where our legitimate businesses provided cover—I was spending too much time in civilian territory lately, but today's mission required specific supplies.

First stop: an exclusive boutique where I purchased one of those designer handbags Mia had been admiring during our surveillance of rival family operations. My loyal secretary had earned this reward for her service and discretion.

Next, I visited a pharmacy for several key components, followed by a high-end stationery store. My final destination was an expensive toy emporium that catered to the wealthy families whose children we sometimes used as leverage.

When I returned to Zenith Systems, my mind was buzzing with strategic possibilities. I immediately summoned Mia and presented her reward.

"You're officially the best boss in organized crime!" she whispered excitedly. "I'll secure this in my car before Zoe spots it and starts asking questions."

"Excellent thinking. And hurry back to witness what I'm about to do to our intelligence liaison," I said with the kind of smile that usually preceded someone's disappearance.

"Be careful, Boss! If she discovers what you're plotting, she'll literally extract your soul from your body with her bare hands," Mia warned, and I knew she wasn't exaggerating about Zoe's ruthless capabilities. "She was asking about your client meeting, and I told her I had no information."

I returned to my office, and when I passed Zoe's workstation, she flashed that smug little smile—the one that confirmed she knew exactly how she'd tortured me through Gemma's psychological warfare. But that satisfaction would be wiped from her face before sunset.

"Who did you meet about expanding operations, Dominic? There was nothing on the schedule," Zoe probed with her characteristic nosiness.

"A potential future client in the financial sector. I'm hoping to make a strong impression and secure their laundering business." I turned casually, filled a crystal glass with water, then sat down and swallowed two harmless pills from a prescription bottle I'd prepared—setting my elaborate plan into motion.

"What medication is that?" Miss Intelligence immediately inquired.

"Something for the migraine that's been killing me. It's really affecting my judgment," I replied with practiced casualness. "What operations do we have scheduled today?"

Zoe began outlining the day's activities, and for several hours things remained relatively peaceful. Now it was time for her punishment to begin.

"Zoe, I need you to handle a particularly tedious assignment for me," I began with serious intensity that suggested family business.

"What kind of assignment?" She asked with immediate suspicion.

"That potential client I met this morning was actually connected to us decades ago when the family was just establishing its financial networks."

"I'm listening."

"His information isn't in our digital systems. Back then, my grandfather kept everything on paper for security reasons."

"Are you serious? Dominic, this is supposed to be a cutting-edge technology operation!"

"Yes, but that's not how we started. When my great-grandfather founded Zenith, it was a telegraph operation. My grandfather transformed it into security and information storage for criminal enterprises." Zoe stared at me in confusion. "Even though we evolved into data security and money laundering technology, my father never bothered transferring all our legacy files into the system."

"What exactly are you requesting, Dominic?"

"I need you to input all this potential client's information into our database."

"And where is this information located?"

"In our secure archive storage, basement level two."

"Wait! You're not referring to those dusty boxes in the old vault, are you?"

"Unfortunately, yes," I feigned regret while internally savoring her horror.

"Dominic, that’s an enormous undertaking," Zoe protested.

"There’s highly confidential financial information in those files, Zoe. I need someone I trust completely with family secrets." I hoped my performance was sufficiently convincing.

"Let me understand—you want me to sort through these boxes and digitize everything about this client?"

"Correct. And since there are numerous boxes, you should work directly from the vault. Take a laptop and input the data onsite for security reasons."

"For God’s sake, Dominic, this is insane! Just hire a data entry specialist!"

"I can’t, Zoe. This involves money laundering records and sensitive criminal intelligence. You’ll only need to enter the surface-level information."

"So I’ll have to read through everything to separate what’s safe?"

"Yes, unfortunately." I tried to sound genuinely apologetic. "But it’s crucial for family operations. They’re a major client we lost to rival families, and I want to win back their business. Our meeting was very promising."

"This is going to be hell, Dominic!" Zoe cradled her head in her hands. "But if it’s family business..."

Soon Mia entered with a laptop I had specially configured. It would appear connected to our secure network but wasn’t—any information Zoe entered would vanish into digital oblivion.

"Here, use this laptop. It has enhanced security protocols and better performance for sensitive data entry."

"Fine. Who’s the client?" Zoe asked with resigned defeat.

"Capital Trust. There’s an archive assistant who’ll help you locate the proper boxes."

"Never heard of them," Zoe muttered.

"They’re massive, Zoe. Dominic’s being strategic about reclaiming lost territory," Mia supported me, though I caught her subtle warning glance.

"Well, I’m going then. The operational schedule is clear. Contact me if there are any emergencies."

"Thank you so much, Zoe." I placed my hand over my heart as if she were performing something extraordinarily valuable for the family.

After Zoe trudged toward the elevator, Mia fixed me with a disapproving stare.

"You’ve gone too far, Boss. Capital never stopped being our client; they just rebranded their operations. How long are you planning to keep her imprisoned down there?"

"There’s enough paperwork to keep her typing for ages!" I grinned with predatory satisfaction. "But I’ll show mercy eventually."

"When she discovers this deception, you’re a dead man!" Mia drew her finger across her throat dramatically.

"I’ll face those consequences later. Now I’m moving to phase two of my revenge."

"Which would be?"

"My sweet, manipulative Gemma!"

Chapter 290: Tender Care

Gemma’s POV

"Miss Gemma." As I exited the Thorne family’s legitimate front office building, I spotted Brandon, the family’s most trusted driver, waiting by his black sedan. His weathered face carried the kind of quiet authority that only came from decades of service to the organization.

"Hello, Brandon. How are you holding up today?" I greeted him with genuine warmth. The elderly gentleman had always treated me with respect, even before Dominic and I became official. His distinguished gray hair and permanent smile masked the steel beneath - I’d seen him handle threats to the family with lethal efficiency.

"Very well, thank you, Miss. And yourself?" His eyes crinkled at the corners when he smiled, though I caught the subtle way he scanned the street for potential dangers.

"I’m good. But what brings you here? Dominic didn’t mention sending anyone."

"Capo Frost requested I escort you home today." Brandon’s expression shifted slightly, the way it did when family business turned serious. "It appears he’s taken ill."

"Dominic’s sick? What happened?" My stomach knotted with concern. He’d seemed fine this morning when he left for his meeting with the money laundering network supervisors, though he had mentioned a headache brewing. It was unusual for him not to text throughout the day - even during the most dangerous family operations, he always found ways to check on me.

"I’m afraid I don’t have details, Miss. The Capo just said you’d need safe transport home." He held the car door open with practiced elegance, his hand positioned where I knew he kept his concealed weapon.

"Of course."

The ride through our territory was pleasant enough, with Brandon chatting about his grandchildren while his eyes never stopped monitoring the rearview mirror and side streets. When we arrived at Dominic’s heavily fortified compound, he handed me the house keys along with a small device I recognized as the security override.

"Capo’s orders, Miss Gemma. He wanted to ensure you could access everything you might need."

I thanked him and made my way past the armed security checkpoint, where the guards nodded respectfully. Inside the fortress-like mansion, I found Dominic sprawled across the living room sofa, looking absolutely miserable beneath a cashmere throw blanket. The sight of such a powerful man - someone who commanded fear throughout the underworld - reduced to this vulnerable state sent me rushing to his side.

"Dominic? My God, what happened to you?" I knelt beside him, immediately noting his flushed cheeks and glassy eyes.

"Just a stupid cold, Princess." His voice sounded raspy before a sneeze erupted from him, so different from his usual commanding tone that struck terror into rival families.

Concern washed over me as I took in his condition - watery, bloodshot eyes, dark circles beneath them, red nose, and a half-empty tissue box at his side. The strong smell of menthol hung in the air, and I spotted a jar of vapor rub nearby. When my hand touched his forehead, the heat radiating from his skin alarmed me. This was the same man who’d taken multiple bullets recently and barely flinched.

"You’re burning up," I said, trying to keep panic from my voice.

"I’ve taken what the family doctor prescribed." He gestured weakly toward the coffee table, which resembled a small pharmacy - fever reducers, antihistamines, throat lozenges, nasal spray, anti-inflammatories, and painkillers were scattered across its surface. "Doc made a house call this morning."

"But you seemed perfectly fine when you left for the waterfront meeting," I noted, perplexed by the rapid onset.

"Had a headache brewing during negotiations. Got worse as the day went on." His words were punctuated by another explosive sneeze. "Probably all those late nights coordinating with our contacts in Chicago."

"Why didn’t you call me?"

"It’s nothing serious, Gemma." He sniffled. "Doc says I’ll be fine soon, as long as it doesn’t develop into pneumonia. Can’t afford to be down longer with the territory expansion plans."

"Pneumonia?" I raised my eyebrows. "Come on, you’re built like a tank, Dominic. You’ve survived assassination attempts and gang wars."

"Professor’s warning. Said even soldiers need to be careful." He sounded so unlike his usual commanding self - the man who could silence a room full of hardened criminals with a single look.

"I bet it was those cold midnight patrol runs through the docks catching up with you." I shook my head. "Have you eaten anything today?"

"Can’t stomach food," he groaned.

"Well, that won’t do. You need nutrition to maintain your strength. I’m making you soup, and you’re going to eat it."

"Gemma, don’t worry about me. You’ve had a long day dealing with the front operations. The kitchen staff left dinner prepared."

"I don’t care. I’m taking care of you," I insisted. "And if this fever doesn’t break soon, we’re getting Doc back here, or I’m having the boys drive us to our private medical facility."

He nodded weakly, making my heart ache. Seeing such a feared Capo - a man whose reputation alone could end territorial disputes - reduced to this vulnerable state was disconcerting.

"Let’s get you upstairs to our room. You can’t recover sleeping on the sofa where anyone could see you like this."

"No, I don’t want you catching this," he protested, his concern for me evident even through his misery. "The family needs you healthy too."

"My handsome worrier," I smiled tenderly. "I want to take care of you."

He looked up at me with those fever-bright eyes. "I don't deserve you, Princess."

My heart melted at his words. "Either you come sleep with me in our bed, or I'm camping out here on the floor with you. Your choice, Capo."

He sighed in defeat. "Fine. Bed it is."

After settling Dominic in our bedroom, I took a quick shower and headed to the kitchen to prepare his soup. While the broth simmered, I called Zoe, feeling she should have warned me about his condition.

"Gemma, I swear I didn't know," Zoe explained, her voice carrying the edge it always had when family business was discussed. "I've been buried in intelligence reports all day, tracking those shipments from the East Coast families. Last I saw him, he was just popping aspirin after the port authority meeting."

"He's really sick, Zoe. I feel terrible - I think those midnight security rounds we insisted on might be responsible."

"Maybe we did push him too hard," she admitted. "But give him some proper care, and he'll bounce back before long. The man's survived worse than a cold."

After hanging up, I finished preparing a tray with steaming chicken soup, toast, and fresh orange juice. When I returned to the bedroom, Dominic was huddled under the covers, looking miserable.

"Soup's ready," I announced gently. "Let's pull these blankets back a bit. You need to cool down."

When I tugged the covers away, I discovered Dominic was completely naked. Despite his illness, the sight of his perfect body - broad shoulders marked with old bullet scars, muscular arms that had eliminated countless threats, narrow hips, and everything in between - made my mouth go dry. I'd been craving him since yesterday, and seeing him exposed like this sent heat pooling low in my belly.

"What is it?" he asked, voice hoarse.

"Nothing. Just admiring my deadly boyfriend." I smiled as his lips twitched in a weak grin.

"Sorry. The fever made me too hot for clothes. And the medicine makes me drowsy."

"Don’t apologize." I composed myself. "I’ve brought soup and juice. You need to eat something and stay hydrated, even if you don’t feel like it."

"Have you eaten?" Even ill, he worried about me first - the protective instincts of a Capo never truly resting.

"Yes, I have. Now it’s your turn."

"Not hungry," he sighed.

"Not negotiable," I countered firmly, using the tone I’d learned from watching him command his soldiers.

I filled a spoon with broth, blew on it gently, and brought it to his lips. After a moment’s hesitation, he accepted it, and I continued feeding him until the bowl was empty. Afterward, he drank the juice without protest.

Once I’d helped him brush his teeth and use the bathroom, we returned to bed. I snuggled against his warm body as he wrapped his arms around me with a contented sigh. Despite my desire for him, I was content to simply hold him as we drifted to sleep, the sound of distant patrol cars and the compound’s security system humming around us.

The next morning, Dominic seemed considerably better. The fever had broken during the night.

"How are you feeling?" I placed my palm on his forehead, relieved to find it cooler.

"Much better. Your soup must have magical properties, Princess." His voice still sounded rough, but his eyes were clearer, showing hints of the dangerous intelligence that made him such an effective lieutenant.

"I'm glad." My gaze wandered over his naked form, desire flaring anew.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" A knowing smile played on his lips, the predatory edge returning.

"Just wondering if you're still feeling too sick," I bit my lip suggestively.

"For what exactly?"

"For me to have my way with you." Heat flared in my cheeks.

His smile broadened, the deadly charm that had conquered territory and enemies alike now focused entirely on me. "Come here."

He pulled me onto his lap, and I straddled him eagerly. "You might catch my cold, but I'll never be too sick for you, Princess."

His lips found my neck as I felt him hardening beneath me. I ground against him while he lavished attention on my breasts. When I felt him fully erect, I positioned myself above him and sank down slowly, gasping as he filled me completely.

Dominic, despite his illness, gave me multiple earth-shattering orgasms in various positions. His sexual stamina was nothing short of miraculous - the same endurance that made him legendary in both the boardroom and the battlefield. When he finally climaxed deep inside me, he collapsed against me, both of us drenched in sweat and panting heavily.

He laughed against my neck and joked, "My mother always said sweating is good for a cold. Old Italian wisdom."

The following days passed in comfortable domesticity. Dominic's health improved steadily, and we fell into a pleasant routine - making love each night, discussing family business for hours, and sleeping wrapped in each other's arms. Thankfully, my immune system proved resilient, and I avoided catching his cold.

Later that week, we went shopping for security upgrades and personal touches for the compound, gradually transforming the fortress into our home. Soon after brought family obligations - lunch with Nadia and dinner with my mother, who was still adjusting to my life in the organization.

Everything seemed perfect, our dangerous little world intact and growing stronger. But in our line of work, peace never lasted long. Soon, our bliss was shattered as a cascade of enemy movements descended upon us, threatening everything we'd built together in blood and bullets.