Mafia Mask 291

Chapter 291: Vault Trap Exposed

Zoe’s POV

I’ve been trapped in this secure document vault for quite some time, and I’m starting to feel as dusty and forgotten as the classified files surrounding me. The sterile air and endless stacks of financial records were making me question my loyalty to this family. What I initially thought would be a quick intelligence assignment was turning into an extended sentence in information purgatory.

The monotonous silence was broken by my encrypted phone’s sharp ringtone. Glancing at the screen, my mood instantly brightened seeing the caller ID.

"Dad! I’ve missed you so much!" I answered with genuine enthusiasm.

"Have you really?" His voice carried that familiar dramatic tone. "Because it seems like my daughter has completely forgotten about her old man. Not even a secure message recently. You’re breaking your father’s heart, sweetheart."

"Sorry, Dad," I sighed, leaning back in my uncomfortable chair. "Family business has been absolutely insane."

"Is Dominic running you into the ground?" he asked with a hint of protectiveness. "Or have you finally taken over his operations and started giving him orders?"

I laughed, picturing my father’s expression. "Don’t worry, I’m still the one managing his chaos around here. But he’s got me digitizing some ancient client records from our offshore accounts."

"What do you mean?"

"I’m manually entering paper records from a fossil client called Capital Trust into our secure system. Since it’s all classified family business, I’m stuck doing it alone in this glorified bunker."

There was a pause on the other end. "That’s strange. I thought Dominic digitized everything when he took over the tech operations. Which company did you say?"

"Capital Trust."

"Hold on, sweetheart. Capital Trust hasn’t existed under that name for many years. They rebranded to Omni Ventures after the old don died."

"What did you just say?" My voice dropped to a dangerous whisper.

"The new generation changed the name after the founder was eliminated. They got tired of all the jokes from rival families about their board game connection. Omni Ventures is one of our major money laundering clients now." My father cleared his throat. "This sounds like family politics, so I’ll let you handle it. Love you, honey."

"Son of a bitch!" I hissed after ending the encrypted call.

That calculating bastard Dominic had sentenced me to vault purgatory as punishment! Omni was already our active client—their files would be digital and completely current in our secure servers. I slammed my laptop shut and gathered my belongings, rage building with each movement.

When I reached the executive floor of our legitimate front office, Mia’s expression told me she already sensed the impending explosion. I dropped my things unceremoniously on my desk and stormed into Dominic’s private office like a category five hurricane. The idiot was actually humming to himself while reviewing what looked like protection money reports!

"HAVE YOU COMPLETELY LOST YOUR MIND, YOU ABSOLUTE BASTARD?" I slammed my palm on his mahogany desk with enough force to make his espresso cup jump.

Dominic jolted in his leather chair. "Zoe! What’s wrong? Is there a security breach?"

"Security breach? Are you kidding me, Frost? What made you think you could exile me to that digital tomb for weeks? Please, enlighten me about the thought process behind this genius plan." My voice dripped with venom.

"Calm down, Zoe. What are you talking about?" His facade of innocence only infuriated me more.

"What am I talking about? Omni Ventures, Frost! Formerly known as Capital Trust? Ring any bells, you absolute moron?" I leaned across the desk, attempting to grab his expensive tie. He jumped back, genuine fear flashing in his emerald eyes.

"Zoe, please, it was just a harmless retaliation!" He stood up, edging toward the reinforced door.

"A harmless retaliation? Switching someone's ammunition with blanks is harmless retaliation. Condemning me to respiratory issues in that data vault is a declaration of war!" I followed his retreat step for step.

"Let's discuss this professionally," he pleaded, palms raised.

"There's nothing to discuss! I'm going to castrate you and feed your balls to the family's guard dogs!" I snatched the letter opener from his desk and advanced toward him with deadly precision.

His face paled. "Zoe, I'll give you whatever you want! Just put down the blade and let's negotiate like civilized criminals."

"Now you're scared? Should've thought about consequences before your little power play!"

"Please, Zoe..." He was visibly trembling as I cornered him against the bulletproof wall, holding the sharp implement dangerously close to his expensive trousers.

"Start explaining. Now." My voice was deadly calm.

"Can we sit down first? It’s hard to concentrate with sharp objects threatening my ability to produce heirs." Sweat beaded on his forehead despite the climate control.

I stepped back, gesturing toward his chair while keeping the letter opener firmly in hand. After we sat, he cleared his throat nervously.

"In my defense, I was furious and not thinking strategically. But you initiated this conflict." Before he could continue, I slammed my fist on the desk, making him jump.

"Explain better!"

"Gemma kept me aroused all night without allowing me to finish! Do you understand how torturous that is? My entire body felt like it was going to combust! And then I discovered you were the mastermind behind that psychological warfare!" His indignation was almost comical.

"How exactly did you discover this?" I fought to control my expression.

"That’s irrelevant to our negotiation!"

"It’s completely relevant!"

He sighed heavily. "I monitored your communications that day."

"So you’re conducting surveillance on family members now?"

"It’s my damn operation! Yes, I monitored communications! Christ, Zoe, you’re the most vindictive person in this entire organization." His complaints only made me laugh harder.

"You weren’t actually handling emergency family business that day, were you?" I asked, knowing the answer.

"Damn it, Zoe! Listen, I love Gemma more than this entire criminal empire. We're in a stable place now. Please don't sabotage this relationship." His plea was almost pitiful.

"You realize I'm going to make you suffer indefinitely for this stunt, right?"

"Fine, whatever, just don't give Gemma any more strategic suggestions." He dropped his head onto the desk in defeat.

"You know I have to inform her."

"I know. Just don't propose any additional punishments, please!"

"Alright, I won't suggest more punishments... for now. But she's going to unleash hell on you." He responded with a miserable groan. "Now I want compensation."

"What?" He lifted his head suspiciously.

"Your yacht for the weekend."

"WHAT? MY SANCTUARY? ABSOLUTELY NOT!" He roared as if I'd suggested selling his armored vehicles.

"Well, then I guess I'll have to brainstorm some creative new torture methods with Gemma..."

"Damn it, Zoe!" He huffed in frustration. "Fine! I'll have the crew prepare it for you. It's yours starting Saturday morning."

"No, starting Friday night." He groaned dramatically.

I knew how protective he was of his precious floating fortress, so I was hitting him where it hurt almost as much as withholding physical pleasure—his prized possessions. It was perfect revenge for a Capo who thought he could outsmart his intelligence chief.

"Fine," he muttered in defeat.

Chapter 292: Deadly Games

Gemma’s POV

I could barely contain my fury at Dominic’s calculated manipulation. That bastard! When Zoe called, revealing his elaborate scheme—how he’d orchestrated her punishment and feigned illness to play with my emotions like some twisted mafia mind game—I wanted to put a bullet through his skull myself. But Zoe, ever the strategic mastermind behind our family’s intelligence network, convinced me to handle this with the cold precision our world demanded.

He would pay for crossing me. When he arrived to collect me after my shift at the legitimate front operation, I slid into his armored sedan without uttering a word. The real confrontation would wait until we reached his fortified compound.

"Gemma, I know you know," he ventured cautiously, his voice carrying that dangerous edge that made lesser men tremble. I maintained my icy silence, staring out at the darkened streets of our territory. "Gemma, please talk to me."

I finally spoke through gritted teeth, my voice as cold as the steel of a gun barrel. "At home, Dominic. Behind closed doors."

The moment we arrived at his heavily secured estate, I bolted upstairs past the surveillance cameras. After a quick shower, I slipped into my most lethal weapon—a barely-there light blue negligee that left nothing to the imagination, completely sheer with only a tiny thong underneath. While Dominic was in his private bathroom, I prepared our drinks in the kitchen, dissolving a military-grade sexual stimulant pill into his whiskey—the kind used to torture prisoners in black sites, designed to keep a man painfully aroused regardless of release. Let him experience what true suffering feels like.

When he descended the marble staircase, I approached him with the calculated grace of an assassin. He wore loose silk pajama pants that did nothing to hide his immediate reaction to my provocative attire. I traced my fingers across his muscled chest, scarred from years of violent encounters, and said with deadly calm, "Come on, let’s have dinner and you can explain your treachery."

I tugged his hand, but he pulled me against him instead, his grip firm enough to leave bruises. "Gemma, before anything else, I need you to understand that I love you more than this family, more than this life. I can’t function without you in my world."

His kiss was desperate and possessive, the kind that claimed ownership in our brutal reality. For a moment, my resolve wavered like a civilian’s first time holding a gun. But I couldn’t let him off the hook so easily—not in our world where weakness meant death. "Come on, let’s eat and you can confess your sins."

In his opulent kitchen, I handed him the doctored whiskey, watching with satisfaction as he drained every drop. During our meal served on china worth more than most people’s yearly salary, he explained his frustration, his territorial jealousy, and his misguided attempt to prove that I craved him as desperately as he craved me.

"Gemma, I made a tactical error and I regret it. I shouldn’t have fabricated illness to manipulate you. But we had an incredible week together—like criminal royalty ruling our empire! Can’t we just move past this?" he pleaded, unaware of the chemical warfare I’d waged against his body.

"The real problem, Dominic, is how effortlessly you orchestrated lies worthy of our enemies. That level of deception is unacceptable between partners," I replied with the unnerving calm of a professional killer. I noticed his growing discomfort as the military-grade stimulant took effect—his arousal straining against his silk pants, sweat beading on his forehead like a man under interrogation.

"It was just a moment of weakness, Gemma, not a betrayal."

"All because you can’t control your base instincts."

"Gemma, it’s more complex than physical need in our world."

"I’ll simplify it for you—I’m returning to my secure apartment, Dominic. Find me when you’re ready to swear a blood oath never to deceive me again." His expression turned predatory, dangerous. "You’re not abandoning me!"

"Watch me." I turned away, heading to the bedroom to gather my belongings like a defector fleeing enemy territory.

He followed minutes later, clearly battling the effects of the chemical compound, his body betraying his arousal though he hadn’t laid a finger on me—exactly as intended.

"Gemma, please, just listen to me."

"Enough, Dominic! You only want to possess me physically, nothing more substantial!"

He grabbed my arm and pinned me to the bed with the swift brutality of a seasoned enforcer, his hardness pressing against me like a loaded weapon. "Yes, Gemma, I want to fuck you. I love claiming you completely. I love having you surrender beneath me. I go absolutely insane making you mine. Your body drives me to the edge of madness—it’s impossible not to get hard when you move through my world like a goddamn temptress." His words came out as a growl, his green eyes boring into mine with lethal intensity.

"Dominic..."

"No, Gemma, listen carefully! I want to touch you and possess you constantly because you ignite something primal in me that no amount of violence or power ever could. But it transcends physical desire! I love you. I love our conversations about territory expansion, our drives through enemy neighborhoods, watching sunrises from my sniper’s perch. I love your sharp wit, your deadly intelligence—everything about you."

"Dominic..."

"I really fucked up, and I don’t know how else to make amends because every time I think we’re building an unbreakable alliance, you abandon me again. I can’t exist in this constant state of war with you. If you want to leave, fine. My best soldier will escort you home and remain on permanent guard duty. But I’m finished with these psychological games. If you’re not willing to burn every bridge and move forward with me—completely, without reservations, without punishments, without fear—then maybe we should declare permanent ceasefire and go our separate ways."

He climbed off me, stormed into his walk-in armory disguised as a closet, changed into tactical gear, and left the compound. The reinforced front door slammed behind him like a gunshot. Perhaps I'd pushed too far, but I wouldn't retreat—he was the one who'd committed the betrayal.

I changed into civilian clothes, packed a bag, and departed his fortress. His most trusted lieutenant waited by the armored vehicle, opened the door with military precision, and drove me to my secure apartment. He swept the premises for threats before leaving me alone with my turbulent thoughts.

I curled into a tight ball on my bed and cried through the night, terrified I'd destroyed my only chance at love in this merciless world. His rage seemed insurmountable; he might never forgive such a calculated attack.

By morning, I prepared for my shift at the legitimate business, and upon arriving at the building, I spotted Lila near the entrance.

"Lila, do you have time for coffee at the safe house bakery?"

"Of course, Gemma. It's still early." Her cheerful disposition made me envious—she'd never had to navigate the treacherous waters of mafia politics.

"How are things with the detective?" I asked once we were seated in a booth swept daily for surveillance devices.

"Wonderful, unlike your expression which looks like you've been through a war zone. What happened?" Lila studied me with concern.

"Dominic and I had a confrontation. A catastrophic one." I sighed and recounted everything, though I omitted the chemical warfare details.

"You know what, Gemma? You really crossed the line. You were so wounded that you wouldn't rest until you inflicted equal damage on him." Lila didn't sugarcoat her assessment.

"I thought you were my ally," I protested weakly.

"I am! That’s exactly why I must tell you the brutal truth. And the truth is that you escalated this conflict beyond reason. Now you’re suffering the inevitable consequences."

"Damn it! You’re right. But I never expected his retaliation to be this severe." I lamented.

"Gemma, it wasn’t just one betrayal—it was accumulated wounds over time. He showed remarkable restraint until now. He’s right—every time you start building trust, you sabotage your own happiness. This isn’t like you, Gemma. You’re normally calculating and strategic. What’s really driving this self-destruction?"

"I think I’m terrified of being vulnerable in a world where vulnerability means death."

"I think so too. But you might be sacrificing your only chance at genuine love with the man who’d kill for you. Because I know you love him."

"More than I ever imagined possible."

"Then repair this damage, my friend. Take the leap and claim your happiness!"

"You’re absolutely right. I’m calling him immediately."

I tried reaching Dominic throughout the day without success. I called Zoe, who informed me he wasn’t at headquarters—she’d only received a coded message saying he’d gone underground. Finding this alarming, I asked Ruby to check with Xavier for intelligence, but even the family’s consigliere hadn’t spoken to Dominic in days. Where had he vanished to?

After my shift, I went to his compound, but the security team reported he wasn’t there. After waiting in the armored courtyard with no sign of him, I returned to my apartment.

My bodyguard performed his routine security sweep before departing. All I could do was wait. I sent numerous encrypted messages to his secure phone, hoping he’d respond once his fury cooled.

My doorbell rang, and I peered through the reinforced peephole to see the building's security guard with a flower delivery. They weren't roses, which meant they weren't from Dominic—he always sent blood-red roses as his signature. I accepted the flowers and thanked him. When I opened the attached card, my blood ran cold like ice water in my veins. I thought I'd already escaped this particular nightmare.

The flowers were a death threat disguised as romance.

Chapter 293: Desperate Exile

Dominic's POV

The aphrodisiac Gemma had slipped into my whiskey hit me like a sledgehammer to the chest. My body spiraled into chaos with symptoms I couldn't control—cold sweats drenching my shirt, heart hammering against my ribs like gunfire, and a painful erection that refused to subside. Something was seriously wrong. When Gemma retreated upstairs to our bedroom, I tore through the kitchen trash until I found the pill packet she'd carelessly discarded. Fury ignited in my veins like gasoline meeting flame.

But what cut deeper than any blade was her relentless pattern of running. I loved this woman with the devotion of a soldier to his Don, yet I was drowning in exhaustion from her endless psychological warfare. This "maybe I'll forgive you, maybe I won't" game was slowly killing me from the inside. If she planned to walk away from our blood bond permanently, I wished she'd put a bullet in my head instead of prolonging this torture.

I'd prostrated myself before her like a common street soldier, explaining my actions until my voice went hoarse and my pride lay in tatters. Yet she continued wielding my emotions like weapons, carving deeper wounds into my already scarred heart. I delivered my ultimatum with the cold finality of a family execution and stormed from our fortress, heading straight to our organization's medical contact as my condition deteriorated rapidly.

At the private clinic that handled Thorne family emergencies, I fabricated some story about accidental ingestion during a business dinner. The treatment was barbaric—a stomach pump followed by an excruciating procedure to drain blood from my groin. The doctor hooked me to an IV and explained that these substances could trigger deadly reactions in certain individuals. He stressed that any future pharmaceutical assistance should only occur under proper medical supervision.

As if the heir to a mafia dynasty needed chemical enhancement for anything!

I endured a hellish night under clinical observation, completely isolated with only my dark thoughts for company. By dawn, bone-deep exhaustion had settled into my marrow. After discharge, I drove directly to the family marina, contacted our boat captain, and demanded an aimless voyage—just sailing without destination or purpose. The yacht became my sanctuary for the following day and night. Despite my physical and emotional wreckage, I had to confront the bitter truth: if Gemma wanted to abandon our blood oath, no amount of power or violence could change her mind.

When I returned to our penthouse the next morning, my phone was missing in action. I vaguely remembered powering it down after security reported Gemma's return to our territory, then completely forgetting about it amid my drug-induced haze.

"Screw it. I'll buy several more," I muttered, abandoning the search entirely.

After showering and donning a fresh suit, I purchased a replacement device before heading to Zenith Systems, our family's money laundering front operation. I arrived late in the morning, already bracing for Zoe's inevitable tongue-lashing.

"Dominic, what time do you call..." she began the instant I stepped off the executive elevator.

I stopped directly in front of her desk. "If you continue speaking, you're terminated. Don't push me today." My voice carried the arctic chill of a mob execution as I stalked into my office. Predictably, she followed within moments. "Dominic, you..."

"Zoe, not today! If it's business-related, send a secure message. Otherwise, return to your station and stay there. I don't want conversation today."

She retreated looking thoroughly chastened. I released a heavy sigh. My mental state was completely fractured, and she bore partial responsibility, having planted too many poisonous ideas in Gemma's head while systematically tightening the noose around my throat.

While reviewing laundering reports, I realized I'd neglected several overseas accounts. Perhaps visiting our international operations would benefit both the organization and my deteriorating sanity. I began arranging a trip for the following week. The distance would provide necessary perspective.

Soon my encrypted phone started buzzing. Xavier called first.

"Brother, where the hell have you been? The entire family's worried."

His concern sounded authentic.

"Handling business, Xavier..." I offered nothing more substantial.

"Want to discuss it?"

"Not now."

"When you're ready, call me."

"Appreciated."

Xavier understood my need for solitude. He would keep the other family members at bay until I was prepared to rejoin civilization.

My sister interrupted my momentary peace shortly afterward.

"Dominic, you vanished yesterday. What happened?"

"Nadia, I'll be direct. Gemma severed our bond. I need time, so please respect that. When I'm ready to discuss it, I'll reach out."

"Do you need muscle or resources?"

"No, thanks."

"I'll instruct the kids not to disturb you."

Soon after ending the call with my sister, my mother marched into my office like a conquering general.

"I know you don't want conversation. But you're going to listen, and I'll only say this once." She adopted her rarely-used matriarchal authority tone.

"Fine." I tossed my gold pen onto the mahogany desk.

"I know you love her, I know she loves you, and circumstances are complicated now. Here's my counsel: take a trip, spend some days away, recharge your batteries, and when you return, fight for her again with everything you have."

"Mom, I'm already organizing the trip. I need to visit some international accounts. But reconciliation isn't feasible. It's finished between Gemma and me. That's final."

My mother sighed deeply. "Son, take your trip. When you return, we'll revisit this conversation."

After saying farewell to my mother, I accelerated my travel preparations, planning to depart the next morning.

Mid-afternoon, Caleb called. Xavier had surely instructed everyone to avoid contact, so this call indicated a family emergency. I answered immediately.

"Caleb, what's the situation?"

"Dominic, Finn was discovered unconscious in an alley. He was beaten within an inch of his life. I'm going to inform Zoe personally. Can you secure her and Nora in your office?"

"Christ! Yes, I'll gather them both."

Caleb provided additional details before we disconnected. I summoned Nora, and she arrived with Caleb. They entered my office to deliver the devastating news to Zoe, who became hysterical. Gemma accompanied them but avoided eye contact with me. This wasn't the appropriate moment for our personal warfare.

"Come on, Zoe, let's get to the hospital." I placed a protective hand on her shoulder. "Take indefinite leave until Finn recovers."

"Thanks." She met my gaze with a weak smile. "You're still furious with me."

"Zoe, I can't maintain anger toward family. Now focus on Finn." She nodded gratefully.

The hospital visit was agonizing. After Finn was stabilized in intensive care, we gathered at Caleb's fortress to meet with our corrupt detective investigating the case. We established security protocols for everyone, and knowing Gemma would remain at Xavier's compound provided me some peace of mind.

The following morning, after confirming Finn would survive, I boarded my flight to Boston. Extended time away from everything—I desperately needed this exile.

Chapter 294: Days Until Return

Gemma's POV

Finn's situation had become the final crushing blow to my already shattered emotional state. Over the past few days, I'd received elaborate flower arrangements from Dominic's father, each accompanied by ominous invitation cards that made my skin crawl. I had desperately hoped the exiled family patriarch would eventually abandon his twisted pursuit, but he persisted with his menacing attention. With Finn now caught in the crossfire of family business, I was determined to keep absolutely silent about his advances.

Dominic and I had spent hours in the same safe house without exchanging a single word. My countless encrypted messages remained unanswered. We were all supposed to remain under Xavier's protection at his fortified compound - how would that tense arrangement possibly work with the current hostilities?

To my shock, Dominic never appeared at Xavier's stronghold. I waited endlessly, but there was no sign of him. Weren't we all meant to be together for security? Where had he vanished to in these dangerous times?

"Gemma?" Jude's gentle touch on my shoulder pulled me from my anxious thoughts. I realized I'd been staring out the bulletproof windows for hours, planted in the armored living room chair. "Oh, hi, Jude. Just lost in thought."

"I noticed. Waiting for Dominic?" The simple question made my eyes instantly well up with tears. "Want to talk about it? I've been told I'm pretty good at listening, even to family drama."

"Did I cross the line, Jude?" I asked, knowing he understood exactly what I meant about the pharmaceutical incident.

"Can I be honest?" I nodded, bracing myself for his judgment. "You didn't just cross the line. What you did was brutal, Gemma. You offered hope and then ripped it away in the next breath."

"So what do I do now? He can't even stand being in the same room as me," I whispered, my voice cracking under the weight of our fractured bond.

"Now you reflect, decide what you truly want from this life, and wait."

"Wait, Jude? For how long?"

"A while. Dominic left yesterday for family business - he'll be gone for some time handling territory disputes. When he returns, he should be calmer, and you two can finally hash this out. That's why he's not here - he's managing operations in the eastern districts."

I couldn’t hold back my tears anymore. I retreated to my secured room and wept uncontrollably like a child. In the days that followed, I was merely a hollow shell going through the motions. I counted each agonizing day until his return from the dangerous family missions.

The days crawled by with torturous slowness. Weeks had passed since Dominic’s departure for family operations, and I couldn’t help wondering if he’d encountered someone intriguing during his time in the field.

Throughout this time, my life consisted solely of traveling between the safe house and my new position at a legitimate front company. I even avoided meeting up with the other women in our circle. I convinced Xavier it was secure for me to return to my mother’s house for a brief visit since I had access to family security protocols, which gave me some peace of mind in this violent world.

That weekend, I decided to visit my mother and stepfather for several days, dismissing my assigned bodyguard. There was no need for armed protection at my mother’s residence, and I didn’t want to alarm her with unnecessary security measures.

"Sweetie, you finally came to spend time with us!" My mother embraced me warmly. "Where’s Dominic?"

"Oh, Mom, it’s complicated."

"Had a disagreement?" A mother’s intuition truly is remarkable, even when it comes to mafia relationships.

"It’s more complicated than that."

"Then sit down and tell me everything."

"Where’s Ryder?"

"He went out with Zander. I’m not sure what those two are planning, but they’ll be back soon."

"Wow, I haven’t seen Zander in ages."

"Such a dedicated young man. But come on, tell me about Dominic."

"Mom..." I smiled through tears as she pulled me into her protective embrace.

I unloaded everything, sparing no detail about the pharmaceutical disaster. By the end of my confession, my mother’s jaw had dropped in horror.

"Gemma, I work in pharmaceuticals. You should never have given him sexual stimulants, especially without his knowledge! He could have had a cardiac episode! That’s incredibly dangerous!" she scolded me with professional authority.

"Oh, Mom, I acted on pure impulse," I admitted shamefully.

"Yes, and your impulsiveness essentially offered him a cup of poison." My mother rarely reprimanded me so harshly, which made this rebuke all the more significant.

"Come on, Mom, that’s an exaggeration!"

"No, Gemma. I completely understand Dominic’s fury. Your actions were both cruel and reckless! This isn’t how I raised you." My mother’s disappointment was exactly what I didn’t need right now.

"Okay, Mom, but I’ve tried apologizing, and he won’t even acknowledge me."

"Follow your friend’s advice - wait for him to return with a clearer perspective on everything."

I agreed, not having any other viable options anyway. Shortly after, Ryder and Zander arrived, laughing heartily about some shared joke. They made quite a commotion upon seeing me after so long.

"So, beautiful, I hear you're involved with some powerful family operator." I laughed at Zander's careful phrasing as he settled beside me on the secured porch.

"We're sort of in crisis mode, Zander." He offered a sympathetic smile.

"My ex claimed she left me because we never had any real conflicts." His eyes reflected deep sadness from old wounds.

"What bizarre logic," I teased, making him laugh despite his pain.

Zander and I had always connected well through our shared experiences. We became friends and often joked about being siblings who met as adults, born to different families. We spent time sharing our respective heartaches and complicated relationships.

Zander was still nursing wounds from his devastating breakup. He believed he'd found his lifelong partner, but shortly before their planned future together, his fiancée decided she no longer wanted him in her life.

Meanwhile, I was torn between being right and being happy. While I stubbornly believed I was justified regarding the Dominic situation, I was far from happy - quite the opposite, actually.

"Think carefully, beautiful," Zander said, his arm draped protectively around my shoulders.

"The worst part is that you're absolutely right," I conceded.

"I know. Life teaches us, Gemma, that it's better to be happy than to be right," Zander spoke with gravity earned from experience. "And life, my sister, is fleeting. I witness that daily."

"I don't know how you manage working in emergency medicine." Zander worked as an ER doctor, and it was remarkable that despite everything he encountered, he maintained his faith in humanity.

"It’s because I believe I can make a difference in people’s lives," he smiled with genuine warmth. "How about catching a movie later?" Zander suggested, and I liked the idea - I love films but hadn’t been to many lately.

"Sounds perfect. Let’s pick something." I grabbed my phone and we started browsing options for entertainment.

We decided on a comedy and arrived at the mall shortly before showtime. We were purchasing popcorn when I heard that familiar voice calling my name.

"Aunt Gemma! We seem destined to meet at the movies," Vincenzo laughed with his characteristic cheerfulness, though I noticed his eyes scanning the area - family habit.

"Well, you practically live in this mall, Vincenzo!" I teased him, grateful for his presence.

"That’s true. What are we watching today?"

"A comedy." Zander turned around, and I took the opportunity to introduce them properly. "Oh, Vincenzo, this is Zander. Zander, this is Vincenzo."

"I’ve heard so much about you!" Zander greeted him warmly, and Vincenzo was as polite and charming as always, though I caught the subtle way he assessed Zander.

"Yeah, I have quite the reputation," Vincenzo joked with family pride. "Nice to meet you, Zander."

"Where’s Brenda, Vincenzo?" I asked, noticing he was alone without his usual companion.

"She’s at home. I came to meet some associates, but I’m heading back to my girl now. Aunt, are you okay? I wanted to call you, but mom told Carmen and me to give you and uncle some space. You know he’s handling business, right?"

"Yes, I do. Hasn’t he returned yet?" I asked the question burning inside me.

"I think he’s coming back soon," Vincenzo scratched his neck thoughtfully. "Look, aunt, sorry, but I think you two really need to hash this out. The family’s concerned."

I just stared at him, understanding the weight behind his words. "Well, I should get going. Can I call you soon?"

"Of course, sweetheart, whenever you want." Vincenzo gave me quick kisses, said goodbye to Zander with a respectful nod, and left.

"I like that kid!" Zander commented. "And I think he’s right about you needing to talk."

"Yeah, he is. But right now, let’s enjoy some laughter." I pulled Zander toward the movie theater, hoping to escape my worries for a few hours.

Chapter 295: Urgent Call Home

Dominic’s POV

I was finishing a late dinner with potential allies from the Chicago outfit when my phone buzzed with Vincenzo’s message. My nephew rarely contacted me during business trips - Nadia had made it clear he shouldn’t interfere - so this had to be serious. When I read his text, ice flooded my veins:

"If you don’t want to lose Gemma to some stranger, get back from Chicago now."

My hand trembled as I immediately dialed Vincenzo’s number.

"Vincenzo, explain that message. Right now," I demanded, abandoning any pretense of civility.

"Well hello to you too, uncle. I’m doing wonderful, thanks for your concern," Vincenzo replied with his usual smart mouth.

"I’m not playing games. Tell me what happened."

"I saw Aunt Gemma at the shopping district earlier. She was heading to some movie with a guy named Zander," Vincenzo explained, his tone maddeningly casual. "Never seen him before, but he’s decent looking and seemed to have his charm working. Oh, and Gemma? She looked absolutely breathtaking tonight."

My grip on the phone tightened until my knuckles went white. "Who the hell is Zander?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. That’s all she mentioned before they left together."

"I’m flying back immediately."

"About time!" Vincenzo sounded satisfied with himself.

"Thanks, kid," I managed before cutting the call.

I immediately contacted my pilot, ordering him to prep the private jet for emergency departure. The flight back to Port Serenity felt endless. Sleep was impossible with thoughts of Gemma with this Zander consuming my mind. Some unknown man had appeared in her life while I was away handling family business.

After landing, I stopped at my penthouse only long enough to drop my bags and shower, but the empty silence without Gemma made my skin crawl. Every room reminded me of what I’d lost. I couldn’t return to our shared apartment either - not yet, not when seeing our abandoned life together might push me over the edge.

"Hotel it is," I muttered, grabbing fresh clothes and heading back out.

I checked into the city’s most exclusive hotel, showered quickly, and drove straight to Zenith Systems. When the elevator doors opened to our floor, Mia immediately jumped up from her desk with obvious relief.

"Boss! You're finally back! I've been worried sick," she exclaimed, embracing me warmly.

"Come on, I wasn't gone that long," I chuckled, returning her hug before handing her a designer shopping bag. "Brought you something from Chicago."

"This is exactly why I love when you return from these trips," Mia laughed, eagerly accepting the gift.

I walked into Zoe's office next, where she sat buried in surveillance reports, completely focused on her work. I dropped her present on the desk with deliberate noise.

"You probably don't deserve this after the grief you've given me, but I'm feeling generous," I said with forced lightness.

She looked up, and I was struck by how somber her expression was. "You're back."

"Yes, I'm back. Did you miss me?" I smiled, but her serious demeanor didn't shift. "I know Finn's thriving with his new security detail, Zoe, so what's eating at you?"

"You were gone for so long cleaning up my mess," she said quietly, guilt heavy in her voice.

I sighed deeply. "Let's discuss this in my office."

She followed me like a condemned prisoner, nothing like her usual confident self. Once inside, I removed my jacket and gestured for her to sit.

"Dominic, I want to formally apologize and submit my resignation," Zoe announced without meeting my eyes.

"Have you completely lost your mind?" I demanded, genuinely stunned. "What's going through that analytical brain of yours?"

"I overstepped every boundary, Dominic. I interfered with your relationship with Gemma, gave you terrible counsel about handling the situation, and now you two are separated because of my advice. Plus my behavior regarding the surveillance files was completely unprofessional. I violated every code we have."

"Yes, you crossed lines," I admitted with a heavy breath. "But who among us hasn't? I've crossed more lines than anyone. And whatever advice you gave me, Gemma makes her own choices. She always has."

"I'm so ashamed of myself," Zoe continued. "I've had plenty of time to think while you were in Chicago. I even discussed it with my father, and he said if it were his operation, he would have eliminated me immediately for the security breach alone."

"Listen carefully, Zoe. You're brilliant at what you do, and I need you here. We're family, and family forgives each other's mistakes. Besides, your father promised me you'd last quite a while in this life," I attempted to joke, but she remained stone-faced. "Can we learn from this disaster and move forward? I really don't want to lose you as well."

"Are you still furious with me?" she asked hesitantly.

"Not anymore. The Chicago trip gave me perspective on what really matters. Now I just want to focus on getting Gemma back."

"Then I won't resign," Zoe offered a small, relieved smile.

"Good decision. So how has Gemma been handling things?"

Zoe stood up firmly. "I'm staying completely out of your personal business from now on, Dominic."

"Come on, Zoe! You won't help me at all?" I pressed. Her expression remained uncertain. "Just tell me who this Zander character is, and then you can maintain your neutrality."

"I honestly have no idea who Zander is."

I studied her eyes intently, searching for any hint of deception or hidden knowledge. "I swear on Finn's life, I don't know," she repeated, and her sincerity was unmistakable.

After Zoe left, I called Xavier to arrange dinner at our usual secure restaurant. Then I contacted Nadia, who predictably complained that I hadn't visited her immediately upon returning, and asked her to send Vincenzo to the office for lunch. Shortly after noon, my nephew swagger into my office.

"Uncle Dominic! Great to have you back in town," Vincenzo declared with obvious satisfaction.

"As if you didn't orchestrate my early return," I said, pulling him into an embrace.

"You just couldn't stand being away from your favorite nephew! Barely back and already demanding my presence. That's true devotion right there!" he teased.

"Don't push your luck, kid. You know exactly why I called you here."

"Of course I do," Vincenzo raised his finger dramatically. "That's precisely why you're taking me to that steakhouse with the incredible ribeye and those amazing truffle fries."

"Already taking advantage of the situation..." I sighed, grabbing my jacket as Vincenzo laughed all the way to the elevator.

Chapter 296: Blood and Blackmail

Dominic's POV

The workday at Zenith Systems had finally ended, but Zoe maintained her usual professional distance as I prepared to leave the money laundering operation headquarters. At least Vincenzo had promised to help by taking Gemma out from Caleb's legitimate business front this week. I headed to Gregory's, our preferred upscale establishment where made men could conduct business without prying eyes, hoping my brothers would have intelligence about her.

"Well, look who finally decided to grace us with his presence!" Xavier stood as I approached their table in the private dining room.

"Gentlemen, it’s been too long," I said, greeting everyone around the table with the traditional embrace. I was pleasantly surprised to see Finn there, still recovering from the recent territorial skirmish. "Finn, good to see you back on your feet."

"Wouldn’t miss your welcome back celebration," he replied with a grin, raising his glass of aged whiskey in a toast.

"I’m glad you’re healing well after that ambush," I said genuinely, knowing how close we’d come to losing him to rival family bullets.

"Going stir-crazy with Zoe running surveillance on me around the clock. Did you convince her not to transfer to another operation?" Finn asked.

"Of course. I can’t run the family’s financial network without that woman anymore," I admitted, which made him smile knowingly.

"That’s good because she’s equally lost without you handling the books," Finn quipped.

Caleb, our Don, fixed me with that penetrating stare that had made lesser men confess their sins. "Just ask what you’re dying to know, Dominic. Don’t dance around it like some amateur."

"You guys know me too well—" I began, but was interrupted by the last person on earth I wanted to see in our territory.

"My prodigal son! Back from your extended exile, I see!" My father Marcus approached with that smug expression I’d learned to despise during my years in the family. The other patrons quickly averted their eyes, recognizing the tension.

"Pretend I’m invisible, Marcus," I said, my mood instantly darkening like storm clouds over the harbor.

"Such an ungrateful child! Is this how you address the man who gave you life?" His tone dripped with the same sarcasm and mockery that had gotten him banished from Thorne territory.

"Father? Blood doesn’t make you famiglia. You’re just a traitor who got lucky with genetics," I replied coldly, my hand instinctively moving toward the concealed weapon at my side.

"You think you’re so much better than everyone, don’t you, Dominic?" I saw that familiar rage flash in his eyes, the same fury that had led him to betray family secrets years ago. "Whatever. Listen, son," he emphasized the word with pure venom, "I have a business proposition. Meet me at your operation tomorrow."

"I don’t negotiate with rats. And you’re permanently barred from Thorne territory," I responded, barely maintaining the composure expected of a Capo.

"Let me be direct then. You’re going to sign over twenty percent of the family’s laundering operation to me. You’ll triple my monthly payments. And you’ll make the private jet available for my personal use. You’ll do all this and have the family lawyer draw up proper contracts for us both to sign," Marcus stated with the confidence of a man who believed he held all the cards.

"You’ve completely lost your mind," I scoffed. "I would never agree to any of that. In fact, I’m cutting off all payments to you entirely."

"Oh, you’ll do exactly as I say," he moved closer, lowering his voice to the whisper used for the most dangerous threats. "And do you know why? Because if you don’t, I’m going after that gorgeous Gemma. I’ll claim her as my own, then send you beautiful footage of her servicing me, so you can see who’s really the superior man in this family."

Something primal snapped inside me. My fist connected with his face before rational thought could intervene, and I grabbed him by the collar as blood trickled from his split lip onto his expensive suit.

"Don’t you dare touch Gemma. Don’t even breathe the same air as her. I can have you disappeared," I threatened, but he only smiled that devil’s smile I remembered from childhood. I knew my threats wouldn’t deter a man with nothing left to lose.

Gregory’s security pulled us apart, their movements swift and practiced. Caleb managed to convince the manager to have Marcus escorted from the premises, but before leaving, he shouted across the dining

room, "One week to get your affairs in order, son!" His maniacal laughter echoed through the restaurant as the security team dragged him toward the exit.

I sat back down heavily, and Jude placed a double whiskey in front of me without being asked.

"Take it easy, Dominic. He won't get near Gemma," Jude assured me, though his voice carried less conviction than his words.

"I'm not convinced, Jude. I know Gemma wouldn't willingly associate with him, but he's cunning like a snake. He could manipulate her or use leverage against her family. The man's capable of anything after what he did to our famiglia," I said anxiously, running my hands through my hair. "Now tell me how she's doing in the legitimate operations."

"That's the problem. We've barely seen her," Caleb admitted, causing my eyes to widen in alarm.

"She works in your cover business," I reminded him unnecessarily, knowing he oversaw all legitimate fronts.

"Yes, but she's been transferred to financial records on the third floor. You know how it is—I don't have time to personally check every department of the operation," Caleb explained with the practiced efficiency of a Don managing multiple enterprises.

"What about you, Xavier? She was under your protection," I said hopefully to our consigliere.

"She left the safe house after less than a week. Claimed she wasn't comfortable with the round-the-clock surveillance. Then she convinced me she'd be secure in her own apartment since we'd neutralized the immediate threat. I couldn't force her to stay under family protection," Xavier explained with his characteristic calm.

"What about the women? Don't they keep tabs on each other?" I pressed.

"They hardly see her either. Even Lila hasn't been able to maintain contact," Daniel added, his cop instincts clearly troubled. "She's stopped attending the family social gatherings, and whenever Lila or Ivy visit her department, she's always buried in paperwork."

"She's avoiding her own people? What's happening? Why didn't anyone inform me of this development?" I demanded.

"Hold on, Dominic. You distanced yourself from all family business and didn't want contact with anyone. We respected those wishes. Gemma seems to be doing the same, and we're extending her the same courtesy," Finn said in his characteristically diplomatic manner.

"You haven't even heard the most concerning part," Caleb sighed heavily. "Gemma dismissed her personal security detail because she wanted to spend time at her mother's house without surveillance. Nothing we said could change her mind."

"Cristo! She's completely exposed. This whole situation is spiraling out of control. She can't be without protection in this business," I ran my hands over my face in frustration, feeling the weight of leadership and love colliding catastrophically.

"We're keeping distant watch. Roman's crew has been quiet lately," Daniel tried to offer reassurance.

"Daniel, Roman's organization is the least of my concerns regarding Gemma's safety. Besides that piece of garbage Marcus, who's capable of truly heinous acts, there are also escalating threats from her psychotic ex-boyfriend," I explained.

"What threats from her ex-boyfriend?" Daniel asked, suddenly alert with the focused intensity of a man trained to hunt predators.

I revealed the entire situation, including the last threatening letter I'd seen containing direct death threats against me, Gemma's mother, and Lila. That's when Daniel's professional composure completely shattered.

"What the hell, Dominic? Some unhinged civilian is threatening my little girl and you're only telling me now? Merda!" Daniel exploded with the fury of a man whose protective instincts had been activated.

"Daniel, there was chaos everywhere, and I assumed you knew because Gemma certainly told Lila," I tried to calm him, but it only intensified his rage.

"My little one knows about death threats and didn't tell me?" Daniel was livid with the righteous anger of a made man whose family had been threatened. "I'm going to have a very serious conversation with her."

"Apparently none of you will ever discover who Zander actually is. Does anyone have any intelligence on this Zander character?" I huffed, sulking like a teenager despite my position in the hierarchy.

"Who?" everyone asked simultaneously, proving my point about their investigative capabilities.

After explaining what little intelligence I had on Zander, I still had to endure my brothers' relentless teasing about how I'd returned from my self-imposed exile solely out of jealousy over another man. Was it true? Absolutely. But I didn't appreciate being the target of their amusement when my woman was in danger.

We had just finished our meal when Beatrix nearly strangled me, approaching from behind like a viper.

"Darling, I've missed you terribly!" She wrapped her arms around my neck with possessive desperation.

"Let go, Beatrix," I demanded without any trace of humor.

"I can't, sweetie. I missed you too much," Beatrix whined in that irritating voice that grated against my nerves.

"Damn it, Beatrix! I said release me!" I forcefully removed her arms and stood up abruptly. "I'm finished here, guys. I'm leaving."

"I'm right behind you," Xavier stood as he spotted Elza entering the restaurant.

Little did I know the damage was already done, and the wheels of destruction were already in motion.

Chapter 297: Burning All Bridges

Gemma’s POV

I couldn’t bring myself to join the girls at Ivy’s safe house tonight. My mood was so dark that I fabricated an excuse about a splitting headache. The last thing I wanted was to cast shadows over their gathering, especially with Ivy carrying the next generation of Thorne blood and needing all the positive energy she could get.

So here I was, barricaded alone in my fortified apartment with takeout and a book I couldn’t concentrate on. The weekend with my mother and Ryder at the secure compound had been perfect, and seeing Zander again felt like breathing fresh air in this suffocating underworld. Just as thoughts of the good doctor drifted through my mind, my encrypted phone rang, bringing the first genuine smile to my face in days.

"You just can’t stay away from me," I answered playfully, recognizing the scrambled number.

"Beautiful auntie! You’re absolutely right, I can’t. I adore you and I’ve been going crazy missing you," Vincenzo replied in that characteristic whining tone that never failed to make me laugh. As Dominic’s nephew and the family’s youngest soldier, he had a gift for lightening even the darkest moods. "Besides, you still owe me that trip to Speedway, remember? The one where we pretend to be normal people eating burgers."

"The vintage car diner? Don’t tell me the great Vincenzo hasn’t been there yet," I said, vaguely recalling our plans to visit the retro establishment that served as neutral territory for the city’s various factions.

"I was supposed to go with this gorgeous woman named Gemma, but she’s been avoiding all my calls," he said with exaggerated wounded pride that made me actually laugh out loud.

"Well, she’s an idiot to miss out on a date with the most charming soldier in Port Serenity," I teased back, and Vincenzo’s delighted laughter filled the secure line.

"How about midweek evening?" he suggested, and I could hear the hope in his voice.

"That sounds perfect," I agreed, realizing how desperately I missed his uncomplicated company in this world of blood and betrayal.

"Bring Zander along. He seems like solid people," Vincenzo added, and I detected the curiosity behind his casual suggestion. The family always vetted anyone who got close to their inner circle.

"I'll definitely ask him. He loves these nostalgic places, assuming he's not pulling another extended shift at the trauma center," I replied, knowing Zander's dedication to his emergency room patients often kept him away for days.

"Christ, don't tell me this guy isn't just gorgeous and decent, but he actually saves lives too," Vincenzo groaned dramatically.

"Yes, sweetheart, he's an emergency room physician."

"Madonna mia!" Vincenzo's amazement was almost comical. "Does this saint have any flaws whatsoever? Please tell me he's not completely perfect, because that would just be unfair to the rest of us mortals."

"Vincenzo, he's not perfect, but he comes pretty damn close," I admitted with a small smile.

"I can't repeat what I'm thinking right now because my mom would wash my mouth out with lye soap," Vincenzo said, making me laugh again. The kid had an incredible talent for pulling me back from the edge.

"I'll extend the invitation. I'm certain you two will hit it off beautifully."

"Then I'll collect you at seven sharp," he confirmed before we exchanged goodbyes.

After ending the call, I felt marginally human again. Vincenzo always managed that small miracle. I made a mental note to contact Zander tomorrow, knowing he was currently covering the night shift at Port General's trauma unit.

I was still smiling softly when my burner phone chimed with a message from an untraceable number. The moment I opened it, my improved spirits crashed and burned. It was a photograph of Beatrix draped all over Dominic at what appeared to be a restaurant. Finn was visible beside them, his arm still casted from the vicious beating he'd received for crossing Thorne territory.

The brutal reality slammed into me like a physical blow: Dominic had returned from his business trip to Chicago, had time to wine and dine that venomous snake, but couldn't be bothered to send me so much as a single message. The arrogance was staggering.

Tears blurred my vision as rage and heartbreak warred in my chest. Through the haze of betrayal, my phone rang again, and I answered without checking the encrypted display.

"Gorgeous Gemma," purred a familiar voice that made my blood freeze in my veins.

"Who is this?" I demanded, though I already knew and was wiping away angry tears.

"Darling girl, have you forgotten your old friend so quickly? It's Marcus Frost. I want to take you to dinner, and I absolutely will not accept any refusal."

My blood transformed to liquid fire. This bastard was the poisonous root of every nightmare in my life.

"Listen carefully, you piece of trash. Forget I exist," I snarled, terminating the call and hurling the phone across the room. My evening was completely destroyed.

After another sleepless night spent watching shadows and jumping at every sound, I dragged myself to the Thorne family's legitimate front offices, relying heavily on concealer to mask the dark circles shadowing my eyes. The moment I stepped off the elevator, the receptionist informed me that Don Caleb was waiting in the executive conference room. Dread settled like ice in my stomach.

When I reached the top floor, I discovered the entire inner circle assembled in the reception area, including Daniel. Their expressions were grave, almost accusatory, and the atmosphere crackled with barely contained tension.

"What's happened?" I asked, my voice barely steady.

"That's precisely what I should be asking you, Gemma," Caleb replied with steel in his tone. His dark eyes held the cold fury that made grown men confess their sins. "When exactly were you planning to inform us that your ex-boyfriend is issuing death threats against you?"

My knees nearly buckled. My streak of catastrophic luck was apparently nowhere near finished.

"Everyone, I discussed this with the girls. I honestly didn't think it was necessary to brief the entire command structure," I attempted to explain, but even to my own ears it sounded pathetically weak.

"Yeah, well it seems your little sorority decided to withhold crucial intelligence, Gemma," Daniel said loudly, his cop instincts and protective fury making his voice carry. "Including the fact that this psychotic street trash is threatening Lila as well as you."

I looked around the room at these dangerous, powerful people who'd become my unlikely family. Every face reflected tension and barely leashed violence. The hostile atmosphere was unmistakable, and I felt cornered like prey.

"Ah, so that's what this is really about," I said, finally understanding the true source of their anger. Daniel was terrified for Lila's safety, and the others feared for their women. "Listen, Daniel, I sincerely apologize. I warned Lila about Nick when you two first got involved. I assumed she would brief you herself. I swear I won't let her or any of the other women be endangered by my baggage."

"Oh really, Gemma? And exactly how do you propose to accomplish that miracle?" Daniel's tone could have cut glass.

"Enough, Daniel!" Lila interjected sharply, stepping between us like a shield. "Actually, all of you need to back off right now! Gemma, come on, let's get some air."

I was exhausted, emotionally shattered, and this morning's inquisition felt like the final nail in my coffin. I closed my eyes and drew a shuddering breath.

"You know what, you're all absolutely right," I said, feeling the crushing weight of their judgment pressing down on me. "Lila, thank you for defending me, but we won't be getting that air. Caleb, I'm eternally grateful for the sanctuary you provided me, but I'm going straight to HR to submit my immediate resignation. I'll clear out today. It's better for everyone if I remove myself from the equation entirely. Don't worry—I'll make certain Nick understands I no longer have any connection to any of you."

I stood and walked toward the elevator with as much dignity as I could muster, before the tears could start falling and humiliate me further.

"Gemma, get your ass back here right now!" Daniel bellowed after me, but I didn't stop. I stepped into the elevator and jabbed the button with a trembling finger.

"What the hell just happened?" I heard Caleb's bewildered voice just as the doors sealed shut, cutting me off from the only family I'd ever truly known.

I went directly to Human Resources and submitted my immediate resignation from Thorne Enterprises. The process was brutally efficient—they scheduled my final paycheck for pickup in a couple days. As I walked out of the gleaming lobby for the last time, tears began streaming down my face unchecked. I was completely alone now, but at least Nick couldn't use me to hurt anyone I loved.

I took a cab back to my apartment and instructed the doorman to tell any visitors I was unavailable. Once safely inside my sanctuary, I engaged every lock, powered down my phones, took a scalding shower, and collapsed into bed fully clothed. I had absolutely no idea what my next move would be, but for today, all I could manage was to lie there and let the tears fall until I had nothing left inside.

Chapter 298: Taking a Stand

Lila's POV

"Daniel, would someone like to explain what kind of bloodbath just happened in that conference room? Actually, all of you—care to explain?" My voice trembled with rage as I faced the men who controlled half the city's underground, wanting nothing more than to strangle each one of them with my bare hands.

"Lila, I just lost my cool, okay?" Daniel ran his hand through his dark hair, frustration evident on his scarred face. "We're already dealing with some street trash stalking Ivy's friend, and then another psycho appears out of nowhere threatening our territory? I snapped!"

"And you think that's Gemma's fault? Really, Daniel? What kind of disgusting macho enforcer have you turned into?" My voice rose with each word, anger burning in my chest like acid. "And the rest of you? You ambushed her in a hostile environment and put pressure on a woman who's already being terrorized by her deranged ex-boyfriend, and you still have the audacity to gang up on her like rabid dogs?"

"I didn't say anything," Xavier raised his hands defensively, his expensive suit doing nothing to hide the blood under his fingernails from his morning collection rounds.

"Exactly! You didn't say a damn thing. You just stood there with your arms crossed and were complicit in this whole mess." I glared at all of them as they avoided my gaze, suddenly finding the polished marble floor incredibly fascinating. These men who could order executions without blinking couldn't meet the eyes of one furious woman.

The elevator doors slid open with a ding, and Heidi strode out, concern etched across her sharp features. As Caleb's business manager for his legitimate operations, she had no patience for the family's brutish behavior affecting their clean enterprises.

"Can someone please explain why Gemma just submitted her resignation from Thorne Enterprises? HR just sent me her settlement forecast scheduled for in a few days," Heidi demanded, her cold gaze sweeping over the silent men like a prosecuting attorney.

"Go ahead, tough guys," I challenged, grabbing my purse from the leather chair. "Tell Heidi about the mess you've made while pretending to protect the neighborhood. I'm going after Gemma, and if you want to blacklist me from every legitimate business in this city, Caleb, I honestly don't care anymore. As for you, Daniel, we'll discuss your Neanderthal behavior later."

"This turned into a nuclear bomb!" I heard Xavier mutter behind me, his usual composure cracking.

"I’m wondering why I let you guys handle delicate situations when you have all the subtlety of a drive-by shooting," Caleb added, his voice laced with the kind of regret that usually preceded someone getting their kneecaps broken.

I stepped into the elevator and headed straight to Ruby’s floor in the Thorne building. When I found her at her desk managing Scott’s books, her expression immediately shifted upon seeing my flushed face.

"What’s wrong, Lila? You look like you’ve seen a massacre," Ruby said, concern lacing her voice as she took in my agitated state.

"Do you think Scott would give you the rest of the day off? Gemma needs us, and I mean right now," I tried to keep my voice steady but failed miserably, my hands shaking with residual fury.

"Sounds serious enough to abandon money laundering paperwork. Give me a minute." Ruby disappeared into Scott’s office and emerged moments later with her purse and a grim expression. "Where’s Gemma?"

"Probably at her apartment, assuming she made it home without getting picked up by any of Nick’s street contacts," I replied, fighting back tears of frustration and genuine fear.

"What happened, Lila?" Ruby’s eyes narrowed as she noted my agitation, her voice taking on the protective edge that came from surviving in their world.

"Are you driving?" She nodded, patting her concealed carry permit. "Good. Let’s go. On the way, I’ll call Nora and Zoe and tell all of you at once what these idiots did."

That’s exactly what I did. We got into Ruby’s armored sedan, and I made a video call, explaining to the girls what those testosterone-poisoned enforcers had done. Their outrage matched my own, with Zoe’s creative threats making even Ruby wince.

"I thought something was off when my sweetie asked me about Gemma’s situation yesterday," Ruby commented, her hands tight on the steering wheel as she navigated through Thorne territory.

"Jude brought it up as well, asking weird questions about Gemma's background," Nora admitted through the phone, her voice crackling over the encrypted line.

"Finn brought it up as well. Dominic was the one who told them about Nick escalating his threats, but it looks like these clueless men completely distorted everything into some kind of interrogation," Zoe explained, shaking her head in disgust. "Let's keep this from Ivy since stress could trigger complications with the pregnancy. Let's meet at Gemma's building; Nora and I are heading there now."

When we arrived at Gemma's apartment complex in the safer part of Thorne territory, the doorman—who doubled as building security and definitely carried more than a nightstick—informed us that Gemma wasn't home. That threw me completely—I was certain this would be her first refuge after such humiliation.

"I'll call Willow. Maybe Gemma went to see her mother," I suggested, pulling out my encrypted phone that Daniel had insisted I carry.

"Be careful not to worry her. If Willow finds out the family scared her daughter, there'll be hell to pay," Nora cautioned, knowing how fiercely protective Gemma's mother was.

I called Willow, making small talk about her health and the neighborhood watch program. During our conversation, she mentioned that Gemma had only visited during the weekend and that she already missed her daughter terribly. So Gemma wasn't seeking comfort there either.

"Guys, maybe she just went for a walk to clear her head and avoid any family surveillance," Zoe suggested, ever the practical strategist. "Let's wait here and watch the building. There's a bakery across the street—we can sit there and keep an eye out for when she returns."

We tried calling her repeatedly and sent countless messages through every secure channel we had. It wasn't until evening that Gemma finally responded with a brief text saying she was safe but needed time alone. There was no point pushing—she clearly wasn't ready to face any of us after what had happened.

Ruby dropped me off at Daniel's fortified apartment, where he was pacing anxiously in the living room like a caged predator. When I walked in, he immediately moved to embrace me with those powerful arms that had broken more bones than I cared to count. I stepped back sharply.

"I don’t want you touching me right now," I said flatly, my voice colder than winter steel. "Actually, I didn’t even want to see you tonight, but here we are."

"Lila, don’t be like this," Daniel said, attempting to sound reasonable while his detective instincts clearly told him he was in serious trouble.

"Seriously, Daniel, what you did to Gemma today was absolutely horrible. You practically blamed her for the actions of her psychotic ex-boyfriend instead of offering protection," I snapped, my voice echoing off his reinforced walls.

"Lila, that wasn’t my intention. I just went crazy at the thought of some lunatic potentially targeting you next, and I lost it completely. But Gemma also overreacted—it wasn’t that serious."

"I can’t believe you’re actually saying this with a straight face."

"Lila, I’m a detective who works cleanup for the family. I see this kind of escalation all the time. These types of obsessed guys don’t stop at threats—they become increasingly dangerous. I was worried about you and lost my cool, but I’ll apologize to Gemma tomorrow."

"I highly doubt she’ll listen to you, considering she’s not even talking to her closest friends because of what you guys did," I huffed, exhaustion creeping into my anger. "Let me tell you something, detective—you don’t know her story. You didn’t even bother to listen before passing judgment. Gemma is being stalked and threatened, she needs support and security, and what did you do? You took away her support system with your arrogant, heavy-handed approach."

"Lila, I’m sorry!" Daniel seemed genuinely remorseful, but it was too little, too late for redemption.

"I’m not the one you need to apologize to," I said, exhaustion creeping into my voice as I headed toward his guest rooms. "I’m sleeping in one of the spare rooms tonight. Don’t come near me until you fix the mess you made, and I mean really fix it."

The sound of his frustrated curse followed me down the hallway, but I didn't look back. Some mistakes required more than words to repair, especially in their world where trust once broken could mean the difference between life and death.

Chapter 299: Brothers Break Faith

Dominic's POV

The morning had begun like any other in my role as Capo until Zoe stormed into my office at Zenith Systems, her phone displaying a video call that would ignite my blood like gasoline. Lila's voice crackled through the speaker, detailing how Jude, Xavier, Caleb, and Daniel had cornered Gemma like she was some low-level snitch, interrogating her about the death threats that had been arriving at her apartment.

My fist crashed against the mahogany desk, sending papers scattering across the floor. "Those bastards crossed the line!" The rage coursing through my veins was the kind that usually preceded bloodshed in our world.

"Dominic, I'm taking the girls to find Gemma," Zoe declared, her voice carrying the steel that made her my most trusted lieutenant. "Nora's coming with me."

"I'm coming too," I growled, already reaching for my shoulder holster.

Zoe's expression hardened. "Not a smart move, boss. Gemma's shattered right now. She needs her friends, not..." She paused, choosing her words carefully in a world where the wrong phrase could mean a bullet.

"Not the Capo whose brothers just treated her like she was working for a rival family?" I finished, running my hand through my hair. The irony wasn't lost on me - in our world, such interrogations usually ended with shallow graves. "Zo, don't leave me in the dark. I need confirmation she's breathing."

"I'll keep you in the loop, I swear on my life," she promised, and in our world, that oath carried weight. "Meanwhile, feel free to remind those morons how badly they crossed the line."

"Oh, I intend to make that crystal clear," I snarled. "And tell Ruby and Lila their positions in the organization are secure. My protection extends to them always."

"Understood, Dominic." Zoe paused at the door. "You know, when the smoke clears, you're the most honorable of all of them."

Her words brought a brief warmth to my chest, but it vanished as she left. I needed answers from my supposed brothers-in-arms. Grabbing my encrypted phone, I dialed Caleb, who answered before the second ring.

"You already know what went down," his voice carried the weight of someone who'd realized his mistake too late.

"Damn right I know," I snapped. "Some loyalty you showed. I asked you to keep her safe within our territory, and instead, you threw her to the wolves like she was marked for death!"

"Dominic, things spiraled out of control. Everyone was on high alert after those threats—"

"When Ivy needed the family's protection," I cut him off, my voice dropping to the deadly quiet tone that made grown men sweat, "I mobilized half my crew. Not just because she's family now, but because you're my brother. But you couldn't extend the same honor to Gemma - or to me."

"I'm losing my mind here too, Dominic! I wasn't thinking strategically. Daniel went full enforcer mode, Jude and Xavier followed his lead, and everything went to hell."

"Yeah, it went to hell alright. Real family loyalty you all showed." I ended the call before my temper could unleash words that would require bloodshed to resolve.

As hours crawled by with no word from Gemma, my anxiety transformed into the kind of paranoid rage that had built my reputation in the underworld. I dispatched Mia to track Marcus's movements, knowing that bastard would strike when I was most vulnerable. The uncertainty was eating me alive, and I paced my penthouse like a caged predator until the four architects of this disaster finally appeared, looking like men walking to their execution.

"Dominic, I fucked up," Daniel stepped forward, his usual confidence replaced by the deference owed to a superior. "I let paranoia cloud my judgment."

"Clouded judgment?" I laughed, the sound carrying no humor. "Gemma's missing, Roman's out there making moves against our interests, and yet you idiots decided she was the threat? Roman's blood is on Caleb's hands, but I don't see you treating him like a potential rat."

"You're absolutely right," Caleb admitted. "Roman's far more likely to spill blood than whoever's locked up sending those letters."

"Then why put her through an interrogation that would make our enemies proud?" I demanded, struggling to keep my voice below the level that would bring my security detail running.

Xavier threw his hands up. "Because we're fucking idiots who forgot the code!"

Before anyone could respond further, Mia burst through the door like she was reporting an incoming hit. "Dominic, Marcus left his safe house this morning and vanished. None of his usual contacts have seen him. Our street sources have gone dark. He's completely off the grid."

"MOTHER OF GOD!" I collapsed onto the leather couch, my head in my hands. "That psychopath's going to make his move on her. I need to find Gemma now, or I'll be identifying her body!"

"We'll mobilize the entire network, Dominic," Jude tried to reassure me, but I wanted nothing more than to introduce his face to my brass knuckles.

Daniel pulled out his secure phone. "I'll have Adler trace her cell signal through our police contacts."

"Just so we're all clear on the hierarchy here," I announced with deadly calm, "I've already guaranteed Lila and Ruby permanent positions under my protection."

Xavier's brow furrowed. "That's not necessary, Dominic."

"Unlike some people, I treat those under my wing with respect and honor," I shot back.

By evening, Zoe confirmed through encrypted channels that Gemma had messaged her, claiming safety but demanding space. The news brought minimal relief - in our world, 'safe' was relative, and I needed eyes on her to verify she wasn't bleeding out somewhere.

"Adler tracked her phone through the network," Daniel announced. "She's at her apartment."

The confirmation loosened the vice grip around my chest slightly.

Xavier cleared his throat. "Let's head to my place, let things cool down—"

"Not interested," I cut him off coldly. "The last thing I want is to be in the same room as any of you."

"Dominic..." Caleb tried again.

"I thought true brothers understood when someone needed space," I said bitterly, turning toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked our territory, effectively dismissing them.

Caleb sighed heavily. "When you're ready to discuss strategy, you know where to find us."

After they left, I stood staring at the city lights until exhaustion claimed me. I woke to Zoe gently shaking my shoulder the following morning.

"Dominic, go home and rest properly," she urged. "Take the day to regroup."

"Have you made contact with her?" I asked immediately, my voice hoarse.

"Not yet, but we confronted those four idiots - all of them, even Finn who stayed clean."

"You women are the real soldiers in this organization," I managed a weak smile. "Zo, I'm terrified for her life."

"We'll handle this situation, boss."

"Marcus's hunting her," I confessed. "Recently, he threatened that if I don't surrender my territory soon, he'll take her piece by piece."

Mia entered, catching my words. "Give him what he wants, Dominic," she urged desperately. "You know that monster - he'll destroy her in ways that would make our enemies sick."

"I know, Mia, but his demands would mean betraying everything I've built. I thought I could shield her..." My voice faded.

"Marcus can only touch Gemma if he forces a confrontation," Zoe reasoned, then seeing our expressions, her face went white. "He wouldn't resort to that... would he?"

"He would do things that would make seasoned killers vomit," Mia whispered before fleeing the room.

"Dominic," Zoe's voice carried both gentleness and steel.

"Marcus is a demon wearing human skin, Zoe," I gripped her hand like a lifeline. "I don't know how to stop him without starting a war. Please find Gemma and convince her to come back to me. I can only protect her if she's within my territory, under my guns."

"We will protect her, Dominic," Zoe vowed, but the fear of failing Gemma - of failing to shield her from Marcus's sadistic hunger - settled on my shoulders like a death sentence I wasn't sure I could escape.

Chapter 300: Hearts Healing Together

Gemma's POV

I woke up feeling like I'd been through a street war, my heart heavy and my mind clouded with the weight of family business gone wrong. But I refused to let this melancholy dictate my day. I needed to be stronger than whatever was trying to pull me down. After a long, steamy shower and getting dressed with particular care, I powered on my phone while nursing my coffee.

Vincenzo had messaged about our plans, but I decided canceling was the safest option. No need to drag anyone else into the deadly mess that came with Thorne family business. I texted him a vague excuse and promised to reschedule soon. He responded with an adorable crying baby sticker that almost made me smile.

After mulling over my options, I decided that once I wrapped things up with the family operations, I'd retreat to my grandmother's countryside home for several days. The peaceful surroundings would give me space to breathe and think clearly, away from the constant threat of rival families and bloodshed.

Right on cue, the family sent a message requesting my presence in the afternoon to finalize my position within the organization. Perfect timing—I could head straight to Grandma's afterward, assuming I survived whatever confrontation awaited.

When I arrived at the designated time, the armed guard at the entrance greeted me with a respectful nod, and another soldier escorted me to the private meeting room in the back of Thorne's legitimate front business. My stomach knotted. Were they planning another interrogation about my loyalty? Stepping inside, I found everyone assembled: Daniel, Lila, Caleb, Xavier, Ruby, Jude, Nora, Finn, Zoe, and even Detective Adler—clearly on the Thorne family payroll. Taking a deep breath, I sat in the chair Caleb indicated.

"Gemma, Ivy would be here too, but her pregnancy needs special protection right now with all the heat on the family," Caleb explained gently, his voice carrying the authority of a man who'd ordered countless deaths.

"Don Caleb, let's just get this over with quickly. Or should I prepare for more accusations of being a rat, considering we have two corrupt cops present?" I replied, my voice betraying my exhaustion with the constant suspicion that came with mafia life.

"Gemma, have we stopped being family?" Caleb asked softly, but I could see the dangerous glint in his eyes that reminded me why he ruled the streets. I just stared back, words failing me.

"Gemma." Zoe approached, her face concerned but her hand never far from the gun concealed in her jacket. "The family's worried about you."

"Zoe, you guys are the best family anyone could ask for. But they're right—I can't put you in the crosshairs of a war," I sighed, fighting back tears. "It's better if I step back from operations. You'll always be in my heart. After this meeting, I'm packing and heading to my grandmother's safe house."

"Absolutely not!" Zoe's tone shifted dramatically as she assumed her signature commanding stance, the one that had intimidated rival family underbosses. "We'd sooner put bullets in these idiots than lose you as family. And yes, that includes you, Caleb!"

"Nobody's getting whacked, Zoe," Caleb replied calmly with the ease of a man accustomed to discussing death over dinner. "And Gemma isn't leaving the family or going into hiding."

"Gemma, I was a complete bastard," Daniel stepped forward, his eyes sincere but his massive frame still intimidating from years of enforcing Thorne family will. "I had no right to treat you that way. I was pissed about Lila being in danger and took it out on you. I care about Lila, and I care about all of you soldiers. Can you forgive me?"

"Don't forgive him, Gemma!" Lila interjected passionately, her innocence a stark contrast to the deadly world she'd been pulled into. "But just so you know, I have your grandmother's address, and I'll follow you there no matter what you say. You're my sister whether you like it or not!"

I couldn't help but laugh through my tears at Lila's fierce determination, so pure in this world of blood and betrayal.

"What about you two morons? Jude and Xavier? Nothing to say?" Nora demanded, smacking Jude on the head with the familiarity of someone who'd grown up around violence.

"Yeah, we were being complete assholes too," Xavier admitted sheepishly, his usual cold demeanor as the family's consigliere softening.

"Keep joking around, sweetheart," Ruby warned Xavier with deadly seriousness. "Lila and I already have our bags packed to go back to Dominic's territory. He's guaranteed us positions in his crew."

"Ruby, come on, you can’t leave me," Xavier protested, genuine fear flashing in his eyes.

"Try me," Ruby challenged, her hand moving to her hip in a gesture that made everyone tense.

"Dominic?" I turned to Zoe, confused about why the mention of my former lover sent ripples through the room.

"He would be here, but there was an emergency with his mother in Chicago territory," Zoe explained carefully.

"Gemma, we don’t want you to distance yourself from the family," Caleb squeezed my hand with surprising gentleness for hands that had personally eliminated rivals. "And we definitely don’t want you to leave our protection. Yesterday was stupid and won’t happen again. You need soldiers watching your back, and we’re going to provide them."

"Gemma, I was furious yesterday," Daniel admitted, kneeling beside me like a loyal soldier seeking forgiveness from his Don. "But today I’m doing what I should have done then. I even brought Adler to help clean up this mess. We want to know about these death threats you’ve been receiving from your ex, and we’re going to handle it Thorne family style. Will you forgive me?"

I gazed into his eyes and saw genuine remorse reflected in everyone’s faces, even those hardened by years of mafia warfare. Maybe I had been too sensitive, overwhelmed by everything happening at once. It had been a perfect storm of family politics and bloodshed.

"Of course, Daniel. Let’s put this behind us," I said, taking a deep breath that still carried the metallic scent of danger.

"No, we’re not just putting this behind us," Lila insisted with surprising steel. "You need to understand that if you act like this again, you’ll lose us all."

"I already understand, little one," Daniel nodded with the respect of a killer acknowledging a future queen. "No hard feelings, Gemma?"

"No hard feelings. I apologize too—I've been stressed with all the family wars happening."

He hugged me, and I hugged him back, feeling the weight of his concealed weapons and the safety they represented.

"That's the problem, Gemma," Nora complained, her voice carrying the authority of someone who'd seen too many funerals. "So much blood is being spilled, and you don't talk to us. You can't expect us to only be part of your life when the bodies aren't dropping. We love you—through every war."

"You're shutting us out again," Zoe gently scolded, her tactical mind already planning protection strategies. "You need to stop doing that if you want to stay alive."

"I'm sorry, girls," I broke down completely, and they surrounded me in a group embrace until my sobs subsided, their warmth a stark contrast to the cold world of organized crime we all inhabited.

"Am I forgiven too?" Xavier asked tentatively, his usual calculating demeanor replaced by genuine concern.

"Yes, you too," I managed.

"What about me?" Caleb inquired with the patient authority of a man accustomed to absolute loyalty.

"Of course," I smiled, wiping away tears while acknowledging the deadly power he wielded.

"Then no leaving the family," Caleb stated firmly with finality that brooked no argument. "That goes for Lila and Ruby too."

"Gemma, do you forgive me for not defending you and letting this enforcer Daniel intimidate you?" Jude approached cautiously, aware that family loyalty was everything in our world.

"Of course, Jude. Thank you."

"Has Marcus tried contacting you again?" Jude asked unexpectedly, his mention of Dominic's exiled father making everyone in the room tense.

"Yes, several nights ago. I don't even know how that bastard got my number, but I told him to go to hell. Why?"

"Because we're going to end this threat permanently," Jude declared, glancing at Zoe with the look of soldiers planning war. "Let Dominic know."

"On it!" Zoe typed furiously on her encrypted phone, coordinating what would likely be Marcus's final mistake.

"Well, everything seems back to normal!" Detective Adler spoke for the first time, her corrupt badge gleaming under the dim lights. "Now, Gemma, I need to know everything about you and your ex, when these death threats started, and what they entail."

"Gemma, I'll leave you with her," Caleb said with the casual authority of a Don dismissing subjects. "Rest today and come back to family business tomorrow. But I don't think you should stay alone in your apartment with Marcus making moves."

"That's non-negotiable, Caleb. I don't want my mother involved in family business, and I'm not staying at anyone's safe house," I replied firmly, knowing that in the mafia world, independence could be deadly.

"Then I'll move in with you. That was my plan anyway, before the Finn situation," Lila offered quickly, her loyalty touching but dangerous.

"No, Lila. You'll stay in protected territory, and you too, Ruby," I insisted, seeing Ruby about to make the same offer. "My building has Thorne family security."

"Dominic won't like this," Zoe muttered, but I chose to ignore the implications of her words.

Just then, my phone rang. Unknown number. I answered cautiously, then immediately put it on speaker when I recognized the voice, looking at Jude with alarm.

"What do you want? I told you not to contact me," I snapped, my blood running cold.

"Darling, I'm persistent. I don't give up on a beauty like you at the first rejection," Marcus's smooth voice replied, carrying the dangerous charm that had once made him a powerful capo.

"Stop calling me, or I'll have the family deal with you permanently," I threatened, my emotions at the breaking point.

"Threats? No, darling, I'm just a man who knows what he wants," he responded with infuriating calm that suggested he had powerful backing.

"I already told you to leave her alone, Marcus," Jude interjected before I could reply, his hand moving to his weapon.

"Oh god, the annoying soldier again," Marcus complained with the dismissive tone of former family royalty. "Always unpleasant talking to you, Jude. Gemma, dear, I'll call you later. Kisses." He hung up.

"This psychopath is insane! He disappeared when he was exiled—why start threatening me now?" I demanded.

"Let me guess—he disappeared when Dominic left the territory?" Caleb suggested with the calculating mind of a chess master.

"Now that you mention it, yes, exactly," I realized with growing dread.

"And he started pursuing you again when Dominic returned to power. He's using you to get back at his son and reclaim his position. That treacherous bastard!" Caleb fumed with the controlled rage of a man planning execution. "Adler, Daniel, finish up here with Gemma. I'll wait in my office. Gemma, the soldiers will look after you."

"Only if you want me dead!" I retorted with fire. "I don’t need bodyguards. Don’t insist."

"You girls are truly alike. Each more stubborn than the last," Caleb huffed as he left the room, already planning Marcus’s elimination.